



THE ESSENCE AND THE EVERYDAY

AN INTRIGUING MOMENT IN THE SEDRA¹ TAKES PLACE WHEN 'JACOB WAS LEFT ALONE'². He was about to meet his brother Esau, after many years of separation. He had good reason to fear the anger of his brother, and during the night he moved the camp of his household across a river to greater safety. Then Jacob went back across the river, and was left alone. Then he then wrestled with an angel, all night until dawn.

Why did Jacob go back across the river? The Sages tell us some small, apparently unimportant things had been left behind, and Jacob returned to fetch them. Yet the Midrash³ also comments that Jacob being alone relates to the exalted essence of the Divine, of whom it is written 'G-d is exalted alone' (Isaiah 2:17).

These two interpretations, taken together, relate to the fact that we are approaching a special date on the Jewish calendar: 19 Kislev, termed the Rosh Hashana of Chassidic Teaching, which falls this year on Sunday 6th December.

People tend to have a hierarchical perspective on life. Some things are important, others insignificant. Unfortunately we sometimes have the same kind of view of people. Some are great and famous, important or precious to us in some way, others seem irrelevant. When Jacob went back across the river to fetch some apparently unimportant objects he was making the statement that, at some level, everything matters. This perspective on life and on society stems from an awareness of the exalted Essence of the Divine.

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In relation to the Essence, everything and, especially, every *person* is significant. Chassidic teachings communicate this idea, seeking to reveal the importance of every moment and the potential greatness of every individual. The Rosh Hashana of Chassidic Teaching expresses the affirmation of this perspective on life.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi had been imprisoned as a result of false accusations made by the enemies of the Chassidic movement. They claimed the charitable funds he sent to Israel were really in support of the Turks, then in control of the Holy Land, enemies of Russia. Hence he was arrested and would very likely have been condemned to death. However the Tsar realised that he was no traitor, but rather a great Jewish leader, and released him on 19 Kislev (27 November, 1798). His miraculous liberation was taken as a green light for the path of Chassidism.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman was a great scholar of Jewish Law, Halacha, and wrote an important new formulation of the Code of Law. But he also wrote the Tanya, which communicates the inner dimension of Jewish thought, revealing the Divine inwardness in every detail of the teachings of Torah, in the performance of the apparently simple practical Mitzvot, and in every detail of life. Further, Tanya emphasises that every person is important. The elitist perspective on Jewish society which had harshly divided between the scholars and the ignorant, between the ‘pious’ and the ‘sinner’, was shown as deeply flawed. Tanya also explains why that which the Torah forbids must be avoided, teaching that when a person restrains himself from a forbidden action, word or thought, he or she is revealing the Divine in the world.

From the point of view of the Essence of the Divine, everything is significant, whether in a positive or negative way. Jacob went back across the river, because he recognised the importance of every detail. Each one of us can follow Jacob’s example, seeking to bring holiness to every detail of life, through Mitzvot, loving-kindness, and study of the inner dimension of Torah. Through this we will help to transform the world⁴.

1. Genesis 32:4-36:43. 2. Gen.32:25. See Rashi’s comment. 3. Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 77:1. 4. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot* vol.15, pp. 281-288.

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SEDRA VAYISHLACH

THE STORY OF STUFF

Faye and Simcha raced against each other to pack up and get back on the boat. Faye collected all the stray bits of garbage and threw them out. Simcha sealed all the plastic containers and put them in her backpack. They wanted to make the most of their day. The canoe bobbed near the dock, and the water sparkled enticingly, inviting the girls to more adventures.

“Done!” Faye and Simcha shouted out at the same time, and they ran towards the boat.

Behind them, the picnic table was bare...well, almost bare.

“You know,” Faye said as she dipped her oar into the water, “isn’t it funny that we’re crossing a lake today of all days. I mean, this is the Sedra when Jacob crosses the Yabok River and wrestles with the angel.”

“It wouldn’t be so funny if we had to wrestle with an angel,” Simcha said.

“You mean when he forgot his little jug? Why did he go back anyways? For a little jug!?”

“Well,” Simcha said and then paused for a long moment, “for the same reason we’re going to have to,” Simcha said.

“Why? Did we forget something?”

“Yes, that little thermos that had the soup in it.”

Faye looked over her shoulder, back to where they had come from. The trees looked like little matchsticks. It wasn’t so far, but it wasn’t so close either. “Do we really have to go back? I mean, I could get you another thermos...”

Simcha put her oar down across her lap. “It’s pretty funny that this happened this week of all weeks!!” she said. “Do you know why Jacob went back? Because stuff isn’t just stuff. Stuff has your signature on it. It is yours because you specifically have the ability to use it for good and elevate it.”

“So with a thermos?”

“You can feed people, take care of your body, make blessings over the food inside it...uncover its real mission here.”

“So you’re saying that the thermos *needs* us?”

Simcha smiled and nodded as the girls slowly turned the canoe around.

Across the lake the sun slanted through the trees and glinted off something on the park bench, and in that moment it looked like gold.

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