


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

קדש..... *for Friday nights* שבת

Friday 10 February 2012 - 17 Shevat 5772
Sedra Yitro

THE FOREIGNER WITHIN

WE OFTEN DIVIDE OUR LIVES INTO OUR ‘JEWISH’ SIDE AND OUR ‘NON-JEWISH’ side. As regards our Jewish side, we go to the Synagogue, whether daily, weekly, or annually, and keep various other aspects of Jewish teaching. As regards our non-Jewish side, we live a ‘normal’ life, playing a full part in the world around us. Which side is more important?

The Sedra¹ gives us an interesting insight. In some sense, the ‘non-Jewish’ side is very important. It may even hold the key to our entire spiritual wellbeing.

The central theme of the Sedra is the Giving of the Torah to the Jewish people. They gathered before Mount Sinai and heard inspiring talks from Moses relaying Divine teachings about their role in the world as G-d’s Chosen People. Then, after several days of preparation, in the most remarkable event described or claimed in any national history, they experienced the Divine revelation at Mount Sinai, hearing the Ten Commandments and bonding with G-d. This is the ‘Jewish side’ of the Sedra.

However, the Sedra actually begins on a quite different note, with



In Memory of Meshulam Scharfstein V"g - 10 Shevat
Dedicated by his daughter Dr Jutta Singer װj ,

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a seemingly minor event. Jethro (Yitro), the father of Moses' wife Tziporah², a man who is not Jewish and is described as "a Priest of Midian", comes to visit the camp of the Jewish people. Yitro has heard of all the striking events which befell the Jewish people, such as the Splitting of the Sea and their success against Amalek, and he tells Moses: "Now I know that G-d is greater than all other Powers"³.

The Sedra begins with a whole chapter describing Yitro's visit, and his name has been adopted as the name of the Sedra. Then the Sedra moves on to its main theme of the Giving of the Torah. We might wonder at this arrangement. Surely the visit by Yitro is a rather secondary matter, compared with the events which followed? Why should it be reported at such length? Why should Yitro's name head the Sedra which is the key to the spiritual life of the Jewish people?

The Zohar states that this was actually a crucial moment. Yitro was the leading Priest of Midian, who had served every kind of idol and spiritual force. Now, hearing of the way G-d's power was expressed in the chain of events of the Exodus, Yitro recognised the One G-d, the Creator, the G-d of the Jews.

This step of recognition of G-d by Yitro was the key to the Giving of the Torah. Yitro had represented the opposite of Monotheism. Now that he had been won over to see the greatness of G-d, the Divine revelation at Sinai could take place.

What does this mean? Our inner Yitro, our 'normal' and often not very Jewish inner dimension, is actually the key to our spiritual health. When this foreigner within recognises G-d, our more obviously "Jewish" lives are immeasurably enhanced. This is what Judaism seeks: not just spiritual contact with the Divine, but the drawing of holiness into every aspect of our worldly lives.

Through this we see the importance of all the little details of Torah law, which reach into every nook and cranny of our being. When these details reach the foreign Yitro within, so that this part of ourselves also recognises G-d - whether in the kitchen, the office or the bedroom - we are able, personally and individually, to receive the Torah at Sinai and live up to being a Jew⁴.

1. Exodus chs.18-20. 2. When she married Moses she converted to his faith. We see her dedication to Jewish teaching in Exodus 4:25. 3 Ex. 18:11. 4. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.4 pp. 1271-2, vol. 11 p.74 ff.

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SEDRA YITRO

SOUL JOURNEY

Chava felt cool air brushing over her face, and the tickle of sunshine on her eyelids. She sleepily opened her eyes, then stared in wonderment. She was not in her cosy bed at home, she was lying on a makeshift bed inside a tent. 'Where am I?' she wondered. She began to make out voices of people milling around outside her tent, they spoke a foreign language... or, wait, didn't that sound like rather guttural Hebrew?

She made her way out of the tent. She found herself in what seemed like a camp, with thousands of tents all around her. The cool breeze that she felt before was quickly becoming warm air and the rising sun in the east sent beautiful rays of light across the endless sandy desert that spanned the horizon. She saw large numbers of men clustered together in groups, they all seemed excited about something. One old man was sitting outside his small tent, all by himself. Intrigued, she went over to talk to him.

'Shalom' she said to him in simple Hebrew that she remembered from class. He looked up at her and smiled. 'Ah...two more days to go', he said in an excited whisper.

Chava was confused, 'Two days until what?' she asked. 'Oh!' said the old man, 'don't you know, in two days G-d is going to give us the Torah on Mount Sinai!'

He pointed towards the imposing mountain at the edge of the camp, 'There! On that mountain G-d will give us the Torah. Moses told us to prepare for three days, we must wash our clothes and make ourselves holy for this great event!' he said excitedly.

Chava looked around her again in amazement. 'Do you mean I am in the camp of the Jews getting the Torah? Did you leave Egypt around seven weeks ago?'

'Yes!' smiled the kind old man, 'You must be one of the Jewish souls that have come to join us at Mount Sinai, Moses mentioned that you souls will be coming'.

Chava laughed, she remembered her teacher telling them about all the Jewish souls who would ever be born, being present at the Giving of the Torah. 'I guess I'm a couple of days early', Chava said, chuckling. She heard herself laugh, but the old man disappeared and soon the desert and all the tents disappeared as well and she found herself in her warm cosy bed, at home.

'I was dreaming', she told her friend, Susan, as they walked to school together.

'Maybe you weren't dreaming', said Susan, 'maybe you were remembering what it was like when your soul was there!' she said excitedly.

Chava smiled. It was possible, she thought to herself. She remembered the old man's words, which seemed to ring in her ears: '...Moses mentioned that you souls will be coming...'

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