

The Rebbe's Discourses

Summaries of points from the Rebbe's Chassidic Discourses בלי אחריות כלל וכלל

י"ב תמוז תשל"ג יום ה' פ' בלק ד"ה מי מנה עפר יעקב בלתי מוגה

Published for Shabbat Sedra Balak

14 Tamuz 5784, 20 July 2024¹

THE DUST OF JACOB

BALAAAM DECLARED “WHO CAN COUNT THE DUST OF JACOB, OR NUMBER THE SEED OF ISRAEL?”² The term ‘dust’ is particularly applied to Jacob, for the Midrash³ points out that Abraham was blessed that his children would be like the stars⁴, Isaac was blessed that his children would be like the sand of the sea⁵ and it was particularly Jacob who was blessed that his children would be like the dust of the earth⁶. What is the significance of this ‘dust of Jacob’, and also why in this blessing from Balaam, is he first called Jacob and then Israel?

Let us start by considering the difference between Jacob and Israel. Jacob was the name given to him at birth, before he began his service of the Divine, while the name Israel was given to him by an angel ‘because you have successfully struggled with spiritual forces and with people’⁷, meaning that this name relates Jacob’s positive achievements in the various struggles of his life.

The name Jacob יעקב includes the Yud of the Divine Name, and the word *akev*, heel. By contrast the name Israel ישראל can be read as לי ראש ‘li Rosh’, ‘I have a head’. Thus Jacob relates predominantly to the heel, while Israel to the head. The meaning of this is that in the case of Jacob, the holiness of the Yud,

¹ Maamar Mi Mana Afar Yakov 5733 (1973), the second Maamar said on Yud Beit Tammuz. It was not edited by the Rebbe. It was printed in Dvar Malchut Balak 5784.

² Numbers 23:10.

³ Bamidbar Rabbah 2:12.

⁴ Gen.13:17, in Sedra Lech Lecha.

⁵ Gen22:17 in Sedra Vayera.

⁶ Gen.28:14 in Sedra Vayetze.

⁷ Gen.32:29, Sedra Vayishlach.

representing Chochmah, Wisdom⁸ is drawn through his entire being, right down to the heel. This spiritual input enables him to reach the higher level of Israel.

Another aspect of the name Jacob, is that when Esau realised that Jacob had taken the blessing which their father Isaac had intended for him, Esau, he declared ‘that’s why his name is Jacob, because he has tricked me twice’⁹. The word for ‘tricked me’ is *yakveni*, relating to the word Yakov, Jacob. This of course raises the question: why did Jacob have to take the blessing from his father in an apparently deceitful way?

A Chassidic explanation¹⁰ is that the service of human beings has to be in a place which is spiritually low, where the evil desire can exist. The process which led to us being in such a realm began with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. According to the Sages, the serpent, which is called ‘cunning’ in the Torah¹¹, used several deceitful ploys in order to get Eve and then Adam to eat from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. Hence, in order for us to repair this harm, striving for Tikkun (Repair), we too have to proceed with what looks like deceit or cunning. Actually it is Wisdom, but of wisdom it is written ‘I am wisdom, I dwell in cunning’¹².

This explains why in various aspects of life we need a form of ‘cunning’ in order to serve G-d on the highest level. For example, consider the pleasure of eating. Given that the person makes a blessing before and after eating the food, one cannot actually tell the difference between a person who is eating in an ordinary way, subservient to the physical pleasure entailed in the tasty food, or one whose eating is a spiritual or even sacred act.

There are some people for whom the act of eating links directly with their [Divine] Soul¹³. These are the few Tzaddikim (who are at the level of Israel). For others, who are striving for spirituality in their lives, the person eating is attempting to sift the sparks of holiness which are hidden in the physical world. By eating the food, this holiness is absorbed by the person’s body, and when he or she uses that energy to pray, study Torah or carry out Mitzvot, the ‘sparks’ of holiness are re-connected to their supernal source. The person engaged in this sacred task is in a sense being ‘cunning’, because anyone observing them would just think they were enjoying a tasty dish like everyone else. The person engaged in this struggle is at the level of Jacob.

⁸ And the spur of the Yud reaches even higher, representing Keter, Crown.

⁹ Gen.27:36, in Toledot.

¹⁰ See Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn’s discourse Padah Beshalom, 12 Tammuz, 5703 (1943).

¹¹ Gen. 3:1 in Beraishit.

¹² Prov. 8:12.

¹³ As it is written, ‘the Tzaddik eats to satisfy his soul’ (Prov.13:25).

On Shabbat there is a change of mode, and the delicious food itself becomes part of the Mitzvah of Shabbat. Temporarily, everyone is on the level of 'Israel'. But during the week, in their daily activities, most people¹⁴ are on the level of Jacob.

This is why Jacob had to take the blessing intended for Esau, with apparent cunning. The blessing concerned the material world with its hidden sparks of holiness, which Jacob has to the task to elevate. The aspect of 'cunning' is in order to transform the effect of the serpent and its cunning, so that the coarseness of the material world is elevated and transformed to holiness.

But then comes a higher level of service, expressed in the words of Balaam's blessing about the 'dust of Jacob' and the 'rova' of Israel which was translated above as the seed of Israel. Another translation takes the word 'rova' to mean rain, as in the word reviah¹⁵. Adam was created from the dust, but also there was a mist which rose from the earth¹⁶. The dust mixed with the water in the mist formed Adam (and Eve).

Both these aspects, the dust and the rain-water, exist in the service of the individual to G-d. The dust represents the Mitzvot, and our humility and acceptance of the Yoke of Heaven in carrying them out. The water represents Torah study. The beginning of the verse speaks of the dust of Jacob, for Jacob is on the lower level of pure humility and acceptance. But the latter part of the verse speaks of the water of Torah and of Israel.

Thus considering how we received the Torah: we said 'we will do and we will hear (understand)'. The Talmud¹⁷ relates that the angels gave us two crowns, one corresponding to 'we will do', and the other to 'we will understand'. First we approach on the level of the dust of Jacob, carrying out the Mitzvot with humility and acceptance; then we enter the realm of Torah, with all its breadth of exploration and discussion.

In Chassidic teachings, Torah is compared to the blood flowing through the body, linking all the different limbs and organs¹⁸. One therefore needs the observance of the Mitzvot and also the study of the Torah, the 'doing' and the 'hearing', both are necessary.

Then Jacob rises, having not only the humility of the dust but also the breadth of Torah. However, the key focus is on the lowest aspect of the world, the dust,

¹⁴ Assuming they are making this spiritual attempt.

¹⁵ See Taanit 5a.

¹⁶ Gen.2:6.

¹⁷ Shabbat 88a.

¹⁸ Which in turn relate to the 613 Mitzvot – 248 limbs and 365 sinews.

where we can create a dwelling for the Divine. In that realm of the dust – especially when it is kneaded with the water of Torah – we completely transcend the concept of ‘counting’.

That is why there is a progression, from Abraham for whom his seed is described as stars, Isaac for whom it is sand and then Jacob whose seed is described as dust, beyond number. And especially when one adds the water of Torah, for the Jewish people connect with the Torah and the Torah connects with the Holy One, and there is a total unity, beyond any kind of limit.

This will be expressed below in our world with the coming of Moshiach, very soon.

Torah teachings are holy – please treat these pages with care