

IS HE STILL MY FATHER?

by Rabbi Label Lam

When I was a child I remember having heard a few hundred times a story book about a little bird who fell from the nest and was asking every creature large and small, "Are you my mother?" I think that was the title too. Years later, I think I have a deeper insight into the childlike plot.

A grade school teacher in Israel asked his class a question from this week's Torah portion and received an unusual answer from an unlikely source. Why did Yosef ask his brothers after revealing his true identity, "Is my father still alive?" Yehuda was pleading for mercy on Binyamin on the basis that their father's health would be in grave jeopardy if anything happened to the boy. Yosef could not have been told more directly about his father's status. Why had he made that his question after years of personal silence?

The class was silent. Nobody could conjure a reasonable explanation till little Shimon in the back of the class raised his hand confidently. Everybody was amazed. Shimon was usually quiet and despondent. He never volunteered an answer or asked any questions. His grandparents had deposited him there after they had gained custody of the boy. His father had abandoned home and his mother was not in a position to care for the child. No wonder little Shimon was usually mentally absent while others were actively participating in the give and take of the classroom.

This time was different, as everyone else sat quietly and Shimon, to the amazement of all, was waving his hand with enthusiasm. The Rebbe called on him and he answered, "Maybe what Yosef meant to ask was not if Yaakov was alive but rather is my father still alive? Does he still think about me? Is he still my father?"

Yosef in Egypt was at the end of his personal exile. He understood with great clarity that Yaakov was still alive but was he still "his father". At the climax of the complete Egypt experience, two hundred and ten years later, The Almighty thundered into the ears of the entire nation, "I Am Hashem your G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt." As much as these words carry the mandate of knowing that G-d is a reality, the greater message, perhaps, is concretizing the idea of a personal G-d. Hashem is your G-d. He took you out of Egypt. He cares about you.

The bigger pain to the Jew in the dark period of our history called the Holocaust was felt after the German planted his boot in the Jew's stomach and then asked him, "Where is your G-d Jew?"

There are many amongst our people who if asked point blank, "Do you believe in G-d?" would likely

say, "Yes!" Just as Yosef, at the end of his torment, evidence abounded about the existence of "a father", but the question of his heart, as little Shimon was able to explain from his unique perspective was "Is he still my father? Does he care about me?"

Now I understand a little better that old book my mother read me hundreds of times. The bird knows he must have a mother, he just doesn't know who it is. He's out of his element on the jungle floor. He's dislocated from his precious nest.

Shortly after Yosef gives articulation to the question that had troubled his heart for twenty-two years, he was reunited with his father. The verse describes how Yosef fell on his father's shoulder and cried. What was Yaakov doing? The sages tell us he was saying Shema Yisrael, Listen Israel Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One!

Why was he doing that particular mitzvah at that time? Perhaps, as Yaakov felt the overwhelming emotion of being finally reunited with his estranged son Yosef, he could begin to approximate the feeling, so to speak, of the A-lmighty when one of his lost children returns to Him. Leaning on the cosmic shoulder as the bird, returning to his nest or as the child who has found the caring parent is still a caring parent.

Good Shabbos!

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