

HIS TRUE IDENTITY

by Rabbi Label Lam

Then Judah approached him and said, "If you please, my lord, may your servant speak a word in my lord's ears and let not your anger flare up at your servant- for you are like Pharaoh...." (Breishis 44:19)

How did Judah hope to influence Joseph by speaking directly into his ears? We have from many sources that Joseph had set up interpreters between himself and his brothers as part of his ploy. Judah, then would have to understand that Joseph could not understand a word of what he was about to say. Why would he engage in a seeming exercise in futility when so much was at stake?

In concluding his appeal to Joseph to release his baby brother Benjamin, Judah declared, "For how can I go up to my father and the youth is not with me...?" (Breishis 44:34) At that moment Joseph could contain himself no more and it was then that he revealed himself, "I am Joseph!" Why was that his breaking point? What magic was embedded in those words that Judah uttered that caused the man with such an iron exterior to melt instantaneously?

Sometimes a single phrase can be understood and appreciated as "standing alone" out of the context of the verse. We know that Judah did not want to damage his beloved father by delivering deep disappointment. He needed desperately to return with Benjamin. Even still that verse carries an alternate message with perhaps a different meaning altogether.

A young Rebbe in Israel had taught his students that we can reflect on these words, "How can I go up to my father and the youth is not with me?" in reference to ourselves. How can we go up after 120 years to our Father in Heaven and the playful spontaneous zeal for life is not with us? It speaks of a mandate to remain sensitive to and excited about the opportunities of life. How dare we go up to our Father and the vital qualities of youthfulness have somehow soured within?

I heard from a great person that there is a profound distinction between being childlike and childish. Adult childishness, a prolonged midlife crisis, can occur with one whose childhood was too brief or lacking play. "Childlike" betrays a happier and healthier core of curiosity and fascination with existence. Both may be slain by "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune".

I was once sitting on Shabbos with Rabbi Mordechai Schwab ztl., and a friend who was not yet observant. In the middle of our discussion, Rabbi Schwab looked over at a dumb-cane plant with its huge drooping leaves and decoratively highlighted veins and asked rhetorically in a childlike manner, "Who painted this?" It was so cute and yet profound beyond words. In Simcha Raz's account of the life of Rabbi Aryeh Levin ztl., A Tzadik in Our Time, he records as follows: Here is fragment of

memory from a woman who was sentenced by the British to a term of fifteen years: "With me in the Bethlehem women's prison were women who had just been arrested, on their entry into the land (of Israel) without official consent of the British. They found it hard to understand Rabbi Levin when he came visiting and spoke to us. They were Sephardic, and he (bless him) used his good old Ashkenazi pronunciation that he brought with him from Eastern Europe. If that were not enough, he spoke in a rather faint voice mingled with intermittent sounds of weeping. Yet these inmates would always sit right opposite him drinking in his words. So I asked them, "Did you understand what he said?" "Not a word," they replied. "But we come to contemplate his pure clear eyes. Such absolute childlike innocence looks out from them. And his glance gives us affection and courage..."

Maybe it's not such a stretch to say that Judah, contemplating his many risks in this battle, spoke on multiple levels, and Joseph hearing the words deeply, wondered about his own lost youth, and needed to reaffirm, his true identity. DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.