

THE FLAME OF YOSEF

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Yaakov settled in the land of his father, in the land of Canaan. These are the descendants of Yaakov: Yosef was 17 years old. As a boy ... (Bereishis 37:1-2)

Chanukah is this coming week, B"H, the first night being on December 1, one of the earliest times it has ever begun, at least as far as I can recall. If Moshiach is not so far away, as many believe is the case given the events of current history, this may be one of the last times we will actually celebrate the holiday.

This is because every Jewish holiday, even the rabbinical ones, represent a particular spiritual light from a later period of history. We need the holiday because the light itself is basically inaccessible on a daily basis at this time, and the holiday acts as a way to let some of that light into our period of history, in order to help rectify ourselves and the world. The activities that we do as part of the holiday, like kindling the Menorah for example, is designed to help open that door to the person performing the mitzvah.

As the rabbis teach, most of the holidays represent lights from the period called Techiyas HaMeisim, the Resurrection of the Dead, or later, as in the World-to-Come. Once the respective periods begins, then the holidays that allowed access to these lights will cease to be specific holidays in the yearly calendar, since access to the lights will then be on a regular basis.

Chanukah, however, is the light of Yemos HaMoshiach, which means that it will be the first holiday to go. For, once Moshiach comes and ushers in the Messianic Era, everyday will be Chanukah, meaning that access to this holy light will be as easy as breathing air, for it will be everywhere at all times. This is why evil will be no more, and free-will will be a matter of the past.

However, we see from Tanach that individuals can become living manifestations of the same lights that are the basis of the holidays. A person can develop an ideology that is in keeping with the concept represented by the light of a particular holiday, and therefore, be associated with the light and the respective holiday. Hence, Avraham was associated with the holiday of Pesach, Yitzchak with the holiday of Shavuot, and Ya'akov Avinu with the holiday of Succot.

What about Chanukah? Who exemplified the light that is the basis of Chanukah? This week's parshah alludes to the answer by connecting Yosef to the number 17, the number that represents the light with which God made Creation and which, as Rashi explains, was hidden on the first day of

Creation. For, this light is the first thing to be called "good" in the Torah, the Hebrew word having a gematria of 17.

Indeed, as we saw in last week's Haftarah, Yosef is compared to a flame:

The house of Ya'akov will be fire, the house of Yosef a flame, and the house of Eisav for straw; and they will ignite them and devour them. There will be no survivor to the house of Eisav, for God has spoken. (Ovadiah 1:18)

And, not just any flame, but specifically the flame that will rid the world of the descendants of Eisav who will not deserve to live into the Messianic Era:

When Rachel had given birth to Yosef, Ya'akov said to Lavan, "Grant me leave that I may go to my place and to my land." (Bereishis 30:25)

Since the adversary of Eisav was born, as it says, "The house of Ya'akov will be fire, the house of Yosef a flame, and the house of Eisav straw; and they will ignite them and devour them. (Ovadiah 1:18). Fire without a flame is powerless from a distance, and thus once Yosef was born, Ya'akov trusted in The Holy One, Blessed is He, and desired to return. (Rashi)

The story of Yosef is a curious one indeed. Of all the tribes born, his was the only one that comes with a story:

Rav said: After Leah had passed judgment on herself, saying, "Twelve tribes are destined to be born to Ya'akov. Six have been born from me and four from the handmaids, making ten. If this child will be a male, my sister Rachel will not be equal to one of the handmaids!" As a result, the child was changed to a girl, as it says, "And she called her name Dinah" (Bereishis 30:21). (Brochos 60a)

Hence, though the adversary of Eisav was destined to be born from Leah, as the result of an act of empathy, he was, in the end, born to Rachel. And, since, as the Arizal explains, we know that children are not randomly born to their parents, there must have been some kind of connection between Leah and Yosef, even though he was born to Rachel in the end, and was considered to be closest to her.

What does this mean for history? What does this mean for Chanukah?

It really reveals the role that we can play in helping to shape history and the destiny of the Jewish people. We are not aware of the myriad of details that put us where we end up in life, but nothing is

by accident, and everything has purpose. We just tend to show up and take it all for granted.

However, Rachel had been the product of a certain life and set of experiences that made it possible for her to have mercy on Leah and assure her a prominent position in Ya'akov's family, and not Eisav's. She never knew just how prominent Leah would become until after she gave birth to half of the Twelve Tribes, before Rachel even bore Ya'akov a single son.

But what a son she had. But only with thanks to Leah, who could have given birth to a seventh son, apparently, had she not deferred to her sister in order to save her the embarrassment of giving birth to less sons than each of Ya'akov's concubines. Thanks to Leah's prayers, the fetus that had formed as a boy had to be transformed into the body of a girl to become Dinah, and the angel who was responsible for the delivery of Yosef's soul had to be reassigned to bring into to Rachel's child instead.

But, did Heaven complain? Not at all. Rather, God seemed to let Rachel and Leah call the shots, and then just work with their decisions. But, we cannot forget, it could not be true if it was not what Heaven wanted all along, and had even planned. Nevertheless, apparently, Heaven wanted to have the involvement of human beings in its affairs, and left room for that to occur as part of the development process of redemption.

This is, in the end, is what Yosef represents. He is the living manifestation of this very concept, of how our decisions can affect historical outcomes, to the extent that Heaven allows us to. And, even if we can't actually cause a particular outcome to occur, we are credited in Heaven with what we tried to do, as if we succeeded, and held responsible for what we didn't try to do, even if we would could not have succeeded. We have to act as if God needs us to do His work, while never forgetting that He doesn't.

There is another element to this discussion. Apparently, Yosef was meant to be a product of both mothers, Rachel and Leah. According to Targum Yonason, Rachel was actually pregnant with Dinah, while Leah was pregnant with Yosef, but an angel came and switched the fetuses, so that Yosef was born to Rachel while Dinah was born to Leah. Hence, Yosef was a product of both mothers.

Perhaps this is how Ya'akov knew that the adversary of Eisav had been born: he was the only son from both Rachel and Leah, and it was Leah who had been meant to marry Eisav. Not only this, but Dinah, who is compared to her mother, Leah, because she was outgoing, was the one who could have caused Eisav to do teshuvah, according to the Midrash, which Rashi quotes. Apparently, there is something about Leah that Yosef inherited during his brief stay in the womb that gave him the ability to tame Eisav as well.

Equally interesting is the fact that it was Leah's outgoingness that resulted in the birth of Yissachar, her sixth son, which is what prompted her to pray that Yosef be born to Rachel. And, it was her outgoingness that resulted in the birth of Yosef to Rachel, who acquired that right when she asked Leah for the jasmine that her son had brought home for her. The duda'im, as they are called in

Hebrew, are the symbol of the Final Redemption, and have the word "Dovid," in them, an allusion to the descendant of Dovid HaMelech: Moshiach.

The question is, though, what was it about Leah and Dinah that gives Yosef, and eventually, Moshiach Ben Yosef, the ability to subdue Eisav in the end? And, how does it tie to Chanukah, the holiday of 36 candles, especially since Rachel died at the age of 36, and the gematria of Leah was 36, especially since Ya'akov was away from home for 36 years altogether?

Ovadiah the prophet and convert from Edom called Yosef a flame. He called Ya'akov, fire, and Eisav, straw, but Yosef himself is compared to a flame. This is interesting, because if anyone seemed like fire, it was Eisav and his descendants, and if anyone has played the role of straw throughout history, it has been Ya'akov and his descendants, who have been burned up on far more than one occasion by the fire of Eisav.

What changes? Kabbalistically, fire represents Gevurah, or strength, traditionally associated with Eisav, not Yosef. Straw represents nothingness, and passivity, certainly not traits associated with Eisav. How and why does everything switch around?

We watched the answer back in Parashas Toldos when Ya'akov, at the insistence of his mother Rivkah, put on the 'hands' of Eisav. However, the important part, indeed, the most important part of all without which the hands of Eisav are not only meaningless, they are dangerous, was that he did it while maintaining the 'voice' of Ya'akov. It is a combination that simply neutralizes the power of Eisav until it is nothing.

Hence, it was no coincidence that Yosef ended up in Egypt, purely as a function of Divine Providence. Indeed, as the Leshem explains, when he sent the male and female donkeys later to his father, in advance of their reunion, he was telling Ya'akov Avinu that he had plumbed the depths of the impurity of Egypt, and yet, he remained Yosef HaTzaddik. For 22 years he had not only lived away from home, but in a spiritually empty world, and yet he had remained righteous. Could his brothers have done equally as well?

Arguably the most dangerous impact Eisav has had on the Jewish people has been assimilation, something that we seem powerless to stop. That which draws the hearts of Jews away from Judaism is all-encompassing and all-pervasive, insidiously a part of our everyday lives in even the most spiritually-fortified of areas. When we act as 'straw' towards it, it seems to act as 'fire' against us, and burns us up in one way or another.

Clearly, it wasn't simply something Yosef picked up along the way, or while he was in Egypt. If his chinuch—his education—that he received from his father had not already prepared him for what he was destined to undergo, then he would have drowned amongst the nations, like so many Jews have done since then. Impurity would overcome him before he could have tamed it.

That is why he also included a gift to his father that alluded to the last thing they had learned before

he had been kidnapped and sent to Egypt. It was a way of telling Ya'akov that what you taught me prepared me for all of this, giving Eisav-like hands on my own terms, so that I could maintain my voice of Ya'akov. As a result, rather than be subdued by the nation of Egypt, the nation of Egypt was subdued by me, an individual.

It was a delicate and powerful balance that was achieved because he had received something from both mothers, Rachel and Leah, and something that the holiday of Chanukah comes to give us each year.

Text

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