

Jewish Pride, Judaism's Power

Shabbat Shalom. A week from today, two billion of our fellow human beings will be celebrating Christmas. Signs of Christmas abound all around us - the lights on people's homes, the decorations in the stores, the music on the radio as we flip stations. Despite all of this, I cannot stop thinking of this year's Chanukkah. Specifically, I cannot stop humming a song, a parody by a group of Yeshivah University students that call themselves the Maccabeats. The song, which is entitled Candlelight, is a take-off on the current hit by Taio Cruze called Dynamite. Among the lyrics are the following words: "I fling my latkes in the air sometimes, saying, A O spin the dreidel, just want to celebrate for all eight nights." The song, with its accompanying music video, became something of a YouTube hit during Chanukkah, being mentioned in as widely varied places as Ryan Seacrest's daily radio show, the Jewish Forward, and on the website Jews for Sarah Palin. It is a well done video that tells the entire story of Chanukkah with excellent music, a little humor, and tremendous pride. Ten days after Chanukkah is over my sons and I are still walking around the house humming the song.

I share this story about Jewish pride this Shabbat morning because of a comment I read in Rashi about this morning's Torah portion Vayehi. *Vayehi* is the last portion in the Book of Genesis and in the Torah scroll itself the portion begins as something called a parasha stuma - a "closed portion," which means there are no open spaces separating the last words of Vayigash (last week's portion) from the first words of Vayehi. Usually there is an empty space of nine letters between portions.

The question therefore arises, if there is usually an open space between portions, why isn't there a space between *Vayigash* & *Vayehi*. Rashi gives two different explanations to resolve the difficulty. He says: "Why is this portion closed? It is because when Jacob our father died, the eyes and hearts of Israel were closed from the pain of subjugation which then began. Another interpretation is that [Jacob] wished to reveal [to his sons] the end-of-times redemption, but it was closed off from him."

If we focus on Rashi's first answer, we actually are faced with another question. What subjugation is he talking about? The Israelites weren't enslaved until after Joseph died, not after Jacob's death. Why talk of subjugation now?

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin suggested in answer to this question that it is because Jacob always acted with pride in himself and his Israelite ancestry. He wrote: "He demonstrates this when he meets Pharaoh for the only time. In violation of accepted protocol, it is the foreigner Jacob who controls the conversation, opens and closes the interview, blessing Pharaoh both at the beginning and the end. When we remember that Pharaoh called himself a god, and was thus the chief dispenser of blessings in Egypt, Jacob's behavior was a breach of good manners at the very least. Apparently, however, the proud Jacob - heir to the heritage of Abraham and Isaac - cannot imagine accepting a blessing from an Egyptian idolater. Joseph, on the other hand, expresses a very different state of mind. When he realizes that he must fulfill his vow to his father and bury him in Hebron, he is forced to stoop to the level of obsequious petitioner, begging servants to explain to Pharaoh that his father wanted to be buried in Israel." In short, unlike his father, whose pride in his Hebrew heritage kept him strong, grounded, and dignified even in the presence of Pharaoh, Joseph's pride in his heritage was not as strong as his fear of upsetting Pharaoh. It is this fear of expressing one's identity and willingness to act subservient and subjugated, that,

according to some, in time led to actually being subjugated! I want discuss the political implications this has for us today.

In any case, what led to the difference in pride between Jacob and Joseph? One possible answer is that Joseph led most of his adult life alone and far away from his people, immersed in a totally different culture. Relying only on the childhood memories of his people's traditions for so long, he had not developed into a fully actualized Jewish or Israelite adult - full of pride in his heritage. According to the midrash he had studied with Jacob on a regular basis before being sold as a slave. But when he was sold his education was interrupted. Lack of knowledge eventually led to a lack of pride, and a fearful demeanor. Joseph's ignorance led to his fear which led eventually to the entire Israelite people suffering as a result.

What happened to Joseph so long ago can happen to anyone of us. Much of my time as a rabbi has been, here at Temple Beth-El and in my other shuls, devoted to the education of our youth. But that is not my only job, for no matter how wonderful our curriculum, how excited the children are, or how well-prepared they are for their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, even if they continue through Confirmation they will still be teenagers, not yet adults, when they complete their time learning with us. A teenager's experience, knowledge, and understanding, no matter how mature they are, is not enough to sustain them throughout life.

That is why I also devote a tremendous effort to the adult education classes I teach, and try to promote all of the classes in our synagogue. As we approach the new "secular" year, there couldn't be a better new year's resolution than learning more about your heritage. There is a reason that on our website there is a section called life-long learning, which is where you go to find out about the Religious School, Hebrew High, AND adult education classes. By the way, it is never too late to start learning - even if it means jumping into a class three months into the eight month class. If you can't make one of our adult classes, there are numerous on-line resources that can help you grow, as well as a plethora of books, including those in our library, to help you on your journey.

By increasing your knowledge you can increase pride. Interestingly enough, I read another D'var Torah this week which discusses the importance of all knowledge, especially self-knowledge. Rabbi David Aron noted this week that in this morning's Torah portion, Jacob says to Joseph - "I never palel-ti that I would ever see your face again, and G-d has granted me to even see the face of your children." The root p-l-l is most commonly known as the root for the Hebrew word *l'hitpalel*, usually translated as to pray. Rabbi Aron, however, writes: "What do you think the term means here? I never hoped...? I never imagined...? I never dreamed...? I never anticipated? L'hitpalel means to do something to your self. Exactly what you are doing is palel-ing yourself. And what exactly is that? Rashi explains the verse to mean, "I never would have filled my heart to think the thought that I would ever see your face again." Therefore, when we l'hitpalel, we are actively, intentionally trying to fill our hearts, to think the thoughts, to dream the dreams of what it is that we want to see and do in this world and then change ourselves in order to make these things happen. It is not G-d whom we are trying to change. It is ourselves and our relationship to G-d we are trying to change through prayer. If we change ourselves, we change our whole situation. Please do not misunderstand this important principle. L'hitpalel does not mean to meditate and talk to yourself as if you could ever make things

happen for your self without G-d. Of course, G-d listens to our prayers and answers but we are not trying to change G-d's mind we are trying to change ourselves.”

In my mind, this self-knowledge is the key not only to our experience of *tefilah*, but it is directly related to the earlier issue of pride. If we do not know ourselves, we cannot appreciate our best qualities. If we do not know ourselves, we cannot experience the joy that comes from improving ourselves. And if we do not take time to examine ourselves, we will never understand that we are made in God’s image, that we are part of His treasured people, and that we have much to be proud of in our heritage.

I began this morning by talking about the Maccabeats and the tremendous joy when I watched them on YouTube. Interestingly enough, one of the lines in their song is about the miracle which took place on Chanukkah. While they speak of the miracle of the oil, they continue by explaining that with the great menorah lit, there was “a return to Torah learning.” What does that mean? It means that the miracle was great, highly important, but even more so was the response of our people - to not only praise God but then to devote themselves to becoming more knowledgeable about themselves and their tradition as a way of praising God. Their studies led to more knowledge which led to more pride which led to more studies and on and on and on. So may it be with each of us.