



# Keep it in the Family

Bereishis

*When a Yeshiva student found a Jew in Yosemite Park, he was asked a bizarre question. But the answer is hidden in this week's parsha.*

## **A Visit to Yosemite Lake**

One of Chabad's earliest activities is a program known as Roving Rabbis. The Rebbe instituted that Yeshiva students utilize their summer vacations by visiting faraway Jewish communities that cannot sustain a permanent rabbinic presence.

Rabbi Levi Shemtov of the Friendship Circle in West Bloomfield, Michigan, shared the following story:

In the summer 1990, he and a friend spent their summer in Fresno, California. They met with the local Jews, held Torah classes and did their part to strengthen the Jewish community. At the close of their time in Fresno, they decided to visit the nearby Yosemite Park.

When they shared their plan with one of their local contacts who helped them find Jewish families in town, he was surprised by the idea. “There are no Jews in Yosemite!”

Suddenly, this fellow recalled that there actually was a Jewish family living in Yosemite Lake, a small town near the national park. But while he knew their name, he didn’t have any of their contact information.

The next morning, the duo headed for Yosemite. During their drive, they noticed a sign that said “Yosemite Lake,” pointing in the direction of that town. They decided to head into the city and search for the Jewish family.

They entered a local office building and began asking around if anyone knew of Mr. “So-and-so.” After a bit of a search, they found their man and headed over to his home.

The Jewish fellow welcomed them in and immediately asked them a question:

“Are Jews a race or a religion?”

He seemed to be very animated when speaking about the topic. These two fellows were Yeshiva students. They had come ready to teach him about Judaism; how to put on Tefillin, how to pray, or how to keep a kosher home. These philosophical questions didn’t interest them as much, and they were curious to know why he was so invested in the discussion.

Finally, he shared with them that his daughter had married a non-Jew. Although he wasn’t a religious person, he believed that

it was important to marry within the Jewish genetic 'family,' and had made that clear to his daughter. When she chose to marry a non-Jew, he cut off all contact with her.

In the course of their conversation, he happened to show them a picture of his daughter and her family. The Yeshiva boys were shocked: they saw a typical Chabad family, where the father had a beard, the mother wore a wig, and the children looked like regular chassidic children.

Seeing their surprise, the fellow explained that his estranged son-in-law was a convert to Judaism. According to his belief that being Jewish is genetic; as far as he was concerned, his daughter had married a non-Jew.

Somewhat amused, the Yeshiva students told him, "Look, we won't try to convince you that Judaism is a religion or a race. But we are sure of one thing: You, your son-in-law, and Moshe Rabeinu are all equally Jewish."

The boys returned to New York and promptly forgot about the encounter.

A year later, a group of young Yeshiva boys visited 770 with their teacher, and they held a chassidic farbrengen. The teacher shared a story about a Chabad couple in Pittsburgh: The husband converted to Judaism, and the wife's father cut off contact because the new husband wasn't a 'genetic' Jew. She was very pained by her father's rejection and wrote a letter to the Rebbe, sharing her frustration and asking for his blessing and advice.

“She never received an answer from the Rebbe,” the teacher said. “But the Rebbe sent special messengers to her father’s home and they convinced him to reconnect with his daughter. And one of those messengers was Levi Shemtov.”

One of the listeners ran to confirm the story with Levi, who was still studying in New York, but Levi had no recollection of any such mission. After racking his brains, he suddenly recalled the strange visit in Yosemite Lake, and connected the dots in the story.

## **Who Are We?**

What is Judaism?

Are we a race? There are Jews of all races: Ashkenazim, Sefardim, Ethiopians, Indian Jews, Chinese converts — we’ve got them all. Jews are made up of every ethnicity and every nationality.

But are we a religion? There are many Jews who don’t observe any form of Judaism and even declare themselves atheists, but are still considered — and proudly consider themselves — one-hundred-percent Jewish.

To be a Christian atheist or a Muslim atheist is an oximoron. If you don’t identify with the faith, you won’t identify as a member of the group either. But for some reason, there are Jewish atheists.

Is Judaism a nationality? Not really. There are Americans who are Jewish, French Jews and Russian Jews. Different nationalities but all Jewish.

Is Judaism a culture? That is also not correct. Some Jews are culturally western, while others had mid-eastern mannerisms. Some Jews eat gefilte fish, Yemenite Jews eat Zhug, and American Jews eat bagels and lox.

So what exactly are we?

The truth is that Judaism is neither nation, race, religion nor culture. Judaism is a family, a 'mishpacha.'

Some of us are biological children and some of us are adopted, but whoever was born to a Jewish mother or went through a Halachic conversion is Jewish. We all share the same grandparents, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. You cannot divorce your family, and you cannot divorce yourself from the Jewish people.

## **Esau's Realization**

Judaism as a family dates back as far as Judaism itself. Abraham married his niece. When Isaac came of age, Abraham didn't allow him to marry a local girl. Instead, he sent his servant Eliezer to Haran to bring back a member of his family as a bride.

In this week's parsha, Jacob and Esau come of age. We all remember the story — Isaac wants to bless Esau and Jacob cunningly steals the blessings and then heads off to Haran. Esau, in his fury, pledges to kill his brother.

Surprisingly, Esau never tried to carry out his threat. He knew his brother's whereabouts and could have easily traveled there or dispatched a hired mobster to carry out the job. Why didn't

he try to carry out his plan? Even more surprisingly: when Jacob finally returns to town, Esau hugs and kisses him!

The answer is hidden in these same verses.

Right after Jacob stole the blessings, Rebecca turned to her husband and complained about the local girls. “I am disgusted with the Hittite girls. If Jacob marries one of them, my life is not worth living.”

Isaac takes the statement seriously. He calls for Jacob, tells him to find a life-partner from within the family in Haran, and sends him off with a long list of wonderful blessings: to carry on the Abrahamic traditions and to inherit the land of Israel for his descendants.

When the Torah describes how Esau watched and internalized this encounter, the verse seem repetitive:

“Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him to Padan Aram to take a wife from there, and that when he had blessed him, he had commanded him, ‘Don’t take a Canaanite girl as a wife.’”

The Torah just described the very same encounter in its own words. Why does it repeat it from Esau’s perspective?

The Torah is telling us that Esau was surprised. This was the first conversation that his father Isaac had with Jacob after being misled to give Jacob the blessing. He had expected his father to rebuke his brother for stealing the blessings. Instead, Isaac had blessed him and told him to marry a girl from within

the family.

Esau suddenly realized that he had fallen out of favor with his parents. And he knew exactly why. Just a few short verses earlier, we read that Esau had married two Canaanite girls, to the displeasure of his parents.

Seeing his parents' command to his brother, he suddenly understood that marrying those girls had been the mistake of his life. He realized that his parents no longer saw him as the future of their family, and were building their hopes on Jacob, who was on his way to build a family with 'a member of the tribe.'

At that moment, he realized that he didn't deserve his father's blessing. Instead of trying to kill his brother, he decided to amend his ways. At the close of the Torah portion, Esau marries his cousin, the daughter of his uncle Ishmael. He didn't divorce his previous wives, but it was a step in the right direction.

## **Keep it in the Family**

The Rebbe once spoke about the accusation that Jews are racist for claiming that there is a distinction between Jews and non-Jews. The Rebbe rejected the claim for the basic reason that Judaism is not an ethnicity. At any moment, any human-being can undergo a Halachic conversion and become a Jew (*Toras Menachem* vol. 69 pg. 165).

In the 1970s, Chase Bank had an advertisement: In Chase Bank you have a friend. When Israel's Bank Leumi opened a branch in Manhattan, their advertisement read, "Chase Bank is your

friend, but Bank Leumi is mishpacha.”