

Uforatzta

A famous Chabad song is sung with the words of Uforatzta. What does the word mean, and how does Jacob's life serve as a lesson for Jews in the 21st century?

Uforatzta

Have you ever heard the song “Uforatzto”? When the Rebbe introduced the idea of Jewish outreach, he turned the word Uforatzto into a Chabad motto. Chassidim made a song out of it.

The source is from this week's Parsha, where G-d uses that word to bless Jacob. What does mean?

Rashi says it means strength. G-d blessed Jacob that he should be strong. Maharsha says it means to break through, that nothing should stand in the way of our G-dly service. In Modern Hebrew, Uforatzto means to spread out.

What did the Rebbe mean when he told us “Uforatzto”?

Uforatzto is the blessing Jacob received from G-d, so let's take a look at Jacob's life and see if we can get a clue as to its meaning.

Jacob's Unconventional Approach

The first story the Torah tells us about Jacob is that he traded places with his older brother, an idea that seems inconceivable to regular people.

The story opens with Jacob cooking a lentil soup. Esau comes home exhausted and asks him for some soup. Suddenly, without warning, Jacob tells his older brother that he can have the lentil soup only if he agreed to hand over his position as first born son. Esau doesn't think very much of it and hands it over. Jacob now has the rights of the '*bechor*,' the firstborn.

Next, he sneaks away with his brother's blessings. Had Jacob asked anyone before doing so, he would have been told not to, for several reasons. First of all, it's not nice to trick your old father. Second of all, if Isaac were to realize that he was really Jacob, he was capable of getting angry and perhaps cursing him. And if Esau would walk in on them he could kill Jacob on the spot! But Jacob didn't ask our opinion; he did it and got away with it.

Now we arrive at our Parsha.

Jacob arrives in Charan and makes a deal with his uncle Laban that he would work for seven years to earn the hand of Rachel in marriage. When the seven years were up, the wedding was held and Laban slipped Leah in as the bride instead of Rachel. A normal person would immediately get a divorce and never do business with Laban ever again.

Jacob does a strange, unconventional thing. He keeps Leah and agrees to work for Laban another seven years in exchange for Rachel. He has now married two sisters, which is never a good idea! But he did it and despite the trickery and lies to which Laban subjected him he became quite a wealthy man with a wonderful family.

In the end Jacob runs away from Laban's house. Talk about unconventional – how does a man with four wives and twelve children “run-away”? Yet Jacob did it, with all of his children, cattle, sheep, and all of his possessions.

Jacob kept up this unconventional behavior throughout his life. A good example is his sending Joseph to check on his brothers, something which is completely illogical since Jacob knew that they all hated Joseph. Yet he did it and in the end, saved the whole East from starvation.

Another good example of Jacob's unconventional behavior is his burying Rachel in the middle of nowhere instead of taking her to the Cave of the Patriarchs, the family burial grounds. Still, in the end it was this burial place that the captive Jews were able to pray at on their way to Babylon.

Even in his last days, Jacob didn't lose the element of surprise. When Joseph brings his children to get his father's blessings Jacob places his right hand on the younger brother Ephraim's head instead of on Menashe's. As it turns out Ephraim would become the more powerful tribe.

Who Ended Up On Top?

It was Jacob's constant 'non-conventionalism' that brought him success. After all was said and done, Jacob ended up on top. Isaac was happy that Jacob had gotten the blessings instead of Esau. Laban admitted that it was Jacob who had brought success to his business. Jacob beat an angel in hand to hand combat and Esau, surprisingly, hugs and kisses the long-lost brother he had sworn to kill.

Jacob had unnatural success with his family as well. Abraham and Isaac had two children apiece, one of which abandoned his father's faith. Jacob had thirteen children in a nomadic home with four mothers and a lot of competition, yet he beat the overwhelming odds and none of his children forsook his faith.

Of the patriarchs, Abraham gave us the attribute of kindness and love of G-d. Isaac gave us the ability to remain humble and obediently follow His commandments. Jacob gave us the ability be unconventional and not to worry what the world says or thinks. From Jacob we have learned to do what the world least expects. Uforatzto.

This is exactly what the Rebbe did when he started the mitzvah campaign. "Peddling Judaism" to those who are far from it was unheard of until then. In fact, the entire Jewish world, orthodox and secular alike, laughed at the Rebbe, certain that it would never work.

In the 1970's the Rebbe came up with another unconventional idea. He invented the "Mitzvah Tank", taking a word that was until that point synonymous with destruction and death and turned it into a positive thing. The plan was to hit the streets in RVs and sell Judaism, something that is completely against Jewish nature. We Jews like to keep a low profile, we don't like being seen for fear of what might happen.

The same thing happened with the public menorah idea. Jews had always lit little menorahs by their windowsills at home. No one ever dreamt that there could be 30-foot menorah in the centers of the world's biggest cities.

Obviously there were scoffers, those who believed that Jews would never go for it.

But you can't argue with success.

The Rebbe, in his unconditionally unconventional wisdom, made it happen because that was his motto - Uforatzto!