



Emotional Intelligence

How to develop Chassidishe Hergesh.

Dreams

Does Judaism believe in dreams?

The classic answer is no. "Dreams speak emptiness" (Zacharia 10:2). Dreams and especially nightmares — we are to ignore them, not to verbalize them, and not to repeat them to anybody, and then the dream won't leave any negative impression at all.

But sometimes, there is another type of dream.

Several weeks ago, a woman named Rachel Zamir passed away in Israel. Allow me to share her story.

Rachel was born in 1932 in Russia. When the Nazis reached Leningrad in 1941, the government decided to evacuate all children via train all the way to Siberia. Obviously, the Jewish children found themselves among large groups of gentile children and counselors. The children themselves were told that it would only be for a summer, but the parents understood that it would be a long separation.

Rachel was only nine years old when her parents sent her and her brother off on the train for the long journey to Siberia. Conditions were terrible, but they finally arrived and ended up in two separate orphanages.

Meanwhile, the situation in Leningrad deteriorated. The Nazis

besieged the city, completely cutting it off from the rest of the world for over three years. This caused a terrible famine in which some half a million people perished. Rachel's parents died of hunger as well.

Rachel and her brother had an aunt — their father's sister — named Ita Sasonkin. Her husband, Moshe Sasonkin, had been arrested by the Soviets for spreading Judaism and hadn't been seen since; she and her young children had escaped the front and were living in Kazakhstan in the home of her father-in-law, Rabbi Shmerel Sasonkin.

One night, her brother came to her in a dream and said two words: "The children." Ita was terribly frightened, but she understood exactly what he meant.

Before the war, they had promised each other that if one died in the war, the other would raise their children. Her brother had come to remind her of her promise.

She thought it was just a dream and went back to sleep, but the dream recurred; again, she saw the image of her brother. She could not escape the memory of her niece and nephew.

She tried to ignore the dream because she knew that the children were in Siberia, a journey of many weeks from Kazakhstan. She was living with her small children with her in-laws in a small house. Her in-laws could barely afford to feed them; she didn't have the courage to suggest bringing two more children into the tiny home.

But when the dream came again on the third night, she was no longer able to fall asleep. She got out of her bed and began to walk around the house. Her father-in-law, a very scholarly rabbi, was studying in the other room when he heard her shuffling around in the middle of the night.

"Ita, what's going on?" he asked her.

At first she evaded the question, but he persisted until she told him about the dream.

Hearing the story, he asked her if she had any information about their whereabouts. She answered yes; she knew exactly where and in which orphanage the boy and girl were.

He was shocked.

“How come you didn’t tell me about this until now?” he said. “The children must be saved!”

He arranged for special travel permits, Ita left the children with her in-laws, and left for Siberia.

While they were processing the travel permits, they received an urgent letter from the orphanage of Rachel’s brother stating that they should come urgently to pick him up. Something was obviously going on.

After weeks of difficult travel, she finally arrived, and she rushed to the boy’s orphanage where she discovered that one of the teachers had already signed an adoption form to adopt the boy. This teacher had fallen in love with the handsome and smart boy and wanted to take him home. When Ita arrived, she had to convince the orphanage management that she had promised her brother to adopt the children in the event that he died.

She did not have any documents to prove her assertion. Moreover: the boy, who was 12 years old, did not want to go with his aunt; he was very fond of his adoptive mother. It took a lot of persuasion and a lot of tears until they gave in. From there, the aunt and nephew went to find Rachel. They found her safe and sound, and the joy of the reunion between the brother and sister, she later said, was indescribable.

The three of them returned to Kazakhstan and eventually immigrated

to the Holy Land, where Rachel grew up, married, and became a kindergarten teacher.

The Teacher

In those years, tens of thousands of immigrants were pouring into Israel from different countries. Many of those immigrants lived in terrible poverty, and the Rebbe ordered the Chasidim in Israel to establish schools for these children. A central administration called the “Reshet” was formed to establish a network of Chabad schools throughout the country.

One of the locations chosen for a school was the city of Holon. Today it is one of the largest cities in Israel, but at the time, Holon was an immigrant town with many underprivileged children.

To start a school, you need to begin with a kindergarten. The management of the network turned to Rachel Zamir, now a married woman, and asked her to teach in the kindergarten in Holon. As a chassid, before taking any important steps in life she asked for the Rebbe’s guidance. She wrote to the Rebbe about the offer and soon received an answer; the Rebbe instructed her to accept the post and blessed her with great success.

Her kindergarten was in a state of terrible neglect. There was almost no furniture, and their budget was extremely tight. In Israel, the local municipality is in charge of running and funding the kindergartens; the Holon municipality was not interested in the Chabad kindergarten, and made every effort to make life difficult for them and hamper Chabad’s work in the city.

In Israel, as in the United States, public education is free and parents do not pay tuition, but the municipality obliged every parent to pay for the one daily meal the children received at school. Many parents could not or did not want to pay for it; Rachel would fundraise and

sometimes pay for it with her own money, always making sure that the children have something to eat — while attempting to cajole the parents to pay the small fee.

One morning, one of the parents showed up at the kindergarten with a big knife hanging on his belt. He brought his child for school and made it very clear that she should not dare ask for payment. Rachel was terrified. She talked to him calmly and tried to come to a peaceful resolution. She explained that she did not control the finances; the city required every parent to pay for meals. However, she told him not to worry; he could leave the child in kindergarten and she would try to talk to the municipality to absolve him of the payment.

The showdown ended peacefully, but this episode finally broke her.

Teaching in this kindergarten had always been a very difficult task. There were always huge problems; there was no furniture and no money, she had more children than one teacher could possibly handle — but despite all this she had persevered. But being threatened with a knife was the straw that broke the camel's back. She wrote to the Rebbe that she was terrified, and she wanted to leave her post.

It was not long before she received a reply. The Rebbe added a postscript in his own handwriting, telling her to contemplate the great merit she had in educating young children in the path of Judaism. "Think about the great merit for those in whom the Divine Providence has entrusted [this role], and the great joy and wealth [it will bring them]. (*Shlichut Chaya*, 122).

In other words, the Rebbe told her to equate the grief of all the difficulties with the eternal fulfillment and joy that comes from raising children to be happy and healthy Jews.

Of course, after such a warm letter, she continued to teach.

In addition to the ordinary problems, many of the children came from broken homes. The children were often abused by their own parents, and she had to train the parents in the art of raising children. She would often stay late after the children left kindergarten and coach the mothers in how to take care of their own children.

One day, she was invited to a meeting at the municipality. When she got there, the head of the kindergartens asked her, “What exactly do you do at your kindergarten?”

Every year, they told her, when the registration for kindergartens opened, everyone wanted to register their children in Rachel’s kindergarten. It got to the point where the city needed to invite the police to control the fights that would inevitably break out. The city leaders couldn’t understand; there were many good kindergartens equipped with the best furniture and toys, yet everyone wanted to attend this poor kindergarten.

Throughout her years in teaching, and throughout all her difficulties, the Rebbe gave her immense encouragement, and she raised generations of wonderful children. Often, adults would return to the kindergarten to find their old teacher, to hug her and thank her for the love she showered on them and for the guidance she gave their parents.

Mrs. Rachel Zamir passed away a few weeks ago at the age of ninety. She had no biological children, but she left hundreds of children and perhaps thousands of grandchildren who owe her their lives.

The Bones

This week, we read Parshas Beshalach. In the third verse, we read, “And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, because he made the children of Israel take an oath, saying, ‘When G-d remembers you, take my bones up with you.’”

Now, as Moses was occupied with transporting Joseph's bones, the Jewish people were occupied with something else.

Last week, we read how G-d commanded the children of Israel to borrow gold, silver, and precious clothing from their neighbors (Bo 11:2). G-d implored Moses to make sure that the people of Israel came out of Egypt with great wealth. Why? Because he had promised our father Abraham in His covenant that the people of Israel would go through a difficult exile, but then exit with great wealth. G-d wanted to make sure that the promise he made to Grandpa Abraham was completely fulfilled.

Indeed, before they left Egypt, the people of Israel were busy fulfilling this commandment, collecting as much gold, silver, and expensive clothing as they possibly could. Only one person, Moses, was busy with something completely different; he remembered the oath of the Jewish people to Joseph and wanted to fulfill it.

The problem was that it was 139 years since Joseph had died, and Moses did not know where he was buried.

He went and found Serach, the daughter of Asher, who had lived an exceptionally long life, and she told him that the Egyptians had sunk the coffin of Joseph in the Nile so that its waters would be blessed — and also so that the children of Israel would not be able to find it and therefore not be able to leave Egypt.

Moses stood on the banks of the Nile and declared, "Joseph, Joseph, the time of redemption has come. If you come up, good. If not, we are absolved of your oath." Joseph's coffin floated to the top, and Moses took it with him.

Making the Right Choice

The Rebbe cites the Midrash (Shemos Rabba 20:19) which describes Moses with the verse, "A wise-hearted man chooses mitzvot"

(Proverbs 10:8). According to the midrash, this is a reference to Moses, who was occupied with the bones of Joseph while the rest of the people of Israel were occupied with collecting gold and silver.

The Rebbe explains that there were two mitzvot here; an explicit mitzvah from G-d — to get as much money and gold as possible out of Egypt — and the oath made to Joseph to take his bones along when they left Egypt.

Which is more important? Which were they to prioritize?

To make the right choice, the Rebbe says, one must be “wise-hearted.” This is what we call “emotional intelligence.”

We are often faced with a choice between two important commandments. Both deeds are important, and both are G-d’s will. Both deeds are worthy and moral. How do we know which is more important at that moment?

On a basic level, you can follow this rule of thumb: The mitzvah that is less enjoyable, and the mitzvah that is less popular — is the mitzvah which should be chosen first. Rachel Zamir isn’t remembered for choosing a popular job; it is the difficult choices and the thankless roles that are remembered the most.

But it is really impossible to create rules, because every situation is different. To make the right decisions at these moments, you need to be “wise hearted.” You need to have emotional intelligence in G-dliness. By studying Chasidic thought, you gain a new perspective and develop a “chassidishe hergesh.” Then, you’ll already know what to choose. (Toras Menachem vol. 25 pg. 52).