

The Ghetto Mentality

Category: Bereishis, Vayechi

What did the Rebbe say to a Conservative rabbi who wanted to know what makes Chabad unique?

What Makes Chabad Unique

A few years ago, a Conservative rabbi from Connecticut was visiting Alaska, and, of course, he bumped into my brother, the Chabad rabbi to Alaska, Rabbi Yosef Greenberg.

It turns out that the Conservative rabbi actually once had a yechidus, a private audience, with the Lubavitcher Rebbe many years ago, and he took the opportunity to tell Rabbi Greenberg about it.

In his day, the rabbi had been the spiritual leader of a large synagogue in Connecticut. One day, Rabbi Moshe Hecht walked into his office and told him that he needs his synagogue's membership list. (Rabbi Moshe Hecht was one of the first shluchim, emissaries, sent out to do outreach by the Rebbe. He came to Connecticut from Brooklyn in the 1950s.)

When the Conservative rabbi asked why he needed the list, Rabbi Hecht answered that he was planning to build a Jewish school in town and he wanted to reach out to every wealthy member of the community to help him build it.

As it turned out, the rabbi helped Rabbi Hecht build the school; he connected him with many community members who donated a lot of money to the school.

After some time, Rabbi Hecht came to the Conservative rabbi's office again. This time, he said, "Listen, you helped me a lot with building the school. I want to thank you by doing something for you in return. What can I do for you?"

The rabbi answered, "What I would like is for you to arrange a meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe."

Rabbi Hecht told him, "Oy, of all the things to ask for! That's something I'm not sure I can arrange." But the rabbi insisted, "Look, you asked me what you can do,

so I told you what I really want!”

Several weeks later, Rabbi Hecht again appeared in the rabbi’s office and informed him that he had arranged the meeting with the Rebbe one late night in the near future. Some time after that, the Conservative rabbi found himself entering the Rebbe’s office.

The rabbi asked the Rebbe three questions. Firstly, he told the Rebbe that he had wanted to move to Israel, and he asked the Rebbe whether he should. The Rebbe answered him that there are enough rabbis in Israel and that he was needed in Connecticut where he’d be able to accomplish much more.

The rabbi did not tell Rabbi Greenberg what the second question was.

But for the third question, the rabbi asked the Rebbe: “There are many types of Chasidim—Satmar, Bobov, Chabad, and so on. What’s the difference between Chabad and other Chasidim?”

The Rebbe answered him that they all began with the Baal Shem Tov and that they all kept many customs that the Baal Shem Tov had begun, like singing and dancing and emphasizing love of fellow Jew. However, it was only Chabad that really stayed true to the Baal Shem Tov’s innovation that one needs to draw every Jew close and that every Jew is precious to G-d like an only child. Chabad are the ones who, in reality, are continuing the Baal Shem Tov’s legacy.

Why Did Yosef Cry?

In this week’s Torah portion, we read about the passing of Yaakov Avinu, our Patriarch Yaakov. The Torah tells us how he blessed each of his sons before he departed from them, and then we read about the state funeral, the royal funeral, that was held for Yaakov by his 12 sons and by the Kingdom of Egypt. The funeral procession took Yaakov all the way back to the Holy Land, where Yosef and his brothers buried him before returning to Egypt.

And then, right at the end of the Torah portion, just one column before the end of the Book of Bereishis, we read a new story: “Now Yosef’s brothers saw that their father had died, and they said, ‘Perhaps Yosef will hate us and return to us all the evil that we did to him.’”

What actually happened? You all remember the story of Yosef, how his brothers hated him so much they left him for dead and now he had become the leader of the world's greatest superpower of the day. When they finally were reunited, Yosef was nice to them, especially since he was reunited with his father.

But now that their father had died, the brothers noticed that Yosef was not acting as he had before. As long as Yaakov was alive, they would eat at his house. But when their father died, Yosef stopped inviting them over, as the Midrash tells us. They seemed to not be that close anymore.

They thought that Yosef must still hate them after all. They decided to send Dan and Naftali, the two brothers who were sons of Bilhah, who had been closer to Yosef than the rest, to visit Yosef and tell him something that actually wasn't true: "Your father requested before he died that you forgive your brothers for what they did to you."

What was Yosef's reaction to this? The Torah tells us, "Yosef cried when they spoke to him."

What exactly was Yosef crying about? In all earlier situations where the Torah tells us that Yosef cried, it was either when he saw his brothers for the first time in 20 years, or when he saw his beloved brother Binyomin for the first time, or when he told his brothers, "I am Yosef," or when he met his father, or when his father passed away. In all those cases, it's obvious why he was crying—out of emotion. But why was he crying here?

Perhaps we can offer the following explanation.

The Bigger Picture

The entire family feud, the whole fight with Yosef, began because of the dreams he had dreamt. Yosef, as you remember, had dreamt that he was the leader and that everyone would submit to him. This led to them hating him and selling him.

Many years then went by, and ultimately, Yosef's dreams became reality. So when his brothers came to Egypt, Yosef said to them, "It wasn't you who sent me here but G-d... He made me ruler of all Egypt."

Yosef repeated this several times, pointing out that everything was by G-d's hand,

as the verse states, “G-d sent me before you for sustenance.” Yosef saw how the entire decree which G-d had revealed to Avraham at the Bris Bein HaBesarim, “that your seed shall be a stranger in a land not theirs” (Bereishis 15:13), was all starting to materialize.

And now, 17 years have passed since Yosef’s entire family came down to Egypt, and 39 years since Yosef was actually sold into slavery—and suddenly the brothers are wondering, “Maybe Yosef still hates us?”

Unfortunately, they were still stuck in the past. They were still at the beginning of the story, as if 39 years had not passed, as if Yosef had not become the leader of the world’s biggest superpower, as if he had not saved the entire world from famine. They were still fighting old battles.

That was why Yosef was crying.

Yosef wept because they didn’t see the big picture—that the reason they had come down to Egypt was not because they had sold him but because it was part of the bigger plan that had begun with Avraham and which was becoming a reality before their very eyes. He cried because instead of continuing Avraham’s tradition of bringing G-d to the entire universe, instead of using the opportunity to spread faith in the One True G-d to the millions of pagan Egyptians, which was why they had been exiled to Egypt, they barricaded themselves in their own little neighborhood in Goshen, the best part of Egypt, and kept to themselves and their own small lives and their own petty assumptions.

In short, instead of leaving the Jewish ghetto mentality behind and seeing the big picture now that they were in Egypt, they simply created a new Jewish ghetto in Goshen—and brought their Jewish ghetto mentality along with it.

Perhaps that’s why Yosef cried. Because the only one who stayed true to the path that Avraham had created was Yosef—a young Jew living in the midst of hedonism, in vulgar Egypt, and there he constantly had Heaven on his lips; he always reminded everyone that there is a G-d.

In Kabbalah, there is a concept called “refining the sparks.”

What this means is that in every physical object, there is a spiritual spark. This spark of divine energy is what allows this object to exist—and as long as it is not

recognized that this object exists because there is a Creator, that inner spark is in a form of exile. But when along comes a person and recognizes that it was created by G-d, he or she redeems that spark from “exile.”

For example, when a Jew says a blessing on a cup of water, “*shehakol neehyeh bidvaro*,” he or she is essentially recognizing that this water was created by G-d—they are refining that spark in the water and elevating it to a higher purpose.

The reason the Jews went down to Egypt was to extract the sparks scattered throughout Egyptian civilization—to teach the Egyptians that there is a G-d.

The Lesson

Now, what is the lesson for all of us?

Every time a Jew travels somewhere, whether for business or pleasure, he or she must always remember what is primary and what is secondary. True, it’s a business trip—but that’s only secondary; that’s only external and superficial. The real reason G-d made it happen that you should go on business to Japan, or on vacation to Jamaica, is to “extract the sparks”—to find the spiritual in the physical and to remind whoever you may meet that there is a G-d, and by doing so, to make them also have heaven on their lips.