

Proud and not Afraid

Category: Bereishis, Vayeshev

The more we are involved in Jewish life, the less worried we are about Antisemitism.

Dreams

People are always fascinated with dreams. The Talmud famously says that dreams speak falsely, but there are stories in which dreams played an important role. In fact, this week begins a “season of dreams” in the Torah, with the story of Joseph and his dreams about his brothers.

In honor of this “dream season,” let me share with you a story about a dream which changed the future of the Jewish people.

This story takes place at the very first meeting between Greece and Jerusalem, 175 years before the story of Chanukah. Alexander the Great was marching throughout the known world, and he arrived in the land of Israel as well. The Talmud tells us about an encounter that took place on the 21st of Kislev, in the year 3448 (313 BCE).

The Samaritans, an ethnic group that lived in the area and were the sworn enemies of the Jewish people, came to meet Alexander the great. They declared their allegiance and joined his army, and thereby gained his trust. Meanwhile, they made sure to inform him that Jerusalem was the capital of the Jewish people who would not submit to his rule. They asked his permission to attack Jerusalem and destroy the Holy Temple.

Josephus Flavius has a different version of the story. In his account, Alexander demanded that Judea abandon its allegiance to Persia and submit to Greece, but the high priest responded that he cannot undo the solemn vow he had made to Persia.

Either way, both records of the story say that Alexander gave the Samaritans permission to destroy Jerusalem. Emissaries soon arrived to the high priest, Shimon Hatzaddik, informing him that Jerusalem was in grave danger.

The Talmud relates that the high priest “donned the sacred clothing, gathered the elders of Israel, and emerged from Jerusalem holding fiery torches. All night long, they progressed towards the company of Alexander the Great, while Alexander the Great’s company progressed toward Jerusalem. As the sun rose, the two delegations met.

“As they approach, Alexander the Great asked his Samaritan companions, ‘Who are those people?’ ‘Those are the Jews who rebelled against you,’ they replied to him.

“As soon as Alexander the Great saw Shimon Hatzaddik, he got off his chariot and bowed to him.

“‘How could such a great king bow to a Jew?’ asked his men.

“Alexander responded, ‘I see the image of this man in my dreams before big battles, leading me to victory.’

“‘Why have you come,’ asked Alexander.

“The Jews responded, ‘There is a house which prays for you and for your kingdom—that they shouldn’t be destroyed. Is it possible that a nation should deceive you into destroying it?’

“‘Who are you talking about?’ asked Alexander.

“‘Those people accompanying you,’ they responded.

“‘I am giving them over into your hands,’ Alexander replied.

Later on, the king forged an alliance with Shimon Hatzaddik, and was invited to visit the Temple. During the visit, Alexander expressed a desire for a statue of himself to be placed inside the Temple. However, Shimon Hatzaddik pointed out that it was against Jewish tradition to install statues in the Temple. Instead, he suggested a symbolic gesture: all children born in that year would be named Alexander.

The Rebbe once shared this story, and pointed out a valuable lesson. When Shimon Hatzaddik had to meet “the most powerful man in the world,” he didn’t try to hide his Jewish identity. Rather than adopting the Greek fashion of the time,

he deliberately wore priestly garments.

According to Jewish law, the high priest is permitted to wear such attire only within the Temple, and he changes into regular clothing before leaving. But Shimon felt, that to safeguard the Temple, he had to highlight his representation of the Jewish people by donning priestly garments. It was through this distinctive attire that Alexander identified him as the same elder he encountered after each victorious battle (Toras Menachem 5745 vol. 2 p. 906).

The Proud Hebrew

This message is echoed in the current Torah portion.

Where is Joseph buried? In the land of Israel, in Shechem. Now, where is Moses buried? In the plains of Moab, right at the entrance to the land of Israel, but outside its borders.

This is intriguing question: How is it that Joseph, who passed away in Egypt over a century before the Exodus at the age of 110, was honored with burial in his homeland, while Moses, who carried Joseph's bones for forty years in the desert, did not merit burial in the land?

The Midrash provides an answer: "One who associates with his homeland is buried in his homeland, and one who does not associate with his homeland is not buried in his homeland" (Devarim Rabbah 2:8). Joseph, wherever he went, proudly declared his Hebrew identity. "I was stolen from the land of Hebrews," and so on and so forth. Whether he was falsely imprisoned or falsely accused, he openly acknowledged being a Hebrew. He never concealed his identity; in fact, he took pride in it.

In contrast, when Moses fled to Midian and was described as an "Egyptian man" by Jethro's daughters, Moses remained silent. He didn't deny the association. As a result, he was not buried in his homeland.

Being Proud Jews

Almost fifty years ago, the Rebbe began to encourage and promote the placement of public menorahs in central locations around the world and to organize large-

scale menorah lightings in various communities.

In explaining the rationale behind this initiative, the Rebbe wrote in a letter on the eve of Chanukah in the year 1981 to someone who had complained about setting up public menorahs: "Experience has shown that a menorah placed in a public space during the eight days of Chanukah serves as a source of inspiration for many Jews. It kindles within them a spirit of identification with the Jewish people and the Jewish way of life. For many, it becomes a source of pride in their Judaism, leading to the realization that there is no reason, fundamentally, for one to conceal their Judaism in this free country, as if Judaism contradicts or does not align with the lives and culture of Americans." (Hiskashrus Issue 542).

In the aftermath of the recent war, many people are afraid to openly display their Judaism in public. Some remove the mezuzah from their doorposts to avoid indicating that a Jewish family resides there. Others take off the "chai" necklace hanging around their necks. Some are hesitant to wear a kippah on the street, opting for a hat instead. There are even those who alter their names on Uber apps to avoid being identified as Jewish.

Let me share a recent experience from about a month ago during a flight from Europe to America. I sat next to a couple from Holland in their forties, and among other things, they mentioned that the grandmother of one of them is Jewish. I inquired about which grandmother they were referring to, and they said it was the mother of their mother. When I asked if she knew, according to Jewish law, that would make her Jewish, she admitted not being aware of it. However, she added that people had told her in the past that she looks Jewish!

It turns out that even those who have no knowledge of their Jewish identity are sometimes labeled as Jewish, so attempts to conceal one's identity are not effective in any case!

In general, we see an interesting phenomenon. Some who don't look very Jewish worry a lot about anti-Semitism, while those who do look visibly Jewish don't seem as bothered. You'd expect the opposite, right? The Rebbe once explained this phenomenon with a metaphor, comparing it to a person experiencing immense pleasure who remains oblivious to a mosquito bite. The joy of a Jew connected to G-d, proud of their Judaism, and immersed in their Jewish identity is so profound that minor issues seem inconsequential (Toras Menachem v. 67 p.

124).

The more someone actively engages in Jewish life and community, living and relishing it, the more it brings vitality and joy—this joy and pleasure provides the strength to confront anti-Semitism. If one's Jewish identity goes beyond just feeling targeted by anti-Semites, becoming a source of warmth, joy, and purpose and meaning in their life, they won't see anti-Semitism as a reason to conceal their Jewish identity. Instead, they will see it as an opportunity to show that being Jewish makes them the happiest person alive.

Let's stay proud of our Judaism.