Resolving an Identity Crisis: Thoughts on Parashat Vayiggash, December 26, 2009

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"And Joseph said to his brothers: I am Joseph. Does my father still live?"

In re-uniting with his brothers, Joseph asked if his father was still alive. Yet, the brothers had already told him that Jacob was alive. Indeed, the rest of Joseph's words make clear that he knew Jacob was alive. So what is the significance of his question "does my father still live?" We need to understand Joseph's dilemma.

We gain insight into Joseph's inner life by the names he gave to his sons. He named his first-born Menasheh "for God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house." Joseph was proclaiming himself an Egyptian. He was a ruler in Egypt, he had an Egyptian name, an Egyptian wife; he wanted to forget his father's house. Yet, he named his second son Ephraim, "for God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." He described Egypt as a land of his affliction--he still wasn't at peace in Egypt in spite of his efforts to be a full Egyptian. Who was Joseph? Was he a fully assimilated Egyptian, or was he still tied to his ancestral home? Joseph had a serious identity crisis.

Joseph concealed this inner struggle until he actually was faced with his brothers, who had come to Egypt to buy food. Now Joseph was forced to decide who he was. Should he be an Egyptian and reject his brothers, or should he be an Israelite and identify with them. This uncertainty might explain his cruel treatment of his brothers. He strove to remain an Egyptian, to avoid re-connecting with his brothers. Yet, he could not succeed. At last, he broke down crying: I am Joseph. Does my father still live?

The question about his father was rhetorical, since he already knew Jacob was alive. The question can be understood as Joseph speaking to himself: I thought I could assimilate and become a full, true Egyptian. I tried very hard to forget my father's home, my connection with my people. But I cannot keep up the charade any longer. Does my father still live within me, do my ties to my people continue to bind me to them, is this connection so powerful as to be able to draw me back to my roots?

When Joseph finally realizes that his father is still alive within himself and that he cannot break away from his family and traditions, he is able to reconcile with his brothers. Joseph, the quintissential "assimilated Jew", returns to the fold. He regains his true identity. I am Joseph your brother. I reclaim the ideas and ideals of my father's home.

The Joseph story foreshadows so many other stories of assimilated Jews who have found their ways back home. They had left their families and traditions, trying to adopt an entirely new identity. Yet, something happens in their lives, triggering a return to Judaism and the Jewish people. They are often perplexed by this return. They ask in amazement: "does my father still live?" And they answer: yes, the Jewish teachings and traditions and peoplehood still live within me. I will not run away any longer. I finally know who I am, and have made peace with myself, my family and my God.

***Have you read the story of the amazing return of a Chueta to Judaism? You can find it on the homepage of our website, jewishideas.org. Please share this Angel for Shabbat column and the article about the Chueta's return with your friends and neighbors.

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