Identity Crisis...and Resolution: Thoughts on Parashat Mikkets

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Mikkets
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Joseph had a serious identity crisis. He knew he was born and raised as a Hebrew. Yet, he lived as an Egyptian. He took an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife. He was a high official in the Egyptian government and comported himself as a full-fledged Egyptian. He did his best to forget his Hebrew roots.

And then his brothers appeared before him, seeking food to sustain their families in Canaan. Joseph was conflicted. Should he remain an Egyptian, a stranger to his brothers? Or should he rejoin his family and return to his family traditions? His stalling tactics reflected inner uncertainty about his own future direction in life. He was not sure how to react to his brothers, so he devised ways of putting them off but still keeping them within range.

Joseph is a classic example of the “assimilated Jew”—a person who is alienated from Jewishness but knows that Jewishness is a deep part of one’s basic identity. Should he/she maintain the veneer of non-Jewishness; or should one reclaim the Jewishness at the root of one’s soul?

In his short story, “The Purloined Letter,” Edgar Allan Poe describes a search for a stolen letter. The police conducted painstaking investigations but were unable to find the missing document. A top detective was brought in and he found the letter right away! He realized that the thief could only have eluded the police by a clever stratagem—leaving the letter in an obvious place. In fact, the letter was always in plain sight on the thief’s desk. The detective informed the police: “Perhaps it is the simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault.”

It sometimes happens that we search for things, not realizing that they are in the most obvious place. On a philosophic level, many Jews search for meaning in life without realizing that the answer is in plain sight—in their own Jewish tradition.

One of the challenges of modernity is that we are presented with many choices and alternatives. We are free to choose among innumerable lifestyles. Yet, the more choices we have, the more confused we may become. Having many options does not necessarily provide us with more happiness.

Thoughtful observers of our society believe that many moderns suffer from a kind of spiritual homelessness. People have been cut free from their spiritual moorings. We have an increase in breakdowns of families, a loss of genuine love and intimacy, a feeling of rootlessness and meaninglessness.

The great 20th century German-Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, had been so alienated from Judaism that he contemplated converting to Christianity. As a last farewell to his Judaism, he attended a synagogue on the eve of Yom Kippur, and experienced the prayers of the pious congregants. Somehow, he was swept into the spirit of prayer. He decided once and for all to remain Jewish, and to deepen his knowledge and observance of Judaism. In a letter written in 1920 to a former professor of his, Rosenzweig said that in 1913 he had felt lost and uprooted. But when he began digging into his own Jewish tradition, his life became infused with meaning and happiness. Judaism had become the center of his existence; its treasures were “my most precious possessions, things inherited not borrowed! By owning them and ruling over them, I had gained something entirely new, namely the right to live—and even to have talents; for now it was I who had the talents, not they who had me.”

By finding his own deepest inner meaning in his Jewish heritage, Rosenzweig actually had rediscovered himself. He won the freedom to confront the world from the depth of his own being, rather than as an artificial person whose content was entirely borrowed from the cultures and civilizations of others.

It is liberating to feel at home with one’s self and one’s heritage. Our forefather Joseph realized this when he ultimately decided to reconnect with his brothers. Franz Rosenzweig realized it when he faced his profoundest spiritual crisis. All of us can experience this inner liberation in our own way, in our own time.

The treasures of Jewish wisdom and spirituality are readily available, within plain sight. They are precious possessions that we have inherited, not borrowed. They are keys that unlock our inner freedom and genuine identity.

***You can access a shiur by Rabbi Hayyim Angel on the book of Maccabees, very relevant to Hanukkah:
https://www.jewishideas.org/sites/jewishideas.org/files/170524_0065.mp3

Angel for Shabbat