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By
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Angel For Shabbat, Parashat Beshallah
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When Albert Einstein was a little boy, his father showed him a compass. The needle pointed north no matter which way Einstein turned the compass around. This amazed the child. In his autobiography published in 1949, Einstein recalls his feelings on that occasion. “The needle behaved in such a determined way and did not fit into the usual explanation of how the world works. That is that you must touch something to move it. I still remember now, or I believe that I remember, that this experience made a deep and lasting impression on me. There must be something deeply hidden behind everything.”

But more than his amazement about the compass, Einstein gained another insight. “Why do we come, sometimes spontaneously, to wonder about something? I think that wondering to one’s self occurs when an experience conflicts with our fixed ways of seeing the world.”

When we are jarred from complacency, when we are challenged to think in new ways—we become open to new insights. Intellectual friction is fructifying. It makes us re-think old assumptions; it drives us to think along new pathways.

In this week's Torah reading, we read that the Israelites scurried to prepare for their exodus from Egypt. While they were busy gathering their goods, Moses took the bones of Joseph, since Joseph had asked that his remains be brought out of Egypt when the Israelites returned to their own land.

Joseph was raised as an Israelite but went on to live many years as a ruler in Egypt. Moses was raised as an Egyptian but went on to become the liberator of the Israelites. Joseph grew up as a shepherd but then lived much of his life in a royal palace. Moses grew up in a royal palace but then lived much of his life as a shepherd. Joseph brought the Israelites into Egypt; Moses brought them out of Egypt. In many ways, then, these two heroes lived complementary lives. How stirring is the Torah passage describing the Exodus, when Moses is carrying the bones of Joseph out of Egypt. Here we have the union of these two amazing leaders, symbolizing the redemption of the Israelites from their servitude and the beginning of their melding into a free nation heading to their own homeland.

In highlighting the greatness of Joseph and Moses, the Torah is conveying an important message. Neither of these men lived easy, straightforward lives, secure in their own traditions. Quite the contrary! They both spent many years in Egypt, in the midst of a civilization that was very much at odds with that of the people of Israel. They both spent considerable time in the courts of the Pharaohs, exposed to the highest leadership of the land. They were thoroughly imbued with Egyptian and Israelite values and ideals. The clash of cultures generated spiritual friction. This friction proved to strengthen them.

The leadership of Israel did not emerge among people who lived sheltered and insulated lives. Rather, it devolved specifically on those who faced deep challenges and who had to experience conflicts with their fixed ways of seeing the world. The challenges stimulated them to think creatively and courageously.

So it has been throughout the generations of Jewish history. Many of our greatest leaders and thinkers faced powerful spiritual and intellectual conflicts. They did not live sheltered lives, in ivory towers. They may have begun their lives in non-religious contexts, but then found their ways to Torah and mitzvoth. They may have been raised in a religious household, but then rebelled—but then found their way back to religious life. They may have been religious throughout their lifetimes, but faced immense challenges when they studied in universities or read the works of non-religious thinkers. They may have been converts to Judaism, who had spent their earlier years within another religious framework, but who then found their ways to Judaism.

Whatever the particular paths they followed, many of the best, most creative and most dynamic leaders and thinkers of the Jewish people have achieved greatness precisely because of spiritual and intellectual conflict. They have had to evaluate and re-evaluate their assumptions; this process has strengthened them and helped them to open new pathways of thought and spirit.

In the Pirkei Avot (2:19), we find the opinion of Rabbi Elazar: “Be alert to learn Torah; know what to answer an unbeliever.” Alertness implies having an agile mind not only mastering texts but demonstrating eagerness to explore new ideas and interpretation. When Rabbi Elazar advises that one must know what to answer an unbeliever, he is warning against obscurantism and authoritarianism. He is calling on us to be aware of the critiques of others in a serious way. Through the analysis of the critiques, we are forced to think through the issues more carefully, not simply to accept past assumptions blindly.

Many seem to think that being religious is exemplified by shutting out conflicts and challenges from the surrounding civilization. It seems, though, that the opposite is the case. It is precisely by facing the conflicts and challenges in a serious way that our religious life becomes stronger, more dynamic, and more creative. Our founding personalities like Abraham, Joseph and Moses demonstrate the truth of this approach. So do the many great leaders and thinkers over the generations who have courageously and honestly faced the intellectual and spiritual challenges of their times and places.

Albert Einstein thought that “there must be something deeply hidden behind everything.” This insight applies to religious worldview as well as to science. If we are alert and study “everything” with an open an eager mind, we may well discover the deep meanings hidden within.

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