**BS”D**

**Parshat Toldot**

At the end of this week’s parsha reading, we learn of the blessings that Yitzchak gave to his sons Yaakov and Eisav. In addition to the blessing he gave Yaakov when he was under the mistaken presumption that he was Esav, Yitzchak subsequently gave Yaakov an additional blessing when he was aware of his true identity. Specifically, part of this blessing included that Hashem:

“…*bless you, make you fruitful and make you numerous, and may you be a congregation of peoples.*” (28:3).

The meaning of the phrase “congregation of peoples” (l’klal amim) seems unclear. According to Rav Sampson Raphael Hirsch, this phrase reveals that Jacob’s descendants will comprise many tribes (“peoples”) with different characteristics and missions, and yet all the tribes would be united as parts of the same congregation. (see page 142 Artscroll version of Sefer Bereishit).

In his popular women’s chabura, Rabbi Areyeh Nivin teaches that each of us have a unique, G-d-given *yi’ud* (life purpose). This is an area or endeavour in which we shine compared to others. When we practice this life purpose, we feel energised and revitalized. Rabbi Nivin suggests one way to identify our *yi’ud* is to ask ourselves: “If I was a billionaire and in no need of being paid, what would I choose to do that I could do for 6 hours straight and still feel energized?” In other words, what special mission makes us light up inside?

Identifying and regularly practising our yi’ud is extremely beneficial to our individual psyche and soul. Knowing that we each have a special, G-d-given talent or strength and purpose with which we can help repair the world, is invigorating. Once we have positively identified our life purpose, the next step is to practice it. As author Sarah Yocheved Rigler reports in her book G-d Winked, the energy expended on our *yi’ud* is supernatural and rejuvenating, allowing us to reach way beyond our presumed physical limitations and energy levels.

Practising our yi’ud is in line with Yitzchak’s blessing that we should be “peoples” (plural), and exercise our own characteristics and mission. However, according to Rav Hirsch’s interpretation above, the phrase “congregation of peoples” also stresses that we will not only be diverse and individual, but also united and cohesive.

Don’t these two concept seem to contradict? How can we be individuals and united at the same time? Let’s explore. As part of the blessing of Yitzchak to Yaakov, Yitzchak also adds:

*“And may He grant you the blessing of Avraham, to you and your seed with you, that you may inherit the land of your sojourning, which G-d gave to Avraham.”* (28:4).

Rav Hirsh interprets the phrase “you and your seed with you” as indicating that a unified kernel of a future nation will develop from your seed, from “zarecha itcha”. He explains this as being a blessing or guarantee that “none of your children will be estranged from you. All of them will inherit with you…the blessing of Avraham (ie the land of Eretz Yisrael).” (p. 596).

[As an aside, this is one reason the commentators explain for why Yaakov was so despairing when he believed Yosef to be dead. As well as being devastated by the loss of a son, Yaakov had a tradition that if any of his sons died in Yaakov’s lifetime then that would be a sign that the blessings would not come true. Perhaps this explains though why Yaakov continued to mourn for 22 years, rather than put the past to rest. He was holding onto the faint belief that Yosef was still alive somewhere and thus the blessing could still come true].

On a most basic level, feeling for the klal or achdut is feeling genuine pain and sadness when we see our fellow Jew experiencing pain, and genuine happiness for them when they are happy. This is quite difficult to achieve in practice. Parents often experience such a true level of empathy for their children, but may struggle to achieve this for another fellow Jew. There is a story which demonstrates the lofty nature of this goal. A Rav went into self-imposed exile to grow in his middot. On his return he reached the outskirts of his town and heard some townspeople wailing. As he came closer, he heard them crying “Moshe, poor Moshele, he’s so ill, he will probably never get better.” Shocked, he ran home immediately, burst through the door and called to his wife: “What happened to Moshele?” She calmly responded that nothing happened and he was happily playing in their living room and the fuss concerned another Moshele in the town. Relieved, he said “Baruch Hashem.” But then he realized that the other Moshele’s family were still suffering and he decided immediately to take himself back into exile to work further on his middot.

One way to minimize this block to connection with others in the klal is to reduce our self-focus. In his amazing shiur on Tishva B’Av, Rav Ithamar Schwartz describes how we can bring ourselves to pain by simply noticing and feeling the pain of the klal.

“*Anyone who has a little bit of heart can feel what others are going through and he can feel pained at the problems of today. His heart can cry inside for others…* *Anyone can identify it* ***as long as he is not entirely self-absorbed in his private life.*** *Anyone who searches even a little for the truth, whose heart is even minimally alive to the spiritual…”*

Herein lies one key to true achdut. Being absorbed in our own private struggles and lives prevents us from being open to the pain and suffering of others.

Another block to achdut is arguably our defence mechanisms. We may feel that other Jews are threatening our way of life or our choices when they choose to take a different path. This is perhaps why we naturally tend to get on with those who are more similar to us. And why we feel more of an internal clash with others who differ from us, whether politically, hashgafically or halachically. We may find it easier to empathize with those with whom we are similar. In addition, we may subconsciously feel that by choosing another path different to our own, the other person is casting doubt on our own choices and direction.

However, Yitzchak’s blessing to Yaakov that his descendants be both a “peoples’ and a “congregation” assures us that we Jews CAN defy nature in this regard. We can be different and individual, and yet simultaneously exercise unity and cohesion as part of the klal. We can make our own choices, and love others for making their own, different ones.

When we have the confidence to be ourselves, to practice our own, unique yi’ud, to forge our own path with certainty, then we are more able to embrace others for doing the same. When we feel energized by giving ourselves a chance to shine, miraculously there is more room on the stage for others to shine too. And when we understand that Hashem’s spiritual world is not limited to the finite laws of nature, we will be able to embrace this seeming contradiction embedded in Yaakov’s blessing. And practice it with confidence. Yitzchak’s blessing to Yaakov affirms that we can each be passionately diverse, forge our own unique path and yet simultaneously come together as one nation and feel part of the klal.

Unlike the natural world, in Hashem’s spiritual world, the individual and the klal are not mutually exclusive. In actual fact, they are necessarily interdependent. And in the course of emulating Hashem’s Oneness, we can strive to achieve a perfect blend of both.

How can we apply these lessons to our parenting practice this week?

Sometimes, we get on better naturally with those of our children that are more similar to us. On the other hand, many times we admire and cheer more naturally for those of our children that excel in areas with which we personally struggle. (For instance, consider Yitzchak’s stronger love for Esav). Rav Hirsh warns that though understandable, parents should not allow such nebulous feelings to determine their chinuch. As parents, we should try our best to not let our natural sympathies for one child or personality traits lead to unfair treatment. Instead, we can strive to treat each child equitably – that is, based on their own individual needs at the time.

We can also apply this week’s lesson to our role as individuals vis a vis the family unit. Though we are parents and spouses, we are also individuals. While living in our family enclave, we can still strive to maintain our distinctiveness, to achieve our special yi’ud. And we can practice this with confidence, knowing that exercising our own unique niche need not conflict with family unity but can actually enhance it. And that this cohesion can then spread outwards to the general congregation, B’ezrat Hashem.

Wishing you success in achieving the juxtaposition of individuality and achdut this Shabbat and always

With bracha