

Sparks

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The Secret to Immortality

When G-d said to Abraham “Go to yourself-- *Lech Lecha*” what was He actually asking Abraham to do? This command seems to be contradicted by the remainder of the statement: “...from your country, from your birthplace and from your father’s home.” Are these not the fundamental elements that make up a person’s sense of self? My nation, my birthplace and family together create the context for my identity and establish the vital ground for my sense of self. In addition, they represent citizenship, property rights, and inheritance, all essential sources of personal security.

What G-d is actually saying to Abraham is, “Go to yourself and leave yourself,” bidding him to seek himself and at the same time abandon everything that establishes and confirms selfhood. The very order of the statement verifies this, as it is not in chronological order. A person *first* leaves his father’s home, then his birthplace and then finally the country’s borders, not the other way around. Clearly, G-d’s intention is not just a geographical move, but also a spiritual journey, expressed in the order of *psychological* difficulty. Abraham is summoned to seek a new identity, a higher self- independent of nationality, land and family. Ready to let go of normative self-definitions, Abraham accepts this new identity. Unlike the usual person whose self, identity and security are founded upon and confirmed by nationality, land or family, Abraham’s new identity is founded upon his service to and love for G-d.

If you define yourself through your relationship to G-d, then G-d, the Eternal, becomes part of your personal definition and identity. In doing so, you discover your higher immortal self. Abraham paved the way back to mankind’s immortality and G- dliness. He initiated the return of the *Shechina*, the establishment of Divine Presence on earth and the acceptance of the greatest gift—the Divine Spirit immanent within humanity. Abraham understood that you discover your higher self when you show your love for G-d.

This is the secret of how the Jews survived 2,000 years of exile from the Land of Israel because their identity was not predicated on their land. This is the secret of how the Jews as a nation could survive, although scattered over the face of the earth: because their identity was not dependent upon their nationalism. This is the secret of how the Jews could survive the Holocaust, when whole families were decimated, leaving solitary survivors: because their identity even transcended families.

Mark Twain, who was not Jewish, marveled at the apparent immortality of the Jews throughout their harsh history in a famous essay. He wrote in his famous essay “Concerning the Jews” published in *Harper’s* magazine in 1897:

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk.

His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also way out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and he has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it.

The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal, but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

The great French philosopher, Blaise Pascal came to the same conclusion:

It is certain that in certain parts of the world we can see a peculiar people, separated from the other peoples of the world and this is called the Jewish people ... This people is not only of remarkable antiquity but has also lasted for a singular long time ... For whereas the people of Greece and Italy, of Sparta, Athens and Rome, and others who came so much later, have perished so long ago, these still exist, despite the efforts of so many powerful kings who have tried a hundred times to wipe them out, as historians testify, and as can easily be judged by the natural order of things over such a long spell of years. They have always been preserved, however, and their preservation was foretold ...

What is the secret of to Jewish immortality? Jewish identity is a human "I" defined in relation to the "Eternal Thou" -- eternity is part of the very definition of the Jews. Leo Tolstoy put it well: "The Jew is eternal. He is the embodiment of eternity."

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