

## ***Why the Rebbe Was Right***

Parashat Va'era 5778

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I may be one of the only Conservative Rabbis anywhere who will speak openly about my admiration for the Lubavitcher Rebbe. You see many of my rabbinic colleagues have all kinds of issues with Chabad/Lubavitch. Some think that Chabad rabbis are out to poach their members, others think they try to position themselves as the official spokespersons of the Jewish community while ignoring other streams of Judaism. And there are some who resent that Chabad is largely funded by non-Orthodox Jews who want to make sure that black-hatted, long bearded, Hasidic form of Judaism survives, even if they themselves will never become Hasidic Jews themselves. I personally have bristled at the declarations of the Rebbe being the *mashiach*, the messiah; declarations that only grew more feverish after the Rebbe's death in 1994. Maybe you've seen the bright yellow flags or images of his face with the words *Melech Ha'Mashiach*, king messiah emblazoned on them. But if it's possible to separate the man from the movement, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the 7th Rebbe of the Lubavitcher Hasidic sect is undoubtedly one of the greatest religious geniuses of all time. Because of the Rebbe, there are Chabad houses not only on college campuses, but also in the farthest flung places in the world, where any wandering, traveling Jew can find a warm welcome, a kosher meal, and a pair of tefillin to strap on! The Rebbe literally resurrected a community that was decimated and demoralized after the Holocaust and turned into one of the most powerful forces of renewal in Jewish life today.

In 1980 the Rebbe founded an organization called *Tzivos Hashem*, which means 'the army of God.' This army has soldiers and officers; it has a military-style crest of red, blue and yellow with the Hebrew letters *tzadi* and *hey* in the center. It has a gold ribbon at the bottom with the words "We Want Moshiach Now." This army, however, does not wage wars on traditional battlefields. *Tzivos Hashem* is an army of kids. The enemy is *the yetzer ha'ra*, the evil inclination. And their weapons are Torah study and performing mitzvot. Today there are numerous subgroups of *Tzivos Hashem*, one of which many of the kids in our shul participate in called Friendship Circle, which offers kids with special needs the opportunity to spend time with other Jewish teens having fun and doing activities together. There are literally thousands of Jewish kids involved in this organization all over the world, and it began as one of the Rebbe's efforts to stem the tide of assimilation, and resuscitate traditional Judaism. Whether you agree with Chabad theology or practice, it's hard not to be in awe of its ingenuity and fearless promotion of Jewish life anywhere and everywhere.

In our parasha this morning God describes the Jewish people in a very unusual way. In chapter 7:4 God says to Moses,

"When Pharaoh does not heed you, I will lay My hand upon Egypt

*Ve'hotzeiti et tzivotai*

I take out; I will deliver **My army** (the Etz Hayim says **My ranks**), and in case you don't know who the army is, God goes on to say:

*Et Ami b'nai Yisrael, mei'eretz Mitzrayim bish'fatim gedolim.*

I will take out my army, my people B'nai Yisrael, from the land of Egypt with extraordinary chastisements!

What's strange about that particular way of referring to the Jewish people? They were not an army! Not in any way shape or form! They were humiliated, abused, broken-down slaves. They didn't have a single weapon, nor the strength to fight anyone! If you recall in just a few more chapters the Torah tells us in Parashat Beshallach that God took them on a less-direct rout in their departure from Egypt, away from the land of the Philistines *pen yinachem ha'am bir'otam milchama veshavu mitzrayma!* God was afraid that the Jewish people would encounter a war with the Philistines on the way out, have a change of heart, and want to go back to Egypt! So much for B'nai Yisrael being an army! So why in the world did God refer to them as *Tzivotai*, My ranks, My army??

I think God was doing what the Rebbe attempted to do with his Tzivos Hashem. In 1980 being an outwardly traditional Jew was not necessarily fashionable. The 80's were about shoulder pads and perms, Reeboks and Ray Bans. The Rebbe knew that kids who were interested in being Jewish, or being *frum* were extremely counter-cultural. So he made them into an army! He gave them all the accoutrement of an army, including ranks and incentives. He empowered them by giving them a higher purpose, a battle for the souls of the Jewish people, and yes, a name that helped them to think of themselves as being strong, powerful, and in the service of God, the Commander in Chief. In our parasha when God refers to a ragtag, emaciated group of slaves as His Army, perhaps God is attempting to do the same: To inspire them to think of themselves as being more than slaves, as having an important and significant destiny in the world. In order to truly be free, the Jewish people had to break out of the slave mentality; to think of themselves as more than property or slave labor. So God said, 'You are my army.' You are in My service. You will bring blessing and hope to the world. You will be a great nation of priests, prophets and sages; people who will live according to a code of morality and goodness that will inspire others. And so began the transformation from dehumanized slaves to people with purpose.

How we think about ourselves, how we talk about ourselves has so much to do with our self-image and potential. If we walk around talking about how we're not very good at this, and not very successful at that, then those statements will likely become self-fulfilling prophecies. But if you begin to think about yourself as smart and capable and interesting and ambitious, then that will also have an effect on how you live your life. One of my biggest pet-peeves is when people say to me "I'm not very religious." Now I've had people tell me they're not religious even though they have Shabbes dinner every week, light candles, bake challah, come to shul on a pretty regular basis, are active synagogue members, maybe even take a class or serve on a committee. 'But I'm not religious.' Look you can always find someone who seems more pious or outwardly observant than you. But if I'm not at the zenith of religious observance does that mean that I am therefore not religious. That's like saying that if I can't play basketball like LeBron James I have no right to step on the court. I think the message of the very deliberate wording in our parasha, of calling the Jewish people an army, is that we need to think much more about what we ARE than what we're not. What if we saw ourselves as soldiers in that army; strong, proud, purposeful. People who have a mission and the very highest purpose.

That's how we are meant to understand ourselves and our lives. Over and over the Torah speaks of us in the most remarkable ways: a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a light unto the nations. Every one of us has our own distinctiveness in the world. Wear that like a shiny badge on a uniform. Walk through the world with pride and purpose; I'm not telling you to be arrogant or

haughty God forbid. But I am telling you that knowing how precious you are and all that you have to offer can be the difference between being a slave or a free person; between being an *eved* or a *Yisrael*. Between suppressing your gifts or expressing them in ways that are unique and special to you. It's enlistment time, dear friends. Time to join the army of God, and to wage a battle of holiness, goodness, compassion and kindness in the world. I hope to see you soon at the recruiting office!