

Our Blessedly Blended Israelite Family

Yes, the Jewish people is a family. We are a family that can date our ancestry back thousands of years. We are a family that devotes a tremendous amount of our effort and treasure to teach, nurture and support our children and our elders. We are a family that honors the past by giving the names of the deceased to the living. We are family that cherishes old recipes and holds as precious heirlooms a dented kiddush cup, a tarnished menorah, a chipped seder plate, a fading tallit, a wrinkled kippah and a dog-eared prayerbook. We are a family that remembers the tastes and smells of Bubbe's best dishes. "Ah, remember her kugel? Oh, and her brisket and tsimmes! Best of all, her strudel...who can make a strudel like that?" Heads nod in agreement as eyes close to take in the full Technicolor memories that miraculously preserve intoxicating aromas and tastes decades later.

Yes, we are a family with Bubbies and Zaydes, Sabas and Savtas. And we are also a family with step-parents and step-siblings. We are a family that has lovingly welcomed those who came from other faith traditions and cultures. Indeed, we are, and always have been a blessedly blended family.

In this week's Torah portion, Jacob, learning that Joseph is still alive, begins the long trek with his family to Egypt in order to reunite with Joseph and his wife and children. The Torah details Jacob's preparation for the journey but it then interrupts the narrative. Instead of progressing right to the actual reunion in Egypt, it instead offers a lengthy list of the names of those the Israelite family...a total of 70.

The list includes the familiar names of the sons of Jacob whose names became the patronymic of the tribes of Israel: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, etc. It also includes the fact that Jacob's grandson, Shaul, is the son of a Canaanite woman. And in addition to mentioning the matriarchs of our people, Rachel and Leah, the list also mentions two others who were mothers of the family: Bilhah and Zilpah. Earlier in the Torah, Bilhah and Zilpah are referred to as Jacob's wives (Genesis 37:2). After Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin and then Leah died, it was Bilhah and Zilpah who were the mothers of our people. Bilhah gave birth to Dan and to Naphtali. In all, 7 of the 70 Israelites were her sons and grandsons. Zilpah gave birth to Gad and to Asher. Her sons and grandchildren numbered 16 of the 70 Israelites.

And finally, the Torah reminds us that Joseph married an Egyptian woman and they had two sons: “In Egypt, Manasseh and Ephraim were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On” (Genesis 46:20).

Note that from the earliest days of our people, we were a blessedly blended family. And now, well over 3,200 years later, we see that our Jewish family is not defined by race or pure genealogy. Rather, we are defined as we always have been, by the love that binds us. No, not everyone had a Bubbe or a Zayde. Some came to our family through marriage. Some came by way of their choice to become Jewish. Some came to our family by way of adoption. And yet, we are all one family. And that’s the best blessing of all.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick

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