

THE ESSENCE OF THE JEWISH SOUL

A commentary on *Parashat Vayeshev*

By Rabbi Oliver Joseph

I am a teenage leader on a summer camp with my youth movement Noam and we are playing some kind of

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large outdoor game. It is a dewy late evening and a beautiful dusk light still hangs on the horizon, we are standing on some kind of fenced off part of a field. I am on one side of a low fence and a few children

are on the other – in hindsight, perhaps they should not have been there. On the other side of the fence is a drop of some ten feet. There is a lot of movement and excitement and as the game reaches its closing minutes, one of the participants starts to fall. Instinctively I reach out my hand and grab onto her. This memory was more than fifteen years ago and is only partially clear in my mind.

For the duration of camp this participant would continually remind me that I had saved her life. It may have been that she would have had a bad fall had she actually fallen but the exaggeration was still a little much. For some reason this story sticks in my head.

Parashat Vayeshev opens with the words “*Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had lived, the land of Canaan*” (Genesis 37:1). Midrash Rabba wants to understand why the words, “*mi'gorei aviv*”, ‘[the land where] his father had lived’, are included in the opening part of the *Parasha* in an unusual sequence. The Midrash jumps to an understanding of the word “*mi'gorei*” which simply translated means to live or dwell, changing it with minimal, subtle flicks of ink to the word “*me'gorei*” meaning to convert or to bring into Jewish life. The Midrash transports us from Jacob's story to the story of Abraham and Sarah, traditionally

understood to be the first Jews in the world – we are now thrown into a discussion of the essence of the Jewish soul.

The poetic contortion is accompanied by a short story presented in the name of Rabbi Yossi Ben Zimra: if you gathered all the nations of the world and attempted to breathe life into one single fly, you would not succeed and yet it says in the Bible, in Torah: “*And the souls they had created in Haran*” [Genesis 12:5]. Abraham and Sarah bought people under the shelter of G-d's wings to Judaism and in the eyes of the Midrash literally drew breath into their souls. Rabbi Yossi Ben Zimra compares the inability of all the nations collectively to breathe life into even the simplest of G-d's creatures (the fly) in opposition to Abraham and Sarah who the Torah tells us brought life to the souls of new Jews.

The vision of the Midrash (a part of which may not jive with modern sensibilities) is that to live as a Jew is to grow a *nefesh*, a soul that is potent, potentially equal to the power to give life. If the Jewish soul and Jewish essence have even one-half of the power that is attributed to it then the next question is what is to be done with this power and energy?

The power to give life and the power to save is fundamental, and the Midrash draws our focus to the life-giving power of our religious life.

If such power is generated by the Judaism that we live, then a response to that power is to ask where such energy should be channelled? I offer one interpretation of this Midrash, that it is making a claim which is aspirational; Rabbi Yossi Ben Zimra and the holders of our Midrashic tradition are promoting a model of Judaism which is visionary and potent. What better way can we realise the greatest expanse of our communal vigour than to take a position on questions of human rights and the dignity of humanity on earth. If we do not allow our Jewish breath to utter words challenging those that seek to undermine the dignity of marginalised people, then what is holy in my Jewish soul?

Rabbi Oliver Joseph is a community rabbi working with Elstree & Borehamwood Masorti Community, as well as Noam, Marom and new Masorti communities across the UK