

Perfection

There's a story the Lubavitcher Rebbe liked to tell about a five year old child and a 99 year old man. The child was Rabbi Sholom DovBer Schneerson, born on the 20th of Cheshvan 5621 (1860), who served as the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe from 1882 until his passing in 1920. The 99-year old man lived 36 centuries earlier; his name was Abraham and he was the first Jew. The story goes like this: On the occasion of his fourth or fifth birthday, Rabbi Sholom DovBer visited his grandfather, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch. Upon entering his grandfather's room, the child burst into tears. His teacher in cheder had taught them that week's Torah reading, Vayeira (Genesis 18:1-22:24), which begins "And G-d revealed himself to Abraham..." "Why," wept the child, "doesn't G-d reveal Himself to me?" Rabbi Menachem Mendel replied: "When a Jew, a tzaddik, realizes at the age of 99 that he must circumcise himself--that he must continue to perfect himself--he is worthy that G-d should reveal Himself to him." The Rebbe must have told this story dozens of times. The story, followed by a discussion of the manifold meanings and lessons the Rebbe saw in it, was a regular feature of the farbrengens (Chassidic gatherings) he held each year on the anniversary of Rabbi Sholom DovBer's birthday, which often falls (as it does this year) on the Shabbat on which Vayeira--which begins with the account of G-d's revealing Himself to Abraham following Abraham's circumcision at age 99--is read. I think I know why the Rebbe liked this story so much. The child's question and the grandfather's explanation express two extremes, whose contrast and synthesis are a hallmark of the Rebbe's approach to life. Imagine: a five year old weeping because G-d does not reveal Himself to Him! To "see" G-d--to attain a consummate vision of the Truth of Truths-- is the ultimate goal of every spiritual quest. It is a goal that takes the greatest of the great at least a lifetime to achieve. Yet here is a child--a very special child, but one who nonetheless is still at the very beginning of his spiritual journey-- who is disturbed, to the point of tears, by the fact that he has not yet attained this goal! And on the other hand we have a man who has 99 years of the most extraordinary spiritual achievements behind him, who recognizes that he is still not perfect--that he must continue to change, grow and improve himself. The Rebbe saw these two prototypes not as conflicting visions of life, but as complimentary and indispensable to each other. To strive for the ultimate, yet never feel that one has arrived. To have huge aspirations, yet remain humble and unassuming. To say: I want to, and can, do it all--yet, no matter how much one has done, know that there is still more to do.

(By Yanki Tauber; based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe) - chabadonline.com