

## Yehuda Leib Alter of Ger



The Chasidic master, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger (d. 1905), in his *Sefat Emet*—with characteristically dazzling creativity—explores the ancient (and modern) *galut* (exile) disjunction between our outward appearance and our inner identities.

The five volumes of *Sefat Emet* (one for each book of the Torah) are easily among the greatest texts of Jewish spirituality ever composed. Dr. Arthur Green, in his excellent English abridgement, *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), translates *Sefat Emet* as "The Language of Truth"; more colloquially, it might mean something like "Straight Talk."

In one homily on *Vayeishev*, dated 1901, the Gerer Rebe (as he is known) draws on a discussion from Tractate, *P'sachim* 23a. There the Rabbis suggest that the verb "to be," *vay'hi* (third person, masculine singular, future-"he will be") prefixed with the *vav* conversive (reversing its tense to the past—"and he was"), connotes more than mere being. Not only, explain the Sages, does it simply mean "and he was," it further connotes the notion of *continuity* or "*remaining* in existence," "being *not susceptible* to change."

Indeed, notes the *Sefat Emet*, when our *parashah* says, for example, "*Vay'hi* / And he [Joseph] was. . . in the house of [Potiphar] his master" (Genesis 39:2) or, later on, "*Vay'hi* / And he [Joseph] was there [now] in the dungeon" (Genesis 39:20) and the like, we must understand this in light of Joseph's inner steadfastness and strength. In the words of the *Sefat Emet* : Joseph did not change who he was in any of the many and radically different places in which he wound up. No matter where his astonishing journey took him, Joseph remained the *same* Joseph. And, when we read therefore that "Joseph *was* in Egypt," it means that, even though he *appeared* to everyone (even his brothers!) as an Egyptian, nevertheless, *on the inside* Joseph remained *who he was*—a Jew, immune to the enticements of the local culture.

And that is precisely why, says the *Sefat Emet*, Joseph was the first one chosen *to be sent* down into Egypt to prepare the way for the rest of us to follow throughout all our subsequent dispersions, dislocations, and exiles. And just this is the principal test of exile: To withstand every attempt to change one's essence of being a Jew.

For this reason, the Gerer Rebbe continues, every Jew needs to know and to believe that even when he or she might descend into Egypt or, for that matter, into the dungeon itself, it is not happenstance but all divine providence. We are on an errand of our Creator. And no matter where the Holy One wishes to send us, we must accept this mission. Indeed, says Aryeh Lieb of Ger, this is the primary test of exile: to remain true to one's inner being despite the outward clothing we must wear to earn a living.

The danger is only when we look into the tailor's mirror and believe that we are like everyone else.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner 2006