

Absentee Ballots Don't Count

In America, every person has the right to vote, even if they cannot make it to the polls on elections day. Israel gives no such accommodation. What about Judaism? Can you be a "Jewish Absentee"?

Jewish Absentees

In recent months, due to Coronavirus, mail-in-ballots have been on the news quite a lot. American law establishes that a person who cannot vote in person does not forfeit his or her right to vote. Rather, he or she can vote early by mail or other means.

In Israel or other countries, the citizen must appear in person at the polling place on Election Day. In Israel, if you are absent on Election Day, you forfeit your right to vote. The logic is typical for Israelis: It's not enough that you're living it up outside Israel—but now you want the right to vote inside Israel too?! No way!

America is more forgiving to its citizens and wants to preserve the basic right of every citizen to cast his vote—regardless of where that citizen currently lives.

I think we could apply this model to Jewish life. Let's say someone can't make it to shul on Rosh Hashanah: he's out of town or really busy. Nu? Let him "vote early"—let him blow the shofar a few days early and fulfill his obligation. What would be

so terrible? On the contrary—the Sages teach us that “*zerizim makdimim l'mitzvos*, quick people get to mitzvos early.” Such a person loves the mitzvah of blowing the shofar so much that he rushes to do the mitzvah.

One year, one woman told me in all innocence that all her family members were coming to town for Thanksgiving—and since it was close to Chanukah and the family wouldn't be getting together again, they simply decided to celebrate Chanukah at that time too. They lit candles, ate latkes, played dreidel and, most important of all, gave out presents in the finest American Jewish tradition.

I jokingly told her: Next time – put a few Matzos on the table! That way, you could have saved yourselves all the energy of getting together again to celebrate Passover. You could have had a Seder right there too, and you would have been done with it!

The Melody of Connection

But seriously, my friends, let us try to understand what the problem would be if one were to celebrate a Jewish holiday a few days early. What would be so terrible?

For example, Rosh Hashanah: It is obvious why we cannot move it up—because that's the day on which G-d sits in judgment and judges the entire universe. So, if you come a few days early, it's like showing up to court a few days before your appointed court date. You will discover that the presiding judge is out on vacation. Similarly, G-d isn't “in court” a few days before Rosh Hashanah to judge all of humanity.

But what about other holidays? Why can't you celebrate Passover a few days early?

Allow me to share a story of the Rebbe.

The Rebbe got married in 1929 in Warsaw, Poland. A year earlier, the Rebbe left Soviet Russia together with his bride to be and her father, the Previous Rebbe. The Rebbe's parents remained behind in Russia. They worked very hard to get permits to leave Russia to attend their first-born son's wedding, but the cruel Communist regime refused to grant them permission.

In her memoirs, the Rebbe's mother recounts how they decided to host a complete wedding party of their own on the same evening of their son's actual wedding in Warsaw. Renting a wedding hall was not possible in those days, so they planned the party in their own home. They sent invitations, hired a band, the community leaders brought a giant wedding cake and over 300 guests attended.

When the time for the Chuppah arrived, a Chassidic Jew took out a violin and played the Chabad Chuppah melody - the beautiful, haunting melody attributed to the Alter Rebbe, the first Rebbe of Chabad - as the groom's parents looked on. They couldn't physically attend their son's wedding, but at that moment, everyone realized that they were there in spirit.

Be on G-d's Wavelength

This is what is meant by "connection."

The Hebrew word "mitzvah" is related to the Aramaic word

“Tzavta,” which means “connection”—the bond between the Jew and G-d.

G-d tells each of us: “Do you want to connect to Me? Do as I do.” G-d, so to speak, fulfills all the Mitzvot, and when we do the same - in the same format, and at the same moment - we connect with Him. As the Midrash says, “Whatever G-d tells the Jewish People to do, He Himself also does as well.”

On the night of the 16th of Nissan, G-d “eats matzos”—meaning, He remembers and relives the Exodus from Egypt. To connect with Him at that moment, we also eat matzos! We do the same thing that G-d does, and thereby connect with Him.

If we will eat matzos one week earlier, it may be very nice, but it’s not what G-d is doing at the moment. It does not give us that important connection—and therefore misses the entire point of the mitzvah.

Another example: Every morning, G-d “puts on Tefillin.” If we want to connect with Him, we will do exactly as He does and put on Tefillin as well. If you put on Tefillin the night before, it may demonstrate that it’s very important to you, but that is not when G-d is “putting on Tefillin,” so you are not connecting on the same wavelength.

Someone once asked the Rebbe how he could be connected to him. The Rebbe simply told him: “Study what I study and busy yourself with what I busy myself with, and that’s how you’re connect with me.”

Absentee Ballots

We find this concept of connection in the Torah portion. We read the story of the Mabul, the great Flood. The Torah tells us that Noach and his family did not engage in procreation while they were in the Teivah, the Ark. They did not have children.

Why? Because at that moment, G-d was not “engaged in procreation”; He was not helping the universe flourish and grow. Being connected to G-d, Noach and his family followed suit.

That is why Judaism revolves around specific times. There is a time for every mitzvah. There is a date for every holiday. Almost everything in Judaism has a limited, defined time: A circumcision is done on the eighth day; the Pidyon Haben is done when the baby is exactly 30 days old; a Bar Mitzvah is marked on a Jewish boy’s 13th birthday; and Shabbos is specifically on the seventh day of the week. Why? Because that’s when G-d “rested”—if you rest on Sunday, you’ll have a great vacation experience, but it’s not G-d’s day of rest.

My dear friends: Judaism is like the Israeli election system. If you want your voice to be heard, you must appear in person at the right moment. In Judaism, absentee ballots don’t count.