

True Love

Category: Holidays, Shavuos

The two 'love stories' in the Torah are the story of Pesach and Shavuos. This is the moment of truth.

The Whistle and the Newspaper

Good Yom Tov!

In the 1950s, the editor of a Jewish newspaper in California visited the Rebbe for a yechidus, a private audience. At the time, the newspaper was new and just founded, and the editor had just been appointed as editor. He came to the Rebbe wondering if he was the right man for the job—he had very limited knowledge of Judaism barely knew how to daven according to halachah. Was he fit to serve as editor of a Jewish newspaper?

The Rebbe responded with a story from the Baal Shem Tov.

The story is told that once on Yom Kippur, the Baal Shem Tov sensed during his prayers that there was a specific accusation in Heaven against the Jewish Nation, and no matter how much effort he made in his prayers, he could not succeed in getting that order canceled.

His students saw that their master was exerting himself in prayer, and they understood that something wasn't right. So they, too, prayed with all their power and focus. Thus, the prayers of the Baal Shem Tov's synagogue that Yom Kippur tore the heavens.

But then, they suddenly heard the sound of whistling coming from the mouth of a poor shepherd boy who was staying in the synagogue. Everyone got angry at him for disturbing the services and wanted to remove him from the premises.

But at that very moment, the Baal Shem Tov turned toward the lad with a smile and indicated that he should be left alone.

As soon as Yom Kippur was over, the Baal Shem Tov said that the simple whistle of the lad, coming from a heart filled with pain and without any words, was the

very thing that had canceled the bad order in Heaven against the Jewish Nation.

Using that story, the Rebbe wanted to explain to the newspaper editor that it's not that important how much you know about the prayers; rather, one who truly cares about the Jewish Nation will figure out how to put out a proper Jewish newspaper.

Still, the editor was not satisfied with that answer and said to the Rebbe, "Rebbe, I'm not a little kid who whistles in shul! I'm a newspaper editor, and it's a huge responsibility!"

The Rebbe then got up from his seat. The editor thought that the Rebbe was politely hinting to him that the conversation was over. Instead, the Rebbe pulled out his wallet and asked him, "How much is a subscription?" Three-and-a-half dollars, came the reply. The Rebbe took \$3.50 out, gave it to him, and added, "You don't have the right to withhold your knowledge from others."

This editor, the legendary Herb Brin, of blessed memory, later would say that the fact that the Rebbe had become both a subscriber and a supporter of the newspaper prompted him to stay at his job for close to 50 years.

The Two Love Stories

On Pesach, there is the custom of reading Shir HaShirim, the "Song of Songs" written by King Solomon, and on Shavuot, we have the custom of reading Megilas Rus, the Scroll of Ruth.

Now, what is the difference between these two books?

Shir HaShirim is the story of two lovers who are constantly coming back to one another. At first, she runs after him but fails to catch him. Then, suddenly, he has a change of heart and he runs after her. He knocks on the door and asks her to let him in, but she's suddenly tired and doesn't want to get off the couch to open the door for him.

Finally, when he's all tired and resigned and he's given up, she is aroused and wants to look for him—but Shir HaShirim ends right there. It doesn't end with a happily-ever-after wedding. It's the story of a stormy and dramatic love—but a love that ultimately is not realized. (By the way, the entire Shir HaShirim is a

metaphor for the relationship between the Jewish Nation and G-d.)

But then along comes the Book of Ruth.

The entire story of Ruth is one of true love. Ruth really did love Naomi, and so she was really prepared to leave her homeland and birthplace and follow Naomi to a strange place and strange nation without any hope for a good life—it was only because she was faithful to Ruth and genuinely loved her. This was not some youthful flaming passion but rather a genuine love and commitment that Ruth expressed in her famous expression: “Where you go, I go; your nation is my nation; your G-d is my G-d”—words that ring true forever.

The Moment of Truth

These two Megillos essentially tell the story of the Jewish Nation while leaving Egypt.

During the Exodus from Egypt, the “man” in the Shir HaShirim metaphor is G-d seeking his “lover,” meaning, the Jewish Nation. And just like every rich and successful guy knows, the way to score that one lucky woman is to pick her up with the longest limousine you can get. Then you take her out to the most expensive and exclusive restaurant in Manhattan at the top of some skyscraper.

But if you’re that guy, you know that that’s not enough. You go on lavishing the young lady with expensive gifts and taking her on trips that she never dreamed of—all to win her heart and show her how you really feel about her.

And now, back to reality—or, to the metaphor of Shir HaShirim, that is.

G-d wanted to “marry” the Jewish Nation, His “bride.” So He performed mighty miracles for them at the Exodus from Egypt, from the Ten Plagues to the Splitting of the Reed Sea. He brought down Manna from Heaven for them and gave them the Well of Miriam—things that you can’t even imagine, G-d gave them! As G-d Himself says in the Torah, “And I carried you on the wings of eagles”—which is a lot more than a limousine.

But then comes the moment of truth at Mt. Sinai.

With His “bride” already under the chuppah, the wedding canopy, G-d sends the

“matchmaker,” Moshe Rabbeinu, to ask the bride, the Jewish Nation, “Will you marry Me?” The pursuits are over. It’s the moment of truth. Is she ready to commit herself to a life of partnership together?

The Jewish Nation, of course, famously answered, “Naaseh v’nishmah!” We will do and we will listen. Yes, we love G-d and so, we are prepared to do everything for Him. At that point, then, G-d gives them the Ten Commandments, the mitzvos.

Now, what does the word mitzvah mean? The Rebbe would always say that mitzvah comes from the word tzavsah, which means connection—meaning taking two things and making them one. Thus, by doing a mitzvah, we are connecting to G-d and becoming a partner with G-d in that which G-d wants.

The story is told about a young woman who had a yechidus with the Rebbe, and she complained that everyone she was being introduced to was unsuitable for all kinds of reasons. The Rebbe smiled and said to her, “You think that love is what they say it is in books? That they fall in love in an instant and the fires of love keep them bound to each other for the rest of their lives?!”

“The reality,” the Rebbe continued, “is completely different. That first flame is not what is really called love. Love is when a couple shares a life together and constantly do things for one another, and the more time that goes by, the more they feel that they can’t see themselves living apart. That’s love.”

Do You Love Me?

On Pesach, we lit after each other—primarily, G-d came after His Nation, the Jewish Nation.

And on Shavuos, over 3,300 years ago, G-d asked us, “Will you marry me?” And then, we answered, “Yes!” And ever since then, we’ve been living together with G-d and being partners in everything G-d does.

In “Fiddler on the Roof,” there is a scene in which the daughter comes to her father, Tevye the Milkman, and says to him that she wants to marry this young man because “I love him!” So

Tevye, who never heard that “love” is a reason to get married, asks: “Love, eh? You love him?” He then turns to his wife, Golda, and asks, “Do you love me?” And

Golda answers, “Do I love you?! For 25 years I’ve lived with you, suffered alongside you, went hungry with you, and lived in the same house as you. If that isn’t love, then what is love?”

So then Tevya asks: “So you love me?” And Golda replies, “It seems that I love you!” And Tevya responds, “It seems that I love you, too!”

Which brings us back to Shavuos.

On Shavuos, we come to shul and G-d asks us, “Golda—do you love Me?”, and we reply to G-d:

“For over 3,300 years we’ve been keeping the Torah and mitzvos with profound sacrifice. Throughout all the years, even during the most difficult periods in Jewish history, we went through fire and water for our faith in the One G-d so as not to be unfaithful in our marriage. If this is not love, then what is?”

And G-d responds: “So do you love Me?” And then we come to the conclusion that if we are prepared to do all that for G-d, then it seems that we do indeed love Him.

And then, when we take heart of the fact that our entire motivation to do mitzvos and guard our tradition comes from a deep love for G-d, and G-d says, “I love you, too.”

Good Yom Tov!