



Fake News

Category: Bamidbar

Are There Real Atheists in Israel?

This week, many people asked me about the new government in Israel. The most common question is whether survival is possible for a government made up of such extremes — with parties from the extreme right to the extreme left.

Unfortunately, I don't have an answer for you, but I want to share the following story which will shed light on Israel's state-of-affairs.

Several weeks ago, Israeli news reported that Meretz, a left-wing party, had submitted legislation to criminalize the act of encouraging a minor to become religiously observant. It was immediately interpreted as an attempt to stop Chabadniks from offering minors (over Bar Mitzvah) to put on Tefillin, as they commonly do on street-corners throughout the country.

The new law obviously raised a ruckus. Leaders, celebrities and politicians came out criticizing the notion, lamenting the fact that there could be an attempt in the Jewish state to stop

teenagers from wearing Tefillin — lest they become too religious. People were demonstrating in front of the Knesset members house - purposely putting on Tefillin as a way of solidarity. All over the news, people were publicly putting on Tefillin; TV anchors, talk show hosts, all over Facebook etc.

(It's been very hot in Israel in recent weeks; whenever that is the case, emotions tend to run high, and everything turns into a major crisis).

Two days after the news broke, the Knesset Member who had submitted the legislation posted a picture of her husband wearing Tallis and Tefillin. That picture drew my attention; if her own husband wore Tefillin, it was unlikely that she would propose a law against it. When I looked a little deeper into the subject, I discovered that the entire crisis was 'fake news.'

She never intended to outlaw the Tefillin campaign. Rather, the Meretz faction has a custom that whenever a new Knesset is inaugurated, they submit all the legislation of their faction which was rejected in previous Knessets. This time, she submitted fourteen hundred bills. Among them was a bill from 2005 which would criminalize the act of convincing a minor to become a full-fledged Baal Teshuvah. Needless to say, the Tefillin Campaign and Chabad Chassidim weren't mentioned at all.

Moreover, this specific Knesset Member — who received all the 'heat' over the issue — was not the one who had written the bill; she had no interest in pursuing the matter.

Her husband was interviewed on Israeli television. He explained

that the law did not outlaw Tefillin at all; in fact, he personally wears Tefillin every day and identifies as a very traditional person. His wife, a member of the Meretz party is very respectful of his choices. Although she identifies as an atheist, out of respect for her husband she lights Shabbos candles each week and they make kiddush and hold a Shabbat dinner with their family. The entire story was fake news.

When the new government was established, people were asking how a Prime Minister with a kippah would get along with left-leaning atheists. But since I've learned that these "atheists" light Shabbos candles, make kiddush and their husbands put on Tefillin each morning, I realized that there is something very spiritual and very genuine which bonds the Jewish people in Israel together.

Most Israelis are not religious. But in America, you don't need to be religious to celebrate Chanukah or a Passover Seder. The same is true about Tefillin. You don't need to be religious. The Rebbe transformed Tefillin into a classic Jewish symbol; just as it's normal for a Jew to wear a "Chai" or star-of-David necklace, it's normal for a Jew to lay Tefillin. Therefore, I am optimistic that the government will be able to bridge its differences.

The Israeli Electric Chair

In Israel, the seat of the Prime Minister is dubbed, "the electric chair," because Israeli leaders are under constant pressure. That is why so many people are worried about Israel's post-Netanyahu future; they question whether there is someone who could really fill his shoes.

Perhaps the answer to this question is found in this week's Torah portion.

During their forty years in the desert, there were two occasions when the Israelites sang a special song of thanksgiving to G-d. The first, famously, was when they crossed the sea. The second, much lesser-known song, appears in this week's reading. It is called "the song of the well." The first song was recited right at the beginning of their sojourn in the desert, and this song was recited at its very end. The first one was sung after crossing through water, and this song is related to water as well. Here, the Israelites thank G-d for giving them the well of Miriam which provided them with fresh drinking water throughout the forty years in the desert.

When you compare the two songs, you discover something interesting. The Song of the Sea begins with the words, "So sang Moses and the People of Israel" (Beshalach 15:1). This song, however, begins with "So sang the People of Israel" (Chukas 21:17). It is quite bizarre; why does Moses not appear in the song? After all, he was still alive!

The Midrash says an interesting interpretation:

"Rabbi Avin explained: When it was time to sing the Song of the Sea, Moses did not have the People of Israel recite it on their own. Like a teacher reciting with his students, Moses said it together with them...after forty years, they 'graduated'; they began to sing the song on their own. They said, 'G-d, Your task is to do miracles and our task is to sing praise to You'" (Midrash Yelamdeinu).

The Midrash separates the two songs: At the Song of the Sea, the People of Israel were like children; Moses needed to recite the song with them. But at the Song of the Well, the people had matured. They were already 'old enough' to do it on their own, without the guidance of Moses.

But when you compare the two songs, you'll notice that the Song of the Well pales in comparison to the Song of the Sea. The Song of the Well is just a few short verses, compared to the extensive delivery at the Song of the Sea. Which is better? The Song of the Sea, composed by Moses — the greatest prophet of all time, or the Song of the Well, composed by the People of Israel?

The answer is found in this song's opening verse: "*Ali bi'er, enu lah*, come up, O well, call out to it." The Rebbe explained in a Chassidic discourse (Az Yashir, 12 Tammuz 5735) that the Jewish people are like a well. The soul of a person is like a wellspring of water. Here, G-d calls out to the Jewish people, "Come up, well," make your own personal effort to sing to G-d. It's alright if your song is a short one, because G-d wants it to be yours. A song written by Moses is nice, but a song of the people is most precious of all.

A leader might seem irreplaceable, but this week's Parsha reminds us: It's all about the people.