

Ahavas Yisroel: As Yourself!

Category: Holidays, Sukkot

What makes you a loser and what makes you a winner?

The three holidays of Tishrei can give us a fascinating insight into how to treat others and how to treat ourselves.

Who Is a Loser?

In Israel, people have adopted many words from the English language and turned them into Hebrew slang. Words like “OK,” “P.C. (politically correct)” or “chaos.” One of the biggest and most commonly used words is “loser.” “Loser” has become an inseparable part of the Modern Hebrew language; everyone calls everyone else “losers.”

Prior to the Baal Shem Tov, founder the Chassidic movement, there was a clear division within the Jewish community. There were the scholars and learned men, and there were the simple, ignorant Jews. The gap between them was enormous. They would never sit near each other in Shul, and certainly not “intermarry.” One of the principle teachings of Baal Shem Tov was that every Jew is precious to G-d. The poor and ignorant folk, even those who don’t know the ‘Aleph Beis,’ are no less dear to Him than the greatest sage and Tzaddik.

The Baal Shem Tov’ successor, the great Maggid of Mezritch took this concept one step further. In the court of the Maggid, the disciples would take turns sleeping outside the Rebbe’s door in case the Rebbe would need anything during the night, because the Maggid suffered from a foot ailment. One of the students in the rotation was the great Tzaddik and mystic Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk. During the night, while R’ Meilach was sleeping the Maggid called to him. He said, “Do you hear Meilach, what is being said in the heavenly academy? They are saying that we must love a complete Rasha just as much as a perfect Tzaddik.”

Now, this is a rather lofty level, if you can reach it. It means that we must love not only the simple yet honest people who are understandably as dear to G-d as the great Tzaddikim. The mitzvah of Ahavas Yisroel is to love even a person who has reached the depths of evil as much as one loves the greatest Tzaddik!

The Alter Rebbe, founder of the Chabad Movement and disciple of the Maggid, took this concept even further. In his famous work, the Tanya, the Alter Rebbe writes that the mitzvah to “love your fellow Jew” absolutely must be “as yourself.” Just as one accepts one’s own shortcomings unconditionally, so too, we must unconditionally love and accept every Jew. The reason, he explains, is because all Jews are indeed one and the same. We all share one soul. An actual piece of the same G-d is within each and every one of us. Consequently, this love for another Jew is very feasible. Your friend is part of you – just like the natural connection between a parent and child.

The Three Levels of Holidays

The three holidays in Tishrei are reflected in these three levels of Ahavas Yisroel (characterized by the first three generations of Chassidus, The Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid and the Alter Rebbe).

Rosh Hashanah is the day of the “Beginning.” Chassidus explains that it was on the day of Rosh Hashanah that Moshe said, “*Atem nitzavim hayom.*” On that day, all of Israel stood together as one, equally — without divisions between the scholars and the simple laymen. It is on Rosh Hashanah that all of Israel unites and all Jews whether great or simple, are equally precious in the eyes of Heaven. This is the position of the generation of the Baal Shem Tov, the beginning of Chassidus.

Yom Kippur symbolizes a deeper level of unity. On Yom Kippur we see people who have never before stepped into a synagogue and, as we say before the Kol Nidre, “We sanction prayer with the sinners.” In other words, we acknowledge that they are sinners, yet we understand that every Jew must be accepted with love even if he is a ‘criminal.’ On Yom Kippur we focus on that which connects us and makes us one, which is much greater what sets us apart.

The Maggid of Mezritch raised his generation’s level of Ahavas Yisroel to the point that the Yom Kippur feeling of togetherness and acceptance would be felt not only on Yom Kippur but throughout the entire year.

On Sukkos, Jewish unity is taken to a whole new level. The focus of the High Holidays is prayer and penitence, where every person prays with a different level of sincerity and repents for different sins. But the mitzvah of Sukkos is to eat,

drink and sleep in the sukkah, a mitzvah in which everyone is perfectly equal. No one can eat or drink in the sukkah better than another.

The focus on Sukkos is the total physical equality of every Jew, for there are no differences when it comes to people's basic necessities. This level of equality is exactly what the Alter Rebbe demanded from his disciples all year round. Love your fellow Jew literally as your own self, for you are exactly the same. Indeed, this is why it is only about the mitzvah of sukkah that the Talmud states, "It is fitting for all Jews to sit in the same sukkah."

Are You a Winner?

Yet one may ask: isn't the world a competitive one by G-d's design? How then can I love another person as I do myself at the very same time that I'm competing with him?

In truth, competition is a false invention of humankind. As Jews, we know that everything we have comes to us from G-d. Just as we never try to outdo other people in our spiritual endeavors because we have different talents and abilities, G-d sets our livelihood and provides us with what we need according to our individual needs; no competitor can obstruct our G-d given income.

In our world of fallacies and incorrect notions, people spend endless energy on the competitions of everyday life. But in the business of Judaism, there is only one person to compete with: Yourself. If you've done more today than you did yesterday, you are a winner, while if you've done less today than yesterday — you are a loser. The moment you absorb the fact that the only person posing any challenge to you is yourself, you will find place in your heart for another Jew, and then you will be able to achieve the Ahavas Yisroel exemplified by Sukkos.

The owner of a successful taxi business was once asked why he was steadily gaining while his competition suffered steady losses. He answered that he invested 95% of his energy into his business and only 5% into the competition, while his competitor invested only 5% into the business and 95% into the competition, and that's why he fails. We must not focus most of our energy on the competition - we must focus on our business and make a vessel for G-d's blessings.

When your mother told you that you are the best and most talented child in the world, she wasn't lying. In your world, you are the best. With this attitude the Jewish nation is a nation of winners: even the "losers" are winners.