



Letters to Talia

A Kibbutznikit girl wrote to a modern Orthodox soldier about her questions of faith. The result was a fascinating correspondence. What was his best answer?

The Correspondence

“Letters to Talia” is a fascinating book containing the 1970s correspondence between a secular high school girl from a kibbutz and a religious student of a *Hesder Yeshivah*.

In the first letter, Talia explains how she learned about the young man (“Dov”) and why she was writing to him:

Shortly before, she had participated in a seminar which brought religious and non-religious youth together. It was a fascinating meeting, and it raised many questions in her mind. When she returned home, she attempted to receive answers from her parents and teachers, but they were unable to provide sufficient explanations to her questions.

Then, her father returned from his reserve duty. He shared that he had met a wonderful young man who pleasantly surprised him with his answers on religious matters, and he suggested that she write to him; he would surely be able to answer her questions.

What was the first question? I thought it would be a deep philosophical question, but in reality, she asked: Why do men and women dance separately in religious communities? You already know the answer to

that question.

In the second letter, she tells him about the Judaic studies in her school on the kibbutz. She says that the bible classes are boring; they study the book of Job, and she is confused why G-d would bring such tragedy upon a righteous man just to test him. This is a common question; why bad things happen to good people. Dov answers it in an interesting and pointed fashion.

In the third letter, she relates that her history teacher declared that she does not light Chanukah candles, because the Maccabees were fanatic religious zealots. If they would be alive in our day, they would no doubt battle the secular Jews. She asks Dov for his response.

Dov answers that the Maccabees fought not for religious coercion but for religious freedom. Antiochus attempted to force Greek culture on the Jews; women and children were executed for carrying out Jewish practices like bris milah. Some Jews — the Hellenists — cooperated with the oppressors and informed on Jews who practiced Judaism. The revolt wasn't to force people to be religious; it was to fight back against being forced to accept another religion. The Maccabees simply fought for the right to live according to their beliefs. Therefore, Dov concludes, any person who supports the cause of freedom could relate to their struggle.

These letters continue for almost two years. As the correspondence continues, you see how Dov manages to change her way of thinking, and she begins to have a much more Jewish perspective on matters.

A Final Message

In one of the final letters, dated 17 Elul 5733, Dov writes that the Israeli Air Force downed thirteen Syrian warplanes in a massive air battle over Syria. He was proud of the victory, but on second thought, he muses about the Syrian response. They will no doubt want to take

revenge, he surmises, and who knows if it will bring to war.

His words ring prophetic.

Just a few months later, the Yom Kippur War broke out and Dov was sent to battle in the Golan Heights. On the second day of the war, he fell in battle.

In the same letter, there is another discussion as well. When Talia finished high school, she spent a year volunteering in Beit She'an helping children with learning disabilities and elderly people who are illiterate. She writes about the experiences.

Volunteering with the children, she writes, is cute. They are young and adorable, they tell her funny stories, and so on. However, the work with the elderly is much more difficult. She helps three old women whose sole literary abilities are signing their name. Very often, she finds them reciting chapters of Tehillim; they don't know how to read, so they recite them by heart.

Their heavy Moroccan accents make it very difficult to communicate. They are religious like Dov, she explains, but they do not study Talmud like he does. Rather, the religious in that town pray all day and recite Tehillim. She cannot understand how they do not go crazy from the endless prayers. Isn't it boring to recite the same thing over and over again? Even on Shabbos — the old women are either eating or praying...

Dov responds as follows:

"I get the feeling that you look down on those people. You seem to view them as primitive and old fashioned. Remember, that the Jewish people survived for thousands of years because of these primitive people. They, and people like them, may be very simple, but they have strength in their faith, and that is what preserved our nation for

thousands of years. Our people have endured persecution, expulsions, hatred, and anti-Semitism; for thousands of years, they've tried to break our small nation. But in merit of these people, we've returned to Israel and to Jerusalem.

"These boring prayers are the secret to the survival of the Jewish people. It's terribly repetitive to say three times a day, 'may our eyes behold Your return to Zion,' or, 'Rebuild the Holy City of Jerusalem speedily in our day.' But it was only due to this determined repetitiveness that we have managed to educate generations of Jews to remember their homeland for thousands of years. How can you disparage that?"

The Custom of Aravos

The final day of Sukkot is called Hoshana Rabbah. At the conclusion of the prayers, it is customary to take five willow branches and hit the ground five times. This custom dates back to the prophets.

The (Jerusalem) Talmud says that this custom is so important that "Rabbi Simon would command those people arranging the calendar to ensure that Rosh Hashanah and Hoshana Rabba didn't fall out on Shabbos. And if that was not possible, allow Rosh Hashanah to fall out on Shabbos and not Hashana Rabbah" (Sukkah 4:1).

These two dates don't work well with Shabbos because Shofar blowing and the custom of the willows are both forbidden on Shabbos. However, the Shofar blowing is a biblical mitzvah while the willow branches are only a custom. Nonetheless, Rabbi Simon declared that it was more important to observe Hoshana Rabbah's customs than to blow the Shofar!

This seems utterly bizarre. Wouldn't shofar blowing be more important? What would be the big tragedy in missing out on the willow custom? What was he so worried about?

To answer this question, we need some context:

The custom of the willows is observed in our day in memory of the Temple. During the Temple era, they observed a similar custom with willows on each day of the holiday; willows would be set up around the altar each day. On Shabbos, however, they would not observe this custom, unless Hoshana Rabbah fell out on Shabbos. In that case, the willow custom would override Shabbos.

In our day, the custom which we observe in memory of the Temple does not have the legal Halachic power to override Shabbos. Therefore, it was always considered very important to ensure that it not fall out on Shabbos — so that the custom would be preserved. When the Jewish calendar was established, the Rabbis made sure that Hoshana Rabba will never fall on Shabbat.

What is unique about willows?

We are all acquainted with the famous teaching that the four species of sukkot represent four types of Jews. The etrog, which has a taste and an aroma, represents those who study Torah and do good deeds. The lulav comes from a palm tree which produces delicious fruit but does not have any smell. It represents those Jews who only study Torah. The myrtle branch has a good smell but does not have any taste, representing those who do good deeds, and the willow has neither — representing those who do neither.

On a superficial level, it seems that the etrog is the perfect Jew while the others are lacking. However, as the Rebbe explained, that's not what this is about. Every Jew studies Torah and does good deeds — at least to some extent. However, taste represents intellectual understanding; the person who has taste understands why he fulfills a mitzvah. Smell represents the emotional enthusiasm that a Jew has when he studies Torah or does a mitzvah.

The etrog represents the Jew who is enthusiastic and intellectually connected with the mitzvah that he does. The lulav represents the Jew who finds intellectual meaning but does not have enthusiasm. The myrtle branch represents the Jew who is always enthusiastic but may not have the proper understanding of what he is doing. And the willow represents the Jew who does the mitzvah — whether or not he understands and whether or not he is enthusiastic about it.

It is this type of Jew who is the “decoration” of the Altar on Sukkot — and on Hoshana Rabbah even on Shabbos. That is why this custom is so precious; we thereby demonstrate our appreciation for those Jews who have no taste and smell. They don’t understand why they should do the mitzvah, and they are not enthusiastic about it. In simple terms, they have no reason to do it. But they have the most important ingredient — *kabalat ol*, the dedication to fulfill God’s will without question. And this is the main “preservative” of the Jewish nation.

On Hoshana Rabbah, we celebrate Jewish stubbornness. You are all invited on Monday morning to participate.