

To Kiss or not to Kiss

Being excited about Mitzvos.

Kisses For Judaism

Good Shabbos!

One of the results of the Covid pandemic is that we've stopped making physical contact. Handshakes and kisses are out of style.

For Jews, there is a religious significance as well - we are accustomed to kissing objects like mezuzos. We also kiss our Torah scrolls, our tefillin, our holy books, and, occasionally, the rabbi. (If you give Chabad a big enough donation, I'll kiss you on the head.)

But seriously, my friends, we even kiss our prayer books if they fall on the ground, as a sign of respect. We likewise kiss our talleisim (our prayer shawls) and kiss our tzitzis.

There are Sephardic Jews from the Middle East who have the custom of kissing the matzah on Passover before eating it. Others have the custom of kissing the Esrog, and Jews have the custom of kissing the Kotel, the Western Wall in Jerusalem, when they visit it.

On top of that, many Jews have the custom of literally getting down on hands and knees to physically kiss the earth when visiting the Holy Land of Israel. As the Talmud (Tractate Kesuvos

112a) tells us, “Rabbi Aba would kiss the rocks of Acco.” Furthermore, there are those who kiss the rabbi’s hand or even his beard.

However, there is no *mitzvah* or *requirement* to kiss the mezuzah, or any holy object or entity, for that matter. Because kissing expresses love for the object or entity, a commandment to kiss an object would not work—you can’t make a person love something to the point that he or she kisses it. That kind of love would have to come from the person, not from an order.

The Mosh Pit

So what’s the big idea of kissing holy objects? Simple: Halachah, Jewish law, describes such kisses as *chibuv mitzvah*, or “endearment of the mitzvah.”

We may all keep the mitzvos. But the question is, how much do we hold them dear?

For example, we eat matzah on Pesach—but some people just can’t wait for Seder night to finally keep the mitzvah of eating matzah. Such people are likely to actually kiss the matzah. Others might not hold mitzvos that dearly. They will eat matzah because that’s the obligation, but they are not exactly excited about it.

There is a Chasidic custom called “Shirayim.” This custom is not observed in the Chabad community, but there are many other Chasidic communities that do do it.

Shirayim works like this: When a full plate or pot of food is served to the Rebbe, the spiritual leader of the community, as

his Chasidim sit around his table, the Rebbe is the first one to take from it. When the Rebbe is done, the plate or pot is passed around, with each Chasid hoping to get even a bit of the food that the Rebbe left. “Shirayim” means “leftovers.” And sometimes it gets a little rowdy around the table, because each Chasid wants a piece.

To an outsider, it may appear completely uncivilized—it can look like a bunch of starving men who just escaped the Warsaw Ghetto literally fighting over tiny crumbs. But someone familiar with this custom understands that eating part of the Rebbe’s food is a form of spiritually connecting with the Rebbe, because eating his food means you’re participating in his meal, which draws you spiritually closer to him.

Likewise, when you push and shove to keep a mitzvah, you show that you are truly happy and excited by keeping the mitzvah—kind of like a rock concert or sporting event, actually.

Have you ever been to one of those? Everyone is pushing and shoving at the entrance and especially at the front of the stage, or what they call the “mosh pit.” Everyone wants to be the closest—even people who otherwise would never push another human being. Yet there they are, so revved up and excited that they can’t control themselves.

In our own circles, we would have those who would push and shove in the Rebbe’s synagogue just to stand closer to the Rebbe.

The Jump on the Bread

But this sentiment did not begin in the Chasidic movement. It existed even in the era of the Holy Temples.

In the Temples, there was something called the *Lechem HaPanim*, the Showbread. These were 12 special loaves that were placed on a special table every Shabbos. They would remain there for an entire week. After seven days, they would be replaced with 12 fresh loaves—but the miracle was that the 12 old loaves had remained as fresh as they had been when they had come out of the oven.

Now, what would happen to the 12 old loaves? They would go to the shift of Kohanim, the priests, who were on duty in the Temple at the time. The Talmud (Kiddushin, Tractate 53a) tells us that they wouldn't exactly line up like good little school boys—as a matter of fact, they would push and shove, with the biggest bullies getting the biggest pieces.

And it's not that the Kohanim were just hungry for a piece of bread. Rather, as the Talmudic Sage Abayai, who was a Kohain himself, tells us (Tractate Chulin 133a), he himself used to grab the priestly gifts simply because he loved the mitzvah.

When Everyone Wants a Part

The story is told that Rabbi Shlomo Karliner, one of the spiritual giants of the early Chasidic movement, came to spend Shabbos with the Alter Rebbe, the first Chabad Rebbe.

Now, for two great Rebbes like them to meet was quite a special occasion—and so hundreds of Chasidim from throughout

the region came to spend the Shabbos in their presence.

To honor that special Shabbos, the womenfolk of the Alter Rebbe's household had a special meeting to plan the catering for the Shabbos meals—kind of like how the First Lady helps the Executive Chef of the White House plan the dinners for visiting foreign leaders.

At the meeting, a disagreement broke out between the Alter Rebbe's wife, his daughter, and the household cook. The Rebbetzin argued that since she was the hostess and the lady of the house, she should be the one making the Shabbos food. Her daughter Freidke said that she wanted to cook. And the cook complained that since she was the full-time cook anyway, you couldn't take her job away.

Not knowing what to do, they went to the Alter Rebbe himself to ask his opinion.

The Alter Rebbe said that in the Holy Temple, the more important the sacrifice was, the greater the number of Kohanim involved in bringing it. Likewise, all three of them should work together to cook for their honored guest. So off they went to the kitchen.

However, once the food was underway, each one sampled it when the others weren't watching and thought it needed a little salt. Then, along came the Alter Rebbe's son. He also sampled the food on the kitchen worktable and also thought it needed a little salt. So he also added salt.

You can only imagine what that food was about to taste like.

The story goes that on Friday night, they served soup at the Shabbos dinner table. The Alter Rebbe began eating his soup—and then noticed that his guest wasn't having his. He asked him, "Why aren't you eating your soup?"

The poor Karliner Rebbe told him that the soup was so salty that he couldn't get it into his mouth.

Noach Building Alone

Which brings us, my friends, to this week's Torah portion.

In the Torah portion of Noach, we read about the Great Flood. G-d tells Noach to build the Teivah, the legendary Ark, in which he will rescue his family and all the animals, birds and insects.

To do so, he would need to build a giant vessel, a craft, about 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet tall by today's measurements. It was almost as long as a football field! It was to have three decks, a truly mighty craft. Many people have tried to build such a huge vessels using traditional hand tools, and none too successfully.

It took Noach many years to build the Teivah. As a matter of fact, the commentator Rashi tells us that it actually took 120 years. (Remember that people ordinarily lived for hundreds of years back then.)

But the Rebbe asks a simple question: Why did it take Noach so long?

If he had been given an order by G-d Himself to build the Ark, he should have done it as quickly as possible, like any other

command from G-d. (After all, if G-d told YOU to build something, wouldn't you do it really quickly?) So Noach should have hired a whole crew of woodworkers and contractors to build the ship in the quickest possible time!

The answer, the Rebbe tells us, lies in the order itself.

What G-d actually said to Noach was, "Make for yourself a teivah of wood"—in other words, the order was that he should personally and literally build the Teivah, not delegate the labor to others. Yes, Noach could have shared G-d's command, this special mitzvah, with others—but we can say that because he loved the mitzvah so much, he wanted to do it all himself.

So, of course, it took 120 years.

But what does that leave us with? Should we kiss our mezuzos or not?

A Sukkah Doesn't Hurt

The Rebbe once entered the sukkah with a cold. His brother-in-law, the Rashag, asked him if he had gotten sick from the sukkah, and the Rebbe responded that he had been sick for several days. "A sukkah *farkilt nit*," the Rebbe told him, "A sukkah doesn't give a cold."

From doing mitzvos and from treasuring mitzvos, we don't get sick. If you kiss mitzvos — and nothing else — G-d will surely protect you.