



Don't Mix Simchas

From a wedding scandal which resembles the story of Jacob and Leah, and a lesson from King Solomon's celebration: how are we to celebrate Thanksgiving alongside Chanukah?

The Wedding

About a month ago, a young couple got married in New York. The bride was from a Syrian Jewish family and the groom was a nice thirty-five-year-old member of the Orthodox community who stemmed from Lebanon.

The celebration was uneventful. The rabbi officiated the marriage according to Jewish law. At the wedding reception, the groom gave a wonderful speech praising his new bride, and, as observant Jews often do, he used plenty of Hebrew lingo (if you don't speak Hebrew, you often would have a hard time to understand the conversations of religious Jews, since they are heavily spiced with Hebrew words).

However, within a few weeks, the new bride began to suspect that something was amiss. She rummaged around in his suitcase and found his passport, where she made a shocking discovery. He wasn't the man she had thought she married. She had married a nice Jewish boy named Eliyahu Chaliwa, whose Facebook page enthusiastically supported Israel but he was actually a Lebanese Shiite Muslim living under a fake identity.

Earlier, when asked why his family members weren't involved in his life, he claimed that they had cut off all connection with him when he

became a Baal Teshuvah. He had built up an entire cover story; some of his family members, he claimed, lived in South America. He would wear fancy suits and present himself as a successful businessman. He also behaved as a devout Jew; he attended services at the synagogue and participated in Shabbat meals. He claimed to have visited Israel as well.

Once he was caught, his Facebook disappeared. The family got the FBI involved, and the anti-terror unit interrogated him. They asserted that he was not a terror threat; contrary to rumors, he was not associated with any terror groups. He admitted that he wasn't Jewish, that he had never visited Israel, and that his whole cover story was a lie, but he denied any accusation that he was an anti-Semite. He married a Jew simply because he wanted to be Jewish as well. But one question is still a mystery. Why didn't he just undergo a legitimate conversion?

Lessons from Laban

One interesting thing about this story is that it broke during the week of Vayetze, when we read about Jacob's marriage experience: He travels to Haran where he spends seven years working for his uncle to earn his daughter Rachel's hand in marriage, but when the moment finally arrives, his father-in-law slips Leah under the chuppah instead of Rachel.

In the morning, when Jacob discovered that Leah had become his wife, he turned to Laban and asked, "Why did you trick me?" Laban answered, "In our place, it is unacceptable to marry off a younger daughter before an older one." Instead, he made another offer: Jacob could marry Rachel at the close of one week from the wedding, and work for another seven years in return.

The Rebbe pointed out that our sages learned two laws from this story:

1. This story teaches us about the concept of Sheva Brachos, the seven days of celebration which follow a Jewish wedding.

2. It is the source of the law which states that we do not mix two celebrations. Laban told Jacob to wait a full week before marrying Rachel. Why? Because it is difficult to focus on two separate celebrations; one celebration will automatically dampen the other. In the Rebbe's words, "one joyous occasion will muddle the other." In the case of someone marrying two women, he will no doubt celebrate with one over the other, immediately bringing friction into his home.

Based on this law, the sages ruled that it is forbidden to get married on Chol Hamoed; indeed, in our day and age, no weddings take place on the intermediate days of Sukkot or Passover. Why? Because we are obligated to celebrate and be joyful in honor of the holiday. If one were to get married on the holiday, he would celebrate not the holiday, but his marriage. In the words of Tosfos, "In order that his heart be unencumbered to celebrate the obligatory joy, he should not mix it with a different celebration."

Solomon's Long Feast

However, the story of Jacob is considered the source for this law only according to the Jerusalem Talmud (Moed Katan 1:7). According to the Babylonian Talmud, this law stems from a different story.

The Bible tells us that King Solomon built the Holy Temple over a period of seven years. He amassed no less than 150,000 workers to participate in the construction. When, finally, the construction was finished and the Temple stood in all its glory, he held a seven-day feast to inaugurate it.

If you pay attention to the dates, you'll notice something unusual. The Temple inauguration began on the 8th of Tishrei, exactly seven days before sukkot. In other words, as the seven-day celebration concluded,

the Jewish people immediately moved into the next celebration, the holiday of Sukkot, celebrating for 14 consecutive days.

This raises the question: Why did King Solomon shut down the economy for 14 days straight? Why couldn't he wait one week and incorporate the inauguration of the Temple into the holiday celebrations? The answer, the Talmud says, is that he was following the rule that two celebrations were not to be combined (Moed Katan 9a).

This rule applies only to weddings, not to bar mitzvahs or circumcisions. Those can be held together, or even alongside weddings. One simple reason is that they are time-bound celebrations: a circumcision must take place on the 8th day following the birth, whether or not it is Shabbat or Yom Kippur. Therefore, if Sukkot arrives on the 8th day, we don't consider pushing it off; holding the bris at the right moment obviously takes precedence.

Likewise, a bar mitzvah marks the day that a Jewish boy turns 13 years old on the Jewish calendar. Jewish custom dictates that at least a small celebration be held on that exact date, even if the major celebration is pushed off for later. The Bar Mitzvah should be celebrated on time, whether or not it is Sukkot or Passover.

Recently, at wedding in Israel, a bris took place immediately after the Chupah. Not for the groom.... but for a baby relative. The baby's bris had been delayed due to jaundice, and on the day of the wedding, the doctor finally ruled that the bris could be held. Instead of holding a separate celebration, the parents simply brought the baby to the wedding and held the bris right after the chuppah.

Don't Combine

What's the moral of the story?

In two weeks, we will celebrate Chanukah. Just a few days earlier, will

be Thanksgiving. Many people told me that they love this holiday because it contains no obligations to pray, eat matzah or fast. Without any guilt, they are free to hold a wonderful dinner together with their extended family, with no further obligations.

Several years ago, when Thanksgiving similarly fell out very close to Chanukah, one woman told me that at her Thanksgiving dinner, knowing that the family wouldn't be gathering again for Chanukah, she decided to mark Chanukah as well. They lit the candles, ate latkes and gave out Chanukah gelt. I commented that she should have put some matzah on the table, to spare her family the effort of gathering for Passover...

I think this rule is a good message for this year: one celebration should not be mixed with another. Thanksgiving should not be mixed with Chanukah. A family dinner on Thanksgiving does not absolve us of gathering again on Chanukah to celebrate the miracle of the Jewish people — and not for one night, but for eight.