

May We All Be Leaders

Why do we eat the fish-head on Rosh Hashanah?

Be Leaders

The most famous of all Rosh Hashanah customs is dipping the apples in honey. For some Jews this custom is the only thing they do to celebrate Rosh Hashanah. They dip the apples in the honey and say the special prayer, “May it be Your will that this New Year be good and sweet for us.”

But this is not the only custom. This isn't even the only extra food we eat to celebrate Rosh Hashanah. We eat pomegranates because they have so many seeds and we pray, “May it be Your will that our merits be numerous like the seeds of a pomegranate.”

We eat carrots and pray that our merits be numerous because the Yiddish word “merin” means carrots but it also means numerous. (The Sephardim eat 17 different foods and have a prayer for each.)

There is another food that we eat that I don't like so much, the fish head. It's always disconcerting to have the tiny little eyeballs staring up at you while you're eating flesh off the torso. It can really ruin your appetite for the rest of the meal. That's why this custom in particular always catches my attention.

When we eat the fish head we pray, “May it be Your will that I

be a head, not a tail.” In other words, let me be a leader and not a schlepper.

What kind of prayer is this? Imagine if everyone was a leader and everyone was giving his own instructions. Imagine if everyone here in shul was a rabbi. We have enough trouble putting up with one rabbi, if everyone were rabbis it would simply be a disaster! There is a well known joke that it’s impossible to be a prime minister in Israel because every Israeli is a prime minister! And on Rosh Hashanah we pray for this, that we should all be leaders?

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi once accompanied Elijah the prophet to a city where they weren’t welcomed respectfully. Nobody offered them food, drink or a place to stay. On his way out Elijah blessed them, “May you all become leaders.” When they arrived in the next city they were greeted very warmly and after a nice stay Elijah blessed them too, “May there be only one leader among you.”

Rabbi Joshua became confused and he asked Elijah why he wished all the greedy men would become leaders while the warm generous people of the second town would only have one? We know the answer, of course. Too many leaders are a recipe for disaster.

Why then do we pray to all be leaders?

The Krechtz

There is a Chassidic story that sheds some light on the issue.

Two little sons of one of our Rebbes were playing a game of

“Rebbe and Chassid” wherein one would come to the other for advice as a Chassid would come to his Rebbe. The younger brother, the “Chassid,” explained that he had a certain problem and he requested the “Rebbe’s” advice and blessing. The older brother, the “Rebbe,” sitting in his Rabbinic chair, advised the little one how to deal with his problem and gave him his blessings for success. However, the little brother retorted, “You’re not a Rebbe and your blessing is not a blessing.”

Offended, the older brother demanded an explanation. The little boy explained, “When a Rebbe hears that his Chassid is struggling, before giving his advice he first sighs and says ‘Oy.’ You didn’t sigh so you can’t be a Rebbe.”

Chassidim say that the word Rebbe is an acronym for the Hebrew words meaning, “head of the Jewish people.” Just as the head contains the nerve center that feels the pain in each part of the body, so too a true leader feels the pain of his people.

When we say “may I be a head” we don’t mean that we all want to be leaders. We mean that we should be able to feel another’s pain as though it were our pain.

Today on Rosh Hashanah, we try to be more leader-like in this respect.

Feel the Joy

Still, this is not the hard part. The real challenge of being a leader is learning to feel the joy of another as though it were your own joy! When you meet a friend on the street and he tells you, “I just closed a huge deal!” it should make you happy, as if

it was your own son who just closed that deal. Instead of saying “Good for you,” as everybody else does, you should be saying, “You’ve just made my day!”

The Rebbe always asked people to inform him of good news and these good tidings actually gave the Rebbe energy, they added to the Rebbe’s health!

When G-d first asked Moses to go to Egypt at the burning bush he refused. One of the reasons that Moses refused was that he didn’t want to offend his older brother Aaron who had served as the people’s leader in Egypt during the slavery. It wasn’t until G-d assured him that Aaron was actually on his way out of Egypt to greet Moses as the new leader and that Aaron was rejoicing in his heart, did Moses agree to go.

Human nature dictates that an older brother, happy as he is over his younger brother’s success, somewhere deep down in his heart of hearts is jealous of his brother’s success. Moses knew this and he didn’t want to cause Aaron any aggravation. But Aaron, even in his heart of hearts truly rejoiced in Moses’ appointment. In this merit Aaron earned his own appointment to the position of High Priest, for only one who truly rejoices in the success of another can be a High Priest, a leader among the Jewish people.

My friends, we must all become Rebbes. That doesn’t mean that you have to buy a shtreimel and grow a long beard. (If you specifically want to, it’s okay with me.) To be a Rebbe means to be a “head”; just as an actual head feels the comfort and discomfort of its own body, may we feel the joys and sorrows of

each and every Jew.