

Break the doors down

Category: Holidays, Rosh Hashana

Why do you put yourself in a box? Open the doors for every single Jew!

Recently, there was an uproar regarding Chasidic education in New York over the fact that they don't teach secular studies, speak only in Yiddish, and so on. I was asked if Chabad educational institutions also teach in Yiddish. The answer is that most Chabad institutions teach in the local language — English in the US, Hebrew in Israel, and so on.

Then came the next question: Why are you different than other Chassidim?

To answer this question, let me give the following preface:

The Questionable Sukkah

The Rebbe once told over a story (Toras Menachem v. 41 p. 86) about the Baal Shem Tov — that he once built a Sukkah that was so questionable (Halachakli) that all the rabbis of his town, Mezhibuz, came and argued that it was invalid.

Many of us build sukkahs, and it seems simple and easy, but really, there are many laws related to building a sukkah. For example, the “shade must be more dense than the sunlight,” i.e. the sukkah must be covered with s'chach in such a way that more than fifty percent of the sukkah will be in shade. In addition, not all materials qualify as s'chach. Also, the sukkah needs a number of walls, and so on.

Now, the Baal Shem Tov built the sukkah in such a way that the rabbis of Mezhibuzh felt it was invalid. The Baal Shem Tov debated with them to prove that his sukkah was kosher, but when they did not agree, he put his head in his hands for a short while. When he lifted his head, there was a piece of parchment found in his hands which said, “The Sukkah of Reb Yisrael is kosher. Signed, Matatron, the Interior Minister [of Heaven]” — the angel who, according to the Talmud, writes in the defense of the Jewish people (Chagiga 15:1).

This parchment remained in the hands of the Baal Shem Tov's grandson, the Degel Machaneh Efraim, and it had healing properties. When someone was sick,

he would use it to treat the illness, and as long as the parchment was in his possession, nobody died in his surroundings. One day, the parchment disappeared, and the Degel Machaneh Efraim commented that it was taken away from him because he had played around with the natural order, trying to stop death.

The Rebbe asked: How is it possible that the sukkah of the Baal Shem Tov was so bad that the rabbis thought it was unkosher? All mitzvos were observed by the Baal Shem Tov, no doubt, in the best possible manner. If so, why did he build such a questionable sukkah in the first place?

The Rebbe gives a wonderful explanation:

On Sukkot, there are those who build beautiful sukkahs which comply with all the laws and traditions, but there are also those who build sukkahs which are only barely kosher. When the Baal Shem Tov built such a sukkah himself and demonstrated that it was kosher, he “kosherized” those sukkos and ensured that those Jews, too, would be counted among those who observed the mitzvah of sukkah. He put himself in the lowest common denominator of the sukkah overservers, to be a good reflection on the lowest level of Jews.

The Rebbe concludes, “This is the role of a Jewish leader — he lowers himself from his spiritual state to benefit a Jew who is in the lowest possible level” (Toras Menachem v. 49 p. 97).

Several years ago, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was the guest of a Modern Orthodox community in the US. During the Q&A after his speech, he was asked to define the role of the Modern Orthodox Day School. He responded as follows: “Jews are a minority in the United States; Orthodox Jews are a minority of a minority, and Modern Orthodox Jews are a minority of a minority of a minority.” Speaking rhetorically, he asked: “Why do you put yourself in a box? Open the doors for every single Jew!” With that, he concluded the evening.

Rabbi Sacks was in many ways, a chossid of the Rebbe, and he was essentially giving over Chabad philosophy: Don’t limit yourselves to a certain type of Jew; open the doors for everyone. In the terms of the story about the Baal Shem Tov: build a sukkah that includes every single Jew.

The Story of Ninveh

One of the most famous stories in the Bible is the story of Jonah and the whale; it is famous among non-Jews as well.

We read this story on Yom Kippur afternoon because it is all about repentance. Jonah is sent to the city of Ninveh with a message from G-d that the city would overturn in 40 days. At first, Jonah attempted to avoid the task, because Ninveh was the capital of Assyria — a world superpower that was an enemy of the Kingdom of Israel and wanted to destroy Jewish independence; he didn't want to give them the opportunity to repent.

In the end, he submitted to G-d's will and visited the city. When they heard his message — that G-d had already sentenced the city to death — they immediately repented; they gathered in sackcloth and ashes, returned everything they had stolen, and the king declared a fast, not only for human beings but also for animals. They starved their animals to compel G-d, so to speak, to forgive them — otherwise all the innocent animals would die.

In the end, G-d forgave them (Taanis 16a).

The Rebbe once asked:

The books of the prophets are filled with stories about repentance. For example, the haftarah of Yom Kippur morning is the words of Isaiah telling the Jewish people that a fast alone is not enough, but one must rather engage in actual acts of kindness. A fast day which is beloved by G-d, he tells them, is a fast which comes along with feeding the hungry and dressing the naked (Isaiah 8:7).

Now, in the United States, the most packed prayer service of Yom Kippur is Yizkor; at that moment, the synagogue is always full. In Israel, however, Yizkor is less popular. The real crowd shows up to Ne'ilah, which is the real pinnacle of Yom Kippur; everyone wants to be at the synagogue before the gate is closed, when the shofar is sounded, and when we declare, "Next year in Jerusalem!"

Why do we read about the non-Jewish story of repentance — in which they cruelly starved their animals to force G-d into forgiving them — at the most sublime moments of Yom Kippur, just moments before the Ne'ilah prayer? Why do we read that story specifically at that moment?

The Rebbe suggests an amazing answer:

It is possible that someone will show up at the synagogue during those moments, in the closing hours of Yom Kippur, and think to himself, “Who am I that G-d should forgive me? I haven’t done anything good in my life…” Instead of utilizing those final moments for prayer, he will give up and resign himself to having a bad year.

It is to that person that we say, “If Ninveh was able to overturn G-d’s decree against them, you surely can as well.” If a city of antisemites (who ultimately exiled the 10 tribes of Israel) and cruel people who starve their animals can achieve forgiveness, no doubt, you can as well; for you are G-d’s only child. (Toras Menachem v. 52 p. 128).

Here we find the same idea: forgiveness is not designated only for the person who promises to never sin again and prays all Yom Kippur day; rather, even the fellow who just showed up at synagogue is told, “If Ninveh can do it, so can you.”

The Story that Doesn’t Make Us Look Good

This idea is also expressed on Rosh Hashanah:

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read about the birth of Isaac. However, we don’t just read those few verses; we also read about Ishmael — how he was banished from Abraham’s home upon Sarah’s directive. Abraham didn’t want to banish him, but G-d told him to listen to whatever his wife said.

The Torah says that Ishmael and his mother got lost in the desert, their water supply ran out, and Ishmael was about to die of thirst. (Vayera 21:12).

No matter how you explain it, it’s not a pleasant story. It doesn’t look good for us; it’s not something that we really want on the Jewish people’s “resume.” Why then, do we read it on Rosh Hashanah, a time when we seek to gain favor in G-d’s eyes? Shouldn’t we skip over a story that has, essentially, been a source of aggravation for us until this very day?

The previous Rebbe explains that the answer lies in the verse: “And G-d heard the

voice of the youngster, where he was” (Vayera 21:17).

Rashi explains that the angels were criticizing Ishmael and telling G-d to allow him to die of thirst. “His children are destined to kill your sons in thirst. Why do you provide him with a well?”

G-d responded with a question, “Right now, is he righteous or evil?”

“Righteous.”

“If so, He will be judged according to his current state.”

The previous Rebbe explains that we read this passage to shed light on the value of every Jew who shows up at the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah. We tell G-d, “Don’t look at what we did yesterday or what we will do tomorrow. Judge us according to our actions — right now. Now, as we stand in the synagogue and pray to you, we are righteous. So, bless us with a sweet new year.”

This is why Chabad institutions teach in the local language. The Rebbe wrote that teaching in Yiddish would exclude anyone who didn’t speak the language. The Rebbe believed in the Baal Shem Tov’s message; he opened the door so wide that the doors fell off and the entrance remained wide open for every single Jew (See Toras Menachem v. 5 p. 63).

When we open the door for others, G-d opens the door for us; He welcomes us and gives us a happy and sweet new year.

(Based on Jewish Insights, Rosh Hashanah class).