

Are Israelis Really Secular?

Joseph's sale still haunts us today. What does it tell us about fighting antisemitism?

It's All About Family!

What percentage of Jews light the Chanukah menorah? In Israel, a recent study has discovered that most Israeli Jews kindle a menorah each year, and that it is, in fact, the second most popular Jewish custom in the country.

This study — to determine the religiosity of the Jewish Israeli population — was conducted in August by the “Israeli Congress.”

It turns out that the most popular Jewish holiday in Israel is Passover; 84% of Jews participate in a Seder. The second most popular holiday is Chanukah, with 78% of Jewish Israelis lighting a menorah. The third most popular observance is Shabbat dinner — 58% of the Jewish population responded that they light Shabbat candles and recite kiddush each week. My friends, these are astounding numbers.

The poll then moved on to more difficult observances: how many Jews fast on Yom Kippur? The answer is: more than half. 53% fast on Yom Kippur, 51% avoid pork, and 42% separate meat and milk.

One of the professors involved in the study noted that family events are clearly the most popular. The holidays and observances that were the most widely observed were those that took place in the family context — the Seder, the Chanukah candles, and Shabbat dinner.

The Never Ending Story of Joseph

In this week's Torah portion, we learn the importance of Family. The Parsha begins with the story of the sale of Joseph, which continues to unfold until the very end of the book of Genesis. Four full Torah portions are occupied with this story. Why are we so obsessed? I would suggest that it's because it's a story about interfamily strife.

In short, Joseph receives special attention from his father Jacob, and his brothers become very jealous. He shares dreams in which his brothers bow to him, which didn't help his popularity at all. It came to a point where they wanted to murder him, but thanks to one brother's intervention, they decided to sell him into slavery in Egypt instead.

It took 22 years until they found him, and the family then reunited. But still, the old wounds didn't completely heal. At the very end of Genesis, after Jacob passes away, the brothers immediately fear that Joseph still harbors a strong grudge against them.

You may not know that the trauma of the sale of Joseph lasted, in fact, far longer. It wasn't just a trauma that remained within the family for that generation; there are a number of Jewish customs that we observe until this very day which reflect back

on that story.

Marking Joseph's Sale

One example is the Pidyon Haben. The Torah commands us to redeem our firstborn sons from a priest. How much money does the redemption cost? The amount is 5 shekel, about 100 gram of silver. Why? The Talmud explains: "Just as they sold the firstborn of Rachel for 20 silver coins [the equivalent of five shekel] every person should redeem his own firstborn for 20 silver coins." Until this very day, Jews spend this specific amount to redeem their firstborn because Joseph was sold by his brothers for that amount more than 3600 years ago.

Here is another custom — the half shekel. In the temple era, every Jew would make a yearly donation of $\frac{1}{2}$ shekel towards the temple service. We make a similar donation every year right before Purim in memory of this custom. Why is the sum specifically $\frac{1}{2}$ shekel? Because, the Talmud says, when Joseph was sold and the money split, each brother received a half shekel. Until this very day, we are atoning for the sale of Joseph. (Yerushalmi Shekalim 82:3. See Likkutei Sichos v. 20 p. 185).

There are several Passover customs that relate to Joseph as well:

Before the exodus, the Jewish people were commanded to take the blood of the Passover sacrifice and smear it on their doorposts. Commentators explained that this was a reminder of the blood in which Joseph's coat was dipped when he was sold; it was a reminder to the Jewish people that the entire exile in Egypt began because of family strife.

The Passover sacrifice also must be eaten in a large group. According to the Rikanti, this is also to atone for the sale of Joseph, in which an entire family ganged up against their brother.

At the Seder, the custom is to drink red wine (Shulchan Aruch Hilchos Pesach 472:26). There are those who explain that it is likewise a reminder of the blood on Joseph's coat.

And here we come to something that is mentioned at the end of this week's Parsha. We drink four cups of that red wine. Why 4? The Jerusalem Talmud states: "They represent the four mentions of Pharaoh's cup of wine." (Pesachim 10a).

This is also about Joseph. At the end of this week's Torah portion, the imprisoned butler tells Joseph about his dream in which he served wine to pharaoh, and he mentions the word cup four times. Again, a story about Joseph.

In simple terms, the entire Passover story revolves around this reminder — that family strife was what started the entire journey to the exile in Egypt. Because there is nothing as bad as family strife.

King David & His Son

This idea is evident in the first few chapters of the book of Psalms.

In Chapter 2, King David speaks about the schemes and plots of the antisemites against the Jewish people. He scoffs, saying that they will have no fulfillment and that G-d laughs at them. *"Why have nations gathered and [why do] kingdoms think vain things*

. . . taking counsel together against the L-rd and against His anointed? ...He Who dwells in Heaven laughs; the L-rd mocks them."

In Chapter 3, he speaks about a different issue — the persecution he underwent from his son Absalom. In this chapter, he sings a different tune: *"O Lord, how many have my adversaries become! Great men rise up against me."* This time, he doesn't laugh; he takes the problem very seriously.

The Rebbe once cited the Talmud's explanation, that "wayward children in a person's home is more troublesome than the war of Gog and Magog [the topic of the first psalm]" (Berachos 7b). Antisemites and Jew haters should not be our main concern, the Rebbe said. Our most important focus must be to ensure that we don't raise any "Absaloms" within our own homes.

The book of Kings (Melachim 1:6) states that King David never educated Absalom; he had never chastised him for his behavior during his childhood. Therefore, he grew up to ultimately turn against his own father.

This teaches us that we need to focus more on Jewish education. It's nice that all our children will celebrate Chanukah and attend a Pesach Seder, but we need to ensure more, and far more. Let's make the Israeli poll a reality in the United States, and not just in the family events, but in every single mitzvah.