

Are You Connected?

Category: Ki Sisa, Shemos

Chaim Topol's passing brings to fore one of the most common American Jewish experiences.

Chaim Topol

In order to be considered Jewish in the United States, it is traditionally required to do three things: have a Bar Mitzvah, participate in a Passover Seder, and watch "Fiddler on the Roof."

Apparently, this is also true of the younger generation, "Gen—Z." Yesterday, I asked my son-in-law Rabbi Levi Raichik, who serves as a Shliach on campus at Ohio University, to conduct a survey among his students to determine how many of them had seen either the stage show or the film version of "Fiddler on the Roof," and to his surprise, the majority of the students responded that they had indeed seen the show or the movie.

As a result of the widespread knowledge of the movie, everyone knows the song "Tradition." This song is indeed a very authentic Jewish idea, because "tradition" is the key to Jewish existence. The Torah that we study is based on tradition, the way in which we interpret it is rooted in "tradition." In fact, everything in Jewish life is closely tied to tradition.

This week, Chaim Topol passed away. He played "Tevye the milkman" in the movie. According to Topol, he had rehearsed for the role in the movie approximately 500 times before filming began because he performed the play 500 times in front of a live audience. Truth to be told, it was time well spent, because this movie connected many Jews to Judaism!

What is less known here in the US is that he was also the lead actor in the film "Sallah Shabati." It's a satirical film about the difficulties of absorption of Sephardic Jewish immigrants in the 1950s and the condescending attitude towards them. The story is portrayed through the character of Sallah Shabati, a new immigrant who comes to Israel with his family and settles in a transit camp, and eventually becomes the leader of the community.

Chaim Topol portrays the character of Salach Shabati with great success. What's interesting is that Topol, who was of Ashkenazi descent and whose parents immigrated from Poland before the war (and whose family perished in the Holocaust), was able to step into the shoes of a person who came from North Africa and had a completely different identity and culture. "Tevye the Milkman" represented the Ashkenazi extreme, while "Sallach Shabati" represented the Sephardic extreme; these are two ends that still experience tension in Israel, but Topol was able to connect with both and to a certain extent, unite them. (Topol himself had the privilege of a private audience with the Rebbe in the 1970s).

The Secret Prayer

This week we read about the sin of the golden calf. Unfortunately, this was not a movie; it happened in reality. Forty days after the giving of the Torah, while Moses was still on Mount Sinai waiting to receive the Tablets from G-d, the Israelites made a golden calf and worshiped it. When Moses descended from Mount Sinai with the Tablets in hand, he saw the calf — and he smashed the Tablets. He also destroyed the calf, grinding it to a pulp.

When everyone calmed down from the madness, something interesting happened.

Moses informed them that he was going back up to Mount Sinai to ask G-d to forgive the people of Israel, and he spent another 40 days on the mountain. When G-d answered his request and forgave the people, Moses recognized that it was an opportune moment and asked for a "small" request: "Show me your glory." What exactly Moses wanted to see — we will leave for the commentators, but Hashem answered him (in the words of Rashi): "The time has come for you to see my glory... I want to teach you... how to request mercy, even if the merit of the forefathers is no longer."

What was that all about?

When Moses first heard about the sin of the golden calf while still on Mount Sinai, he immediately prayed to G-d on behalf of the people of Israel. He invoked the merit of their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants." Moses pleaded with G-d to forgive the people in the merit of their righteous ancestors.

Here, G-d was teaching Moses an important lesson: that even if the merit of the forefathers should run out, he should never give up on praying for the people of Israel.

Rashi continues by saying that Hashem said: “As you see me wrapped [in a prayer shawl] and reciting the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy — teach Israel to do likewise. By mentioning these names, *Rachum V’chanun* they will be answered because my mercy never ceases.”

Many of us are familiar with this prayer, which we recite together on Yom Kippur and other solemn occasions: “Hashem, Hashem, *kel rachum v’chanun...*” This prayer has its roots in our parshah, when G-d revealed this secret to Moses, promising that whenever Israel would recite these words, they would stir His mercy and He would answer them (Shemos 33:19).

The Knots

There was another important message that Moses received. When Moses asked to see G-d’s glory, G-d replied that no person can survive witnessing the Divine. Instead, He revealed to Moses the knot of His head-tefillin. He also showed Moses how to pray during times of distress, by demonstrating how he wraps himself in a tallis.

Why the knot, and why the tallis? What exactly does that mean, and what message did He mean to convey?

Tefillin have two knots — one for the head tefillin and one for the arm tefillin. Creating these knots is not a simple task. The knot for the head tefillin is in the shape of the letter “dalet” and the knot for the arm tefillin is in the shape of a “yud.” Together with the shin on the head tefillin, they form the name of G-d — Shakkai.

In a Sichah, the Rebbe once explained that the two commandments, Tzitzit and Tefillin, both serve to remind Jews of G-d’s commandments. Both of them involve “knots” — the four fringes of the Tzitzit are actually threads that are tied in all sorts of knots, and the Tefillin also involve knots.

A knot is something that connects and binds two things together. The word

KESHER can mean knot and connection. The idea behind these knots is to remind us that when a Jew loses his way, it is because his “knot” which connects him to G-d has been loosened.

By showing Moses Tzitzit and Tefillin, G-d was saying that the problem is in the “knot” — the connection has weakened, and in order to strengthen it, a double connection must be made. This is the concept of Teshuvah — when one knot is weakened, we are told to double it.

In other words, G-d showed Moses that the root of all Jewish problems is the connection.” With a strong connection, everything works. When spiritual or material problems arise, one should immediately strengthen the positive connection that a Jew has to Judaism, and then all the problems will disappear.

Hiskashrus

There is another message to be gleaned from the story of the Golden Calf. If the Israelites had been as devoted to Moses as they were during the parting of the Red Sea, where the Torah testifies that “they believed in G-d and in Moses, his servant,” they would never have sought a replacement for him, and the Calf would never have been fashioned.

The problem was they lacked *hiskashrus*, the knot of connection to Moses himself.

Among Chasidim, there is a concept called “*hiskashrus*” or “attachment,” where the Chossid connects to the Rebbe, and the Rebbe helps connect the Chossid to G-d. The more the Chossid is attached to the tzaddik, the easier it is for him to connect to G-d.

Why don't we try to connect to G-d on our own? The reason is that an average person's ego is a contradiction to G-dliness; when one connects to the Rebbe, who is completely attached to G-d, he gains the ability to properly connect as well. When a Chasid feels that he is beginning to lose his spiritual vitality, he immediately knows that he must strengthen his “knot” to the Rebbe, and then everything will straighten out.

How does one connect to the Rebbe? By following his instructions. The Rebbe said that the “mitzvah of the generation” is to bring another Jew closer to

Judaism. When we share a mitzvah with another Jew, give him a mezuzah as a gift, invite him to the Passover Seder, or tell him a Torah story, we are creating a bond with the Rebbe, and in turn, we become closer to G-d.

(Likkutei Sichos v. 21 p. 232. Ki Sisa 5735, p. 371)