

Why Is Everything A Competition

Category: Bamidbar, Pinchas

Some people are naturally sharing, while others are intensely competitive. What about Moses and Joshua?

Hot Dog Eating Competition

Every fourth of July, a competition is held in Coney Island in Brooklyn. It's an over one hundred year old tradition, attended by forty thousand spectators and close to two million via television. Contestants invest long hours of training and many hours on the road to win.

It's the Nathan's Famous July 4th Hot Dog Eating Contest.

How many hot dogs could a human being possibly consume in ten minutes, you might ask? Well, the world hot-dog champion is Joey Chestnut, who set the record at an incredible 76 hot dogs (with buns!). This year, he retained his primacy, but made it only to the low number of 62.

Today, there are competitions for everything; kids, adults, men, women—there are contests and competitions for anything you could possibly think of.

The Rebbe once related that during his childhood, his uncle—a rabbi in an agricultural colony—visited his home and told him about the contests that would be held among the simple folk of his town. “When they sat around after a day's work and wanted to showcase their strength, they would sit across a wall and declare that all should spit at the wall. Whoever's spittle reaches further, has demonstrated that he is strong, powerful, smart and so on.” (Sichos Kodesh 5741 vol. 2 pg. 716).

In truth, even when we are not in declared competitions, people are often busy competing with their neighbors; who has the nicest car, the nicest furniture, the nicest house—we are often busy comparing ourselves to others.

For some people, they need competitions to keep themselves on their toes. They always want to be the best, the smartest, the most handsome—and if they

perceive someone else edging into their “territory,” it ruins their mood. But for others, competition is not as vital; they are happy to share their level of success with others, and will help others achieve the same goals.

Moses vs. Joshua

Today, we read about the transition between the leadership of Moses and Joshua. Before Moses passes on, G-d calls him onto a mountain to gaze at the land which his people will soon enter; at that moment, Moses turns to G-d and says, “Please appoint a new leader for the Jewish people.” Joshua is chosen by G-d to assume the role of Moses and bring the Jewish people into the land.

These two leaders—Moses and Joshua—seem to each express one of these characteristics.

In a story we read a few weeks ago, in Parshat Behaalotecha, Moses complained to G-d that his role as the only leader of the entire Jewish people was too difficult to bear, so G-d suggests that he appoint seventy elders to share in the burden. Moses follows G-d’s advice, and seventy chosen individuals begin to experience prophecy.

Suddenly, somebody comes running. Two of the chosen people who had refused to accept the role, and had remained in their own dwellings instead of joining the gathering with Moses began to prophesize as well. To Joshua, this was an unacceptable breach of protocol, and he demanded that they be detained. Moses, however, didn’t seem perturbed.

“Are you being zealous on my behalf?” he says, “if only all of G-d’s nation were prophets.”

Clearly, Joshua believed that there could only be one source of authority—Moses. When that centrality of his leadership seemed to break down, he was infuriated. But Moses felt otherwise; the more the merrier, he said. He was happy to share his prophecy with everyone.

This same idea seems to emerge again at the end of Moses’ life, in Parshat Vayelech.

When Moses appoints Joshua, he says, “Be strong and courageous, because you

will come with this nation...” Twenty verses later, G-d repeats the same statement, but with a small distinction: He says, “You will *bring* this nation.” (In Hebrew, it is the difference of one letter, “*tavo*” as opposed to “*tavi*”).

Rashi explains that Moses was saying, to paraphrase, “The elders will assist you, and make sure to consult with them,” while G-d was saying, “It is all up to you; there is only one leader in the generation, not two.”

When Moses envisioned Joshua’s leadership, he saw it as resembling his own, where he was comfortable sharing the space with others. But G-d gave Joshua a leadership role which suited him—in which there was no space for elders or consultants.

The Sun & the Moon

This same debate, interestingly, played out during the creation of the world, on the first Wednesday, when G-d created the sun and the moon.

The Torah says that “G-d created the two great luminaries, the great luminary to rule over the day, and the small luminary to rule over the night, and also the stars.”

All the commentators immediately point out that the Torah seems to contradict itself in a single sentence; are the sun and the moon both great luminaries, or is that designation only appropriate for the sun?

Rashi explains that an entire drama had played out between the sun and the moon when they were created. At the outset, both the sun and moon shared equal greatness, but the moon argued that a power-sharing arrangement was inappropriate. “Who is the real boss?” the moon wanted to know; only one luminary should truly rule.

In response, G-d shrunk the moon to its lesser state; now, it is a mere reflection of the sun’s greatness, and it has no light of its own. As compensation, G-d also gave the stars, which appear smaller than the moon—so that the moon should feel better that it’s greater than all the stars.

Good or Bad?

Is this jealousy good or bad? Is competition good or bad?

The answer is that it depends on the results. If it propels you to accomplish more in a healthy and balanced way, then it is good, but if it leads you down a rabbit hole of jealousy and hate, then it is obviously bad.

English has two words for this emotion — envy and jealousy. Envy is usually used in good terms. i.e., the person wishes he could achieve as much as the other, and therefore seeks to emulate him, while jealousy is used in a negative way — that a person cannot possibly “fargin” that the other has something which he does not.

But in the end, when Moshiach comes, it seems that we will be rid of both. The Rambam writes that “In that time, there will be no . . . envy or jealousy...” — may it be speedily in our day.