

Parshat Shemini: Dancing our Judaism

A story tells about a man who just moved to a new house, and the first day living in that new place, he looked through the window and found that in the building in front of his house, there was a very strange group of people, moving their bodies, jumping, shaking and moving their lips as they were shouting. He could not understand what was happening so he came closer to the window, curious; trying to realize what was going on with that people. But it was impossible: They were making turns and moving in very funny and strange ways. He quickly concluded that probably those people had mental problems and very worried, thought that that building in front of his house was a psychiatric hospital. But then, without even thinking, he opened his window looking for fresh air, and what happened? He began to hear music. So he realized that the people inside the building were not insane and the building was not a hospital: They were just normal people having fun, dancing and enjoying a party. What for him were just movements without no-sense because he could not hear the music, for the people was their way of celebrating an especial occasion in their lives.

Rabbi Marshal Meyer used to tell this story to describe how some Jews, often judge the way of life of other Jews who want to live a life of Mitzvot, of commandments... a life devoted to fulfill God's precepts, according to way they understand them. Many Jews think that there is no sense in living a life of Mitzvot: Praying three times a day the traditional prayers, eating kosher meat, spending money in buying a lulav or for fixing Mezuzot in the doors of our houses... They think that this is exaggerated, that is close to fundamentalism and that that people are keeping the forms but forgetting the "essence". The people who think that way cannot listen to any music behind those practices. For them they are just empty.

I am sharing with you today this story and this reflection, firstly because the main part of our Parasha, Shemini, is devoted to the laws of Kashrut. The Torah gives us the basic principles of what we can and cannot eat, and a detailed list of animals that are allowed and others who are not. As you may know, the Torah doesn't give any specific explanation about those details: We don't know why the mammals have to have cloven hoofs and be ruminants. We don't know why the chicken is permitted and the stork not. We only know that the purpose of the whole system of kosher laws is about holiness, but we don't understand the rational explanation of every specific regulation, and also we even are not even sure of what holiness is about.

So why to give importance to Kashrut? Why to invest money and to complicate our life with so strange regulations? For those of us who strive to keep Kosher, there are several reasons to do it: We can find meaning if following what we think is God's will, we can think it can help us to live a healthier life, maybe because that discipline in general is important as a way of life, or maybe just because Kashrut is a fundamental pillar of Jewish identity and we want to keep that tradition, not only because of its content, mostly because is an important tradition, and tradition is a value in itself. We enjoy keeping kosher, we are happy with that and when we can do it, we celebrate what we understand is Jewish life... the music we enjoy, as the people dancing in the party.

But then we can find people who are like the man who was looking through the window: They see us doing strange movements, separating dishes, bringing kosher meat from Winnipeg, and eating certain products only with rabbinical supervision. And because they don't listen to our music, they judge us in a negative way: They think that kashrut is an obsolete commandment, that there is no reason to keep it

today because pigs don't transmit diseases anymore... or because there is nothing inherently wrong in mixing meat and milk.

I think our Parsha gives us important lessons:

If you sometimes see yourself looking to other people and you don't quite understand what they are doing, before judging and thinking they are doing something wrong or exaggerated, try to see if there is a window that can be opened and try to ask or to learn about what seems to be so strange. Maybe there is music behind that strange dancing. Maybe that won't be the music you like to dance, maybe that is not your Judaism... but you will be able to understand that they are just enjoying with the Jewish life they want to live.

And in the other hand: If sometimes you feel that someone is looking at you, and you feel yourself judged because of the way you practice your Jewish identity, or if you understand the commandments in a certain way that for others seems to have no sense or to be "too much"... Don't worry about that! Do not feel intimidated or pushed to give up on your beliefs because of the intolerance of other people. Just enjoy the music of your Judaism, and if you can, try helping them about the importance of opening our windows and understanding each other.

The Talmud says: "Elu ve Elu divre Eloheim Chaim" "Both this and that are the words of the living God". There are many ways of being a Jew. We have to listen to each other, so we can live together, with respect and peace.

Shabbat Shalom!