

REEH (DEUTERONOMY 11:26-16:17)

The Emperor's New Tallis

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

ELUL

Next Wednesday, August 11, will be the first day of the Jewish month of Elul. The month of Elul is traditionally a time of introspection and preparation for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. After services every weekday morning, we sound the Shofar as a reminder that Rosh Hashanah is a mere month away. Our prayers get a little longer and become a little more sincere. We use this time to get our spiritual act together in time for the New Year when G-d will decide our fates for the coming year.

“The Emperor’s New Tallis”

Jewish culture is very nice. But Jewish Law is G-d’s word. Sometimes we may be tempted to alter commandments and ceremonies to match our own agendas.

The Torah has other ideas:

The entire word that I command you – be on your guard to do just that; do not add to it and do not subtract from it. (Deuteronomy, 13:1)

Commandments were given to us by the Creator of the World. He knows very well what is best for us. We wouldn’t make our own decisions to “enhance” a prescription from our doctor by adding a few ingredients of our own. Nor would we delete a few ingredients just because we, who are untrained in medicine and pharmacology, decided to tweak the formula. Nor should we use a medication that is not prescribed. “Doctor” knows best.

It was the social event of the year.

The mother-of-the-bride is a Secretary of State and former Senator. The father-of-the-bride is the former leader of the free world. They are probably the second-most powerful couple in America, possibly in the world. It’s about as close to American royalty as you can get (without being a Kennedy!)

There was, of course, a Chuppah. How do you have a Simcha without one? And a framed Ketubah. And a Yarmulke. And a Tallis. And a broken glass.

Oh, there was also a Jewish young man who wanted to get married.

Unfortunately, as far as Torah Law is concerned, he didn't.

[Before I go any further, I want to be clear. I bear no ill will against this couple, and I am not judging them. I'm sure they are both nice people. And if they want to live in a way that is not in keeping with Torah values, that's their business. Rather, I am responding to the notion by some that this wedding was somehow a Jewish event by virtue of various props used at the party.]

The ceremony was conducted by two clerics who are both rather casual about the teachings of their respective religions. Personally if I were a Christian I wouldn't be thrilled about the idea of one of my congregants marrying a fellow who rejects the Christian savior. Let alone a non-believer with a Tallis! The denomination from which the Jewish clergyman -- a chaplain from Yale -- hails "reluctantly" permits their members to officiate at intermarriages, as long as there is no non-Jewish clergy and as long as it doesn't take place on the Sabbath. I guess he cheated.

The Tallis thing is kind of interesting. Our Sages tell us that the Tallis, a four-cornered garment with special fringes on it, serves, in part, to remind us to obey all 613 Commandments. (See "Fringe Benefits".) Including the Commandment to observe the Sabbath. Including the Commandment to keep Kosher. Including the prohibition against marrying out-of-faith.

I think they should have left the Tallis at home.

The Ketubah? A Ketubah is a document, a legal agreement between a Chosson and Kallah that declares, in part, "*...Be my wife ... in accordance to the laws of Jewish men ... as is done with the Daughters of Israel, that are done according to the established rules of our Sages...*"

Daughters of Isreal?? Established rules of our Sages?? What connection could there possibly be between a legitimate Ketubah and the party that happened last Saturday??

Yarmulke? Nothing Jewish there. The Pope also wears a Yarmulke. (I wonder if he was invited.)

In other words, there was nothing Jewish about what happened last week. Nothing at all. Some will point with pride at all the symbolism. I'm not a big believer in empty symbols. (See See "A High Fly Matzah Ball into SHALLOW Center Field".) Some see the inclusion of the very Jewish-looking props as a sign that Judaism will play a large role in their future life together.

Some choose to view the superficially Jewish-looking aspects of this event as proof that we have "made it." Here we are in the open society known as America. We are so accepted in the higher echelons of American society that one of "our own" has been admitted to "Camelot." And he didn't even have to become a Methodist!

A colleague of the Jewish fellow who performed the ceremony said, “The price of our reaffirmation in American society is a high rate of intermarriage. We can’t be embraced and not expect that our young people won’t be marrying with their young people. Unless we are prepared to withdraw into a ghetto, there is no solution.” (Quoted from here.)

Isn’t that sad? Of course there is a solution. It’s called Jewish education!

He continued, “I hope they will make a choice to raise their children in a single religion and tradition and second, as a Jew and rabbi, I hope it will be Judaism...”

America is a free country and this gentleman can use any title he wants. But to me, he doesn’t sound like much of a rabbi. Why in the world should they raise non-Jewish children as Jews? Why confuse the children of a non-Jewish mother and allow them to think that they are Jewish?

What’s that you say, maybe she’ll convert to Judaism? Maybe. If she undergoes a full-fledged, legitimate conversion to Judaism and she and her husband fully observe all the Commandments and raise their children on Kosher food and Kosher values, maybe this story will have a happy ending.

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