

KI SISA (EXODUS 30:11-34:35)

‘Los ANGELES’ (‘City of ANGELS’) or San Francisco?

2004 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

Nobody likes to stand out and look different.

You’ve been invited to a state dinner. Everyone who is *anyone* has been invited. You want to be sure to do everything right. You place your napkin on your lap just as everyone else has. You look around apprehensively to make sure that you use each of the twelve forks and seventeen teaspoons in proper sequence.

You’ve read all the books on proper etiquette. You see to it that you know the proper bow or curtsy and how to address the Ambassador. You’ve memorized the appropriate greeting for the Prime Minister. You are committed to get it right!

It is very important to defer to the protocols of the community you visit. Even angels do it for humans, and humans do it for the angels:

... *He (Abraham) stood by them (three angels who appeared to be men) under the tree, and they ate.*
(Genesis, 18:8)

... *He (Moses) was there (Mt. Sinai/Heaven) with G-d for forty days and forty nights. He ate no bread and drank no water.* (Exodus, 34:28)

Based upon the above two verses, the Talmud (Bava Metzia, 86b) advises us to respect local custom. Humans require food for sustenance. Angels, who are spiritual beings, do not. Yet, the angels, out of respect for Abraham, honored him by accepting his offer of food, while Moses had to adhere to the angelic way of life by engaging in a forty-day fast.

WHOSE NEIGHBORHOOD DO YOU LIVE IN?

We just read that one should follow the customs that are acceptable in the locale in which he finds himself. Does this mean that we should have one set of values in Jerusalem, Monsey and Boro Park, and a different set of values in San Francisco, New Paltz, and Massachusetts?!

Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter (“Elder”) of Slobodka, points out, based upon several verses, exactly Whose neighborhood we occupy:

G-d went before them ... to guide them along the way... (Ibid, 13:21) ... You, the ones who remain attached to G-d are all alive today. (Deuteronomy, 4:4) ... I have set G-d in front of me at all times... (Psalms, 16:8)

So it seems that we find ourselves in G-d’s presence at all times. It therefore behooves us, in deference to “local custom,” to conduct ourselves in a G-dly fashion. And what exactly does that entail?

Rabbi Finkel cites the Talmud’s (Shabbos, 133b) reference to a verse from this week’s Torah Portion.

Moses wanted to know what G-d is “all about.” G-d responded with the “Thirteen Attributes:”

G-d revealed Himself in a cloud...and (Moses) called out in G-d’s Name...G-d passed before him and proclaimed, “G-d, G-d, a merciful and kind G-d, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness and truth; He remembers kindness for thousands (of generations), forgiving sin, rebellion and error, and cleanses...” (Exodus, 34:5-7)

Abba Shaul in the Talmud tells us that “... just as G-d is kind, you too should be kind. Just as G-d is merciful, you too should be merciful...”

Just as G-d loves honesty, brotherhood, and morality, so should we. Just as G-d abhors deceit, hatred, and perversion (of ALL kinds), so should we.

You and I are guests in G-d’s home. Just imagine for a moment -- How different would the world be if we all kept that one thought in mind at all times?

We can’t change the world. We can, however, change ourselves. And that, in time, can change the world as well.

Have a great Shabbos.

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