

Q&A - Strengthening our South African community - May 2011 - "Jewish Life" magazine

Chief we all know Shavuot is the time of the giving of the Torah ? but what else can we get from it that has relevance for our lives today?

Of course, one of the major themes of the day is that it is the day 3323 years ago that we received the Torah, Hashem's blueprint for our lives ? how we have to live, who we are, and what are purpose is in the world. But the second major theme of Shavuot is interesting, because it is unity.

Where do we see this?

It says that at Mount Sinai, when we received the Torah, was the one moment in Jewish history where everybody was unified. The expression that the sages of the Talmud use here is ?one person with one heart?. It says ?when they encamped at Mount Sinai?, and the word ?encamped? is in the singular even though there were many people ? because they were united as one.

Why is this so relevant?

One of the things that makes South African Jews so special is that we are a community that places great importance in and lives by the values of respect for others and a real sense of community. And that is something that we can be proud of and grateful for. And it is very important for us to keep strengthening that ?working together and learning together, sharing and gaining strength from one another.

Can we as a community be an example of unity despite our differences?

Unity does not mean uniformity. Rather, it means that we are not fragmented, that we feel part of a community. One can't say that every single South African Jew feels that, but we are talking about the majority and I think that the vast majority do feel a sense of belonging to the broader South African Jewish community and share that as a value, drawing strength from the fact that we are together as one community.

But why is community so important?

There is a great value in having a world of peace and not divisiveness, antagonism and hatred. So when there is a sense of community that comes with unity, tolerance, and respect, it promotes these same positive forces in the world. And it also gives strength. As an individual, we stand alone in the world. As a community, we stand together with others. And again, I think that is one of the most remarkable things about the South African Jewish community ? we have such outstanding community organisations, and people help each other in all spheres of life. And that is largely what makes our lives here so special- that we are involved in a supportive, vibrant and dynamic community.

But why is this specific to Shavuot other than that the whole nation was there?

The Torah itself was given to us by G-d not as individuals alone, but as a people. G-d gave it to the nation. And the fact that He did so when the people were unified, the Maharal explains, is because in a sense, that is part of the Torah's identity. If the people were fragmented and divided then the Torah would have been received as individuals and not as a nation.

How can we keep what you call this ?remarkable SA community? up?

It needs constant work. It is not something that we should take for granted. The Maharal also says that conflict is a natural state, and, quoting from the Mishna, he says you have to pursue peace. Because peace is elusive. If you look around the Jewish world, one cohesive Jewish community working together and supporting one another is not the norm. The norm is for there to be many communities, divided amongst themselves. So we have a very special legacy that we have inherited from the generations of Jews that came before us, and we need to build on that legacy in order to keep it alive, and even expand it.

Maintaining it is one thing ? how would we go about ?expanding? it?

There are two projects coming up now which I have been involved in and which promote the values of Sinai, that is the values of unity around Torah ideals. The one is Generation Sinai, which will take place please G-d on the 3rd of June, the Friday morning before Shavuot, and because it is also Rosh Chodesh, it actually marks the anniversary of the day the Jews arrived at Mount Sinai.

What is it about?

All Jewish day schools around the country will, at the same time, participate. Parents and children will learn a designated text from the Talmud that will be the same for everyone, at different levels depending on the different ages and the different schools. This will create a tremendous amount of positive energy in communal unity, but also promote the values of Sinai and the unity between generations.

Why parents and children though?

People always talk about the ?generation gap?, but the Torah has a tremendous power to bring generations together. When parents and children sit around and learn together, it is very powerful and unifying. It also brings the light and inspiration of Hashem?s Torah into the families of our community.

What is the second project you mentioned?

The second project is the ?Sinai Indaba?. This will be a unified, communal day of Torah learning, where all the different segments of the community will please G-d gather, on the 19th June in JHB and 20th June in CT, to hear top international and local speakers, and learn Torah together.

Why are both of these projects structured around learning ? is that intrinsically connected to the idea of unity?

Jewish unity is not just based on ethnicity. We were born as a nation at Mount Sinai, and it is the values we go there that define who we are. And the starting point of finding those values and making them a part of our lives is to learn about them. That?s why the Talmud says that the study of Torah leads to action, which means that is the great engine of Judaism. And the entire month of Sivan (June), the month of the giving of the Torah, will please G-d be one of tremendous Torah learning. Because if you add to the Sinai projects all the ?Tikkun Leil? programs, the all-night learning on Shavuot, which will be going on across the community, there will be thousands of people learning, and this is a powerful example of Jewish unity around Torah values, and keeping the special South African legacy of unity alive and building on it.