

Sparks

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Purim: Celebrating Oneness and Love

A rabbi gets a new position in a synagogue. It is his first day on the job, and the congregation gets to the point in the prayer where they recite the *Shema*, “Hear Israel, G-d our G-d is one.” At that moment half of the congregation stands up and starts singing the *Shema*, while the other half stays seated. Those standing start screaming at the ones sitting down, “Stand up, stand up, it’s the *Shema*!” The ones sitting down say, “Oh, you’re crazy! Sit down, sit down, it’s the *Shema*!” The rabbi had never seen anything like this.

The next day the same thing happens. The ones that got up start yelling at the ones sitting down, the ones sitting down start yelling at the ones standing up. The rabbi goes over to one of the members and says, “I don’t know what to do. I mean, I’ve never seen anything like this. What is the tradition of the synagogue?”

“I don’t know,” the man says. “I’m a new member here.”

“Is there a founding member that we could just ask what is the tradition?” the rabbi asked. “Does this congregation stand when they say the *Shema*, or do they sit?”

“Well, there is one last founding member,” the man offers, “and he’s in an old folks’ home. We can go ask him.”

So they arrange a visit to Mr. Schwartz, the last founding member. The rabbi takes along a delegate of the ones who sit and a delegate of the ones who stand.

The one that sits says, “Mr. Schwartz is it not true that the tradition of the synagogue is that when we recite the *Shema* we sit?”

Mr. Schwartz says, “No, that is not our tradition.”

So the one standing says, “Aha, so then indeed, Mr. Schwartz is it not true that the tradition is that we stand when we say the *Shema*?”

Mr. Schwartz looks at him and says, “No, that’s not our tradition either.”

So the rabbi says, “Mr. Schwartz, I’m a new rabbi here, please, you must help us. Every single day the ones that stand up yell at the ones sitting down, and the ones sitting down yell at the ones standing up.”

Mr. Schwartz, with a smile, replies, “That was our tradition!”

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When Haman approached the king to destroy the Jewish people, he inadvertently revealed the secret of the Jewish people. He said, "You know, King, there is one people who are scattered and spread out among the whole empire, and we can destroy them." He mistakenly thought that because we are scattered and diversified, we could be annihilated. However, he unconsciously expressed precisely the reason why he will not succeed. Unknowingly, Haman described the very reason for the miraculous survival of the Jewish people. We may be scattered and diversified, yet we are still one people. The oneness of the Jewish people reflects the transcendental oneness of G-d—the essence of love. G-d’s oneness can include multiplicity and diversity while mysteriously remaining one and so too the oneness of the Jewish people.

The Jewish people are very diverse. We are all very different. We all have strong opinions. You have probably heard the famous quip, "If you have two Jews, you have three opinions." And yet we are one.

What other nation in the world has a book of disputes, like our Talmud, that they consider holy? How can there be holiness in disputes? How can people have opposite opinions and still remain part of one people?

The oneness of the Jewish people is not sameness. Our oneness reflects G-d’s oneness, which includes multiplicity and even encompasses opposites. On Purim, we celebrate G-d’s oneness, the all-inclusive power of love, and we celebrate our oneness, by showing love to our fellow Jews with gifts of food to each other and charity to the poor.

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