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The "Kululu"

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Eikev

The "Kululu"

Good Shabbos!

The story is told that in Israel, a young man and woman got engaged. But the guy was Ashkenazi and his fiancé was Sephardi.

A few weeks before the wedding, the guy gets a panicked phone call from his bride that she must speak to him about something very important. He felt very stressed. Maybe there's a problem with the engagement? Who knows what it could be already? So he quickly ran over to meet with her.

When he got there, she was sitting there with a serious face. She asked him if he had come with an open mind—if he was prepared to hear unusual things.

Now he felt even more stressed.

So she began saying how there is a tradition that is very important to her grandmother and therefore, she wants to have it at their wedding. He asked her, "What's this tradition that's so important to your grandmother?"

"Kululu."

"Kululu?!" asked the groom.

"Kululu," she answered him.

What's kululu? So I'll tell you.

In many Sephardic communities, they have the custom that when there is a joyous occasion, and especially when there's a wedding, the women make certain sounds that most of us in the West neither have ever heard nor know how to do. These are supposed to express joy and happiness.

In English, it's called ululation [pronounced UHL-you-LAY-shuhn], or trilling. It's basically the syllable "loo," or "lee," or similar sounds, repeated quickly over and over, and usually in a pretty high pitch. The North African Sephardim call them "tzahaloolim."

One explanation for the custom is that when there is a joyous lifecycle occasion like a wedding, demons and angels of destruction try to interfere—so the ululation is supposed to shoo them away, as if to say, “Get out of here! Let there be only gladness and light!”

If you’re not prepared for it, it can be pretty startling. Some people say that it doesn’t just scare away demons but also everyone else, too.

So when our Ashkenazic groom grasped what she was saying, he sharply told his fiancé that in no way was he prepared to let such sounds be heard at his wedding. “What are we, Arabs?!” he asked her. “The next thing I know, you’ll be asking me to slaughter a sheep at the wedding!”

But she argued, “This is my grandmother’s tradition, and it’s very important to her.”

“If so,” countered the groom, “Let’s have my Hungarian grandmother come and throw goulash on all the guests and sing songs in Hungarian!”

“By all means,” said the bride. “It doesn’t make a difference to me. If your grandmother wants to do that - with pleasure!”

But the groom was still not at all prepared to hear of such things; obviously, the disagreement heated up and she screamed at him that he’s a racist.

A few days went by, and he suggested to her that he would go himself to talk to the grandmother and try to convince her to let go of the idea.

So he came to the grandmother’s house and started talking to her about the wedding. “Grandma,” he said to her, “We’re very happy that you’ll be coming to join us at our wedding. But I want to speak to you about something that’s very important to me.”

By now the grandmother was sitting on pins and needles waiting to hear what her granddaughter’s fiancé would say to her—and then, the young man had the nerve to utter the one key word from his mouth: He says to her, “I want to talk about the kululu.”

But when Grandma heard this, she got up from the table and declared, “Tell your bride that I am not coming to the wedding!” He tried to say, “Let’s discuss this! Let’s try to understand each other!” But Grandma was already in the other room.

A few days later, he heard that Grandma was not feeling well: She was laid up in bed, and all because of the kululu—which is the last thing a groom needs a few days before his wedding. Now he would be blamed for the bride's grandmother not coming to the wedding.

So he immediately went with his bride to visit Grandma again. This time, he sat by her bed and begged her, "Grandma, please come to the wedding. It really doesn't matter. Do as many kululus as you want—just come!"

And so Grandma suddenly started feeling better.

She then said that she wanted to do ten kululus at the chuppah,. The groom begged: "Let's settle on five." Grandma agreed.

A few days later, at the wedding, the groom told all his friends that "her" grandmother would be making five bizarre noises under the wedding canopy—and that when she made the first noise, everyone should count, "One!" out loud, then "Two!" "Three!" and so on.

So sure enough, as soon as the ceremony concluded and Grandma started ululating, the guys shouted out, "One! Two! Three!"

But by the time they got to "Three!" they realized that the kululus actually were a lot of fun and made everything really happy.

So the newlywed groom turns to her and said, "Go ahead, Grandma! Do more! Go all the way to ten!"

And that, of course, brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In the Parshah of Eikev, the Torah almost immediately begins with the verse, "Boruch tihiye mikol ha'amim" (Devarim 7:14).

The literal meaning is that the Nation of Israel will be more blessed than all the other nations. But there is another meaning quoted in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Tractate Brachos 8), which reads: "If a non-Jew blesses you, answer 'Amen!' after him, for it is written, 'You shall be blessed from all the nations.' "

What that means is that the nations of the world will bless us—that they will value the Jewish Nation and therefore they will bless us. And this is a special blessing with which G-d blessed the Jewish Nation.

Now there were generations in which the world did not exactly bless us, and perhaps even worse than that. But in our generation, for example, and especially in the United States, it often occurs that non-Jews express their esteem of the Jewish Nation.

But there is even a third meaning mentioned in Chasidic philosophy: "Blessing will be drawn down to you by refining all the nations." This means that from the very nations themselves shall come forth blessing for the Jewish Nation—that there are sparks of spirituality scattered and lost among the nations, and it is incumbent upon us to lift them up and to refine them.

What does this mean? Well, it means converts, for starters. There are converts who came to the Jewish Nation from all the other nations and who brought blessing to the Jewish Nation. For example, the great Rabbi Akiva was the son of converts, and he became one of the greatest giants of leadership that ever rose in the Jewish Nation.

Other Jews who were converts or sons of converts were the Sages Rabbi Meir, Shmaya and Avtalyon. There was also the famous convert Unkelus, the nephew of the great Roman emperor Hadrian, who went on to translate the Torah to Aramaic.

All of these came from among the nations, and they brought very great blessing to the Jewish Nation.

And this is true not just with regards to people but also to many other things—like music, for example. There are many songs and melodies that were composed by non-Jews but were "converted" by Chasidic groups and elevated them to spirituality.

In 1973, a few days after the Yom Kippur War broke out, in the middle of the holiday of Simchas Torah, the Rebbe suddenly started to sing the melody of "La Marseillaise," the national anthem of France, but to words from the prayer book: "Ha'aderes V'Haemunah."

At that time, France did not have a good diplomatic relationship with Israel, and so the Rebbe expressed that by taking the anthem of that country and bringing it up to holiness and singing it like a Jewish victory song, we were thus taking from them the power to oppose Israel. And indeed, a short period after that, the French government changed, and so did France's relationship with Israel...

Not too long ago, U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman wrote a book in which he sang the praises of Shabbos. But in the book, he mentions that the general custom of Western society at large of husbands bringing their wives flowers turned into Jewish custom in the last generation, with Jewish men bringing their wives flowers in honor of Shabbos. Even the Rebbe mentions this custom in one of his talks, noting that “It is a Jewish custom in many places to beautify the home with flowers in honor of Shabbos and Yom Tov.”

And we find the same thing with clothing too. Everyone knows that religious Jews, or at least religious Jewish men, tend to wear black, or at least dark colors, to the point that they are sometimes associated with this color.

But it wasn't always that way: Moshe Rabbeinu didn't wear black clothing and neither did Rabbi Akiva. On the contrary—in Talmudic times, wearing black was considered very strange.

The Talmud tells us about a Sage named Rabbi Eliezer Zeira who was strolling through the marketplaces of Naharda wearing dark clothes when members of the community leader's household bumped into him and asked him why he was suddenly wearing black. So he told them that he was in mourning the destruction of Jerusalem—but they did not like that answer.

Not only that, but up to 150 years ago, Chasidim actually wore white on Shabbos—black clothes were by non-Jews in Germany and for whatever reason, the Jews “converted” this style of dress and turned it into a Chasidic trademark.

Now to digress a bit, everyone celebrates their birthday—and in the Torah, the only person about whom a birthday celebration is mentioned is the Pharaoh. There is no other story about any Jew celebrating his or her birthday in the Torah. Because of this, there are some Jews who are opposed to the cultural custom of celebrating one's birthday, arguing that it is historically not a Jewish custom.

But over 25 years ago, the Rebbe came out with a “Birthday Campaign” to encourage people to celebrate their birthdays in a Jewish way. The Rebbe explained that a birthday is one's personal Rosh Hashanah.

And so, just like at the New Year, people take on good resolutions to carry out every day of the new year, like losing weight, so too on a person's birthday should a person take on good resolutions of adding something to their Jewish repertoire—to move forward and at least do one thing more than he or she did last year, and to throw a party, invite everyone and publicly declare whichever mitzvah he or she resolved to add in the new

year. This is so all your friends can “remind” you throughout the year of your resolution, because friends never forget.

And that brings us back to the beginning of our talk.

The origin of the “kululu” is probably not Jewish. But after so many years of it bringing happiness to Jews, it certainly has already become part of the tradition.

So as it turns out, the Torah is right: We truly are blessed by the good things that come to us from the nations.

Let us make full usage of those things the Torah allows us to use, and take full advantage of the good things around us from the rest of the world.

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