

An Interfaith Salad Bar for Thanksgiving?

Most of us will probably be sitting down to some kind of a Thanksgiving celebration later this week. There are some in the Orthodox community who question the idea of observing a “non-Jewish” holiday such as this. I would like to learn with you a *pasuk* of Chumash along with a piece of *agadeta*, in an attempt to elucidate this question.

Bereshit 25:23 states: And God said to her (Rivka) – two *goyim*/peoples are in your womb and two nations from your loins will separate....

The Gemara in Avoda Zara 11 teaches:

Said R. Yehuda in the name of Rav: Do not read *goyim*/peoples but *geyim*/proud ones. These are Antinonus and Rebbi, from whose table never ceased lettuce, nor gourds, nor radishes, neither in the summer nor the winter.

Who were these people? And why should we care if they had a great salad bar all year?

Chazal understood Esav, one of the twins in the *pasuk*, as the ancestor of Rome (either physically or culturally). It is not an historical stretch to note that Esav, via Rome, gave birth to the early Church which in turn begat Western Culture. And Yaakov, the other twin, is of course our ancestor. Much of our history is a struggle between these two value systems, which reaches back to the struggle in Rivka’s womb.

Rebbi was the editor of the Mishna, the attempt to systematically write down the Oral Torah which was being forgotten due to Roman persecution! Antinonus was probably a high Roman official, possibly connected to the Caesars. And Chazal here tell us they had a familiar and positive relationship. We also know that Rabbinic Literature is filled with examples of the ongoing struggle and persecution of our people by the Romans. But the vegetables may imply that there were also fruitful economic and personal relationships – good for the Romans and good for the Jews. Though most of our history was filled with terrible and pain-filled interactions, these two descendants of Rivka had positive interactions that enriched the world.

The *drash* of *geyim*/proud ones suggest that we can be proud of who we are in our interaction with the Western World. When we go out into the workplace, the campus, or at times of leisure, we can still be proud of our observance of Halacha and Mitzvot as well as our study of Torah. We can take advantage of the freedoms offered to us in this blessed land. We can positively interact with our non-Jewish neighbors and friends without giving up our Torah. When a proud non-Jewish “Antinonus” comes to us, we can interact in an atmosphere of mutuality, friendship and respect. We can share our “vegetables” as we better humanity together.

For a Jew, every day should be Thanksgiving. We should be filled with gratitude to Hashem for our lives and our community here all year round. But it seems to me that Thanksgiving is a secular holiday that we can share with our neighbors, as long as we retain our pride as Jews in who we are and what we do. We are living in a time of “vegetables,” of relative prosperity (even with the rotten economy, it is still better than it was for most of our history). Let us take this week as an opportunity to join the rest of the country in thanking the One who makes these blessings possible. Even if you do not have a salad bar, Thanksgiving is a holiday worth observing.

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