

Shabbat Parashat Yitro JEWISH Valentine's Day?

This week, the entire Jewish community relives the powerful experience of receiving the revelation of Torah at Mount Sinai through the reading of this week's *parasha*/Torah portion. As did the Israelites approximately three thousand two hundred and fifty years ago, those of us who will be in synagogue for the Torah reading on Shabbat morning will rise and listen to the words of the *Aseret Hadib'rot*/The Ten Commandments chanted aloud, these serving as the very beginning of the teaching of Torah to our people. As the Rabbis have taught throughout the generations, the gift of the Torah to the Jewish people was and is given as an expression of God's love. It is a sign not only of the *mitzvot* that God expects us to observe, but also is an explanation of the commitments for which God is responsible. Put simply, the Torah is like the marriage contract between God and our people. In turn, it is our responsibility to share the teachings of Torah with all other nations in order to "spread the love" throughout the world.

This coming week, we will cross paths with the date of February 14th, celebrated as "Valentine's Day" in the secular world. It is a day that celebrates romantic love and offers people the often rare opportunity to take pause and celebrate their love. At its origins, this day commemorated the Christian St. Valentine who was martyred by the Romans on this date for assisting Christians who were being persecuted by the Roman Empire. The eventual connections that were made between this date and romantic pursuits are very unclear and seem not to date any earlier than Geoffrey Chaucer in the 14th century and are, perhaps, as late in origin as the 18th century. However, for the Jewish community, celebrating romantic love goes at least as far back as two thousand years - to the time of the Mishna, where we find the following teaching:

"There were no greater holidays for Israel than Tu B'Av and Yom Kippur, for on them the girls of Jerusalem used to go out in borrowed white dresses ... and dance in the vineyards. What would they say? 'Young man, lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself...' " (Mishna Ta'anit 4:8)

On the Jewish date of the 15th of Av and on Yom Kippur, single men and women would go out and "make their matches." The white dresses in which all the young women dressed themselves "evened the playing field" among them and forced the young men to see beyond superficial characteristics and choose a woman with whom he would have a deeper connection. These two days, for lack of a better term, were Jewish "Valentine's Days." Over time, and as the Jewish people were forced to move out of the Land of Israel and be more spread out around the world, Yom Kippur lost its place as a Jewish "Love Day." However, until today Tu B'Av remains a day of celebration of love, especially in Israel where it is a popular date for weddings.

As we go into Shabbat this week, love is certainly in the air. However, for the Jewish community around the world, it is not the love of Valentine's Day. Rather, it is the spirit of the love shared between God and the Jewish people, which was and is consummated with the giving and receiving of Torah. It is in this week's *parasha*, *parashat Yitro*, where the vows of Torah began to be exchanged under the silhouette of Mount Sinai, a metaphorical *huppah*/Jewish wedding canopy shared by God and God's people.

The love that it shared between two loving partners should be something that is marked, respected, and celebrated every day. However, if we, as Jews, are looking for a particular date on the calendar to mark this love, then I encourage all of us to do so on the date on which it has been customary for us to do so for upwards of two thousand years, the 15th of Av, which this year will fall on Thursday night and Friday, August 2nd-3rd, 2012. What could be better than a romantic evening shared in the Vancouver summertime!

Shabbat Shalom!