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BORDERS

A POPULAR THEME IS THE QUEST TO TRAVERSE BORDERS, TO JOIN that which was previously separate, to achieve unity between individuals and nations. This sounds like a highly commendable goal. The Jewish messianic ideal expresses a grand vision of world unity and peace.

However, a complementary issue is the concern when any species of life is seen to be threatened with extinction. There is a desire to care for the ecological balance of the world. This often means protecting differentness. On the human front too, society seeks to protect the borders of the individual, so that he or she should not feel their identity has been suppressed or abused.

The Sedra¹ presents several teachings about protecting borders and preserving distinctions. Thus we learn that Jewish law forbids planting mixed seeds. A vineyard cannot be sown with wheat, and different vegetable crops should be kept separate. Similarly, the distinctiveness of the different species of animals should be preserved. One should not try to mate animals from different species, nor even make them work together: “do not plough with an ox and a donkey together”.

The Sages explain that the different varieties of plant and animal species each have their own individual significance and role in existence. G-d created the world in such a way that it embodies “differentness” between wheat and barley, between an ox and a donkey. The Jew must be wary of tampering with this differentness.

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Yet another law forbids mixing wool and linen². This is called Shaatnez. When buying clothes, one looks at the label and has the garment specially checked to ensure that there is no mixture of these two different fibres. They are described by the Sages as relating to opposite spiritual forces which cannot usually be joined.

Here we come to an intriguing concept. The Sages explain³ that in certain kinds of *sacred* clothing, such as the ritual fringes (Tzitzit) and the garments of the Priests in the Temple, Shaatnez is permitted. Why is Shaatnez sometimes permitted, but never mixed seeds or mixed mating of animals?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that when two different or opposite forces come together in the ordinary world, the effect is conflict. By contrast, in the sanctity of the Temple or of a Divine Command, joining opposites leads not to conflict but harmony. The conflict is stilled because of the sense of the presence of the Divine.

In the case of mixed seeds or mating of animals, the joining of opposites is in such a way that each loses its own nature and breaks down the individuality of the other. Even in the Temple this remains forbidden. However, in the case of wool and linen, Shaatnez, the separate individuality of the wool or linen fibres is not destroyed. It connects with its opposite in a way which in ordinary life could lead to a conflict of spiritual forces, but when this is part of the Mitzva of the fringes, or of the Priestly garments in the Temple, the spiritual forces governing wool and linen join together in peace⁴.

This provides a key to the structure of the universe. There are different species and forces, whose individual natures are all part of a spiritual totality. Proper and healthy preservation of the differentness of each leads to the wholesome unity of all. Then, ultimately, in the time of the Messiah the atmosphere of the Presence of the Divine will fill the world with holiness. Certain spiritual opposites will join, and yet then too there will be borders. Through healthy differentness and even singularity, there will be harmony.

1. Deut.21:10-25:19. 2. See Deut. 22:9-11. 3. Talmud Yebamot 4a, commenting on the fact that the command to wear fringes (22:12) immediately follows the prohibition on Shaatnez. This permission to wear Shaatnez in the fringes does not apply nowadays, because we do not have the 'blue thread'. 4. See *Likkutei Sichot*, vol.29, pp. 126-9.

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SEDRA KI TETZE

EXPRESSING LOVE

“Oh Debbi, look at this coat - isn’t it beautiful?” Leah lifted up a soft wool coat in a deep shade of red from the rack and showed it to her sister. The two had been taken shopping by their mother for new winter coats - (“I know it’s still the summer, but I won’t have time later to take you,” she had said) - and were now both enjoying browsing through the racks of coats and jackets.

“That’s really nice,” Debbi said, admiring her sister’s choice. “I can’t decide between this green one or the black with the zipper. What do you think?”

“The green one is nicer. Let’s ask Mummy though - she might not like any of them” Leah suggested. They found their mother nearby and showed her their selection.

“What nice coats! Let me just see what they’re made of” she said, looking at the labels. “Oh Debbi, I’m afraid you can’t get this green one - it’s a woollen coat and I see it’s also got some linen mixed into it. That means it’s Shaatnez.”

“Shaatnez? What’s that?” Leah asked.

“Shaatnez is a Mitzvah in the Torah that is actually mentioned in this week’s Sedra, Ki Tetze. It’s the

command not to wear in one garment a mixture of wool and linen. That's just what this coat is made from so therefore, we can't wear it."

"That's a really funny Mitzvah," Debbi said. "It doesn't make sense".

"That's not a nice thing to say about a Mitzvah." Leah said.

"Well, most Mitzvot make sense - like not stealing or being jealous or telling tales - those all make sense to me, and a lot of people who don't keep the Torah also don't do those things. But this idea of wool and linen not being together doesn't really seem to have a reason. No one will get hurt if I wear this coat."

"That's a very good point you're making. Debbi" her mother said. "In fact, Shaatnez is one of a type of Mitzvot called Chukim - statutes, which are Mitzvot that don't apparently have a good reason, but we do them because they are a commandment from G-d, and what He says, we do".

"You mean we don't just do them because they make sense to us, we do them because G-d said we should" said Leah.

"Right And by doing these Mitzvot we show how dedicated we are to G-d, and how much we love Him".

Debbi was quiet for a minute. "When you come to think of it, that's a really nice way of doing Mitzvot," she said. Then she added, smiling, "Okay let me get the black coat. I like that zip on it anyway."

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