

The Redemptive Power of Eruvin

The Ba'al Shem Tov

The Ba'al Shem Tov (cited in Mikveh Mayim 3:6 and elsewhere) is cited as interpreting the Pasuk in Chabbakuk 3:12 (and see Metzudot David ad. loc.) “בְּזָאָם, תִּצְעַד-אֶרֶץ, Bezaam (Bet, Zayin, Ayin, Mem) Hashem will remove the enemies of the Jews from Eretz Yisrael.” The Ba'al Shem teaches that Za'am is an acronym: Zayin=Zevicha (ritual slaughtering, i.e. Kashrut), Ayin=Eirubin, and Mem=Mikva. In other words, scrupulous observance of the Halachot of communal Kashrut, Eirubin, and Mikvaot will bring the removal of the enemies of Am Yisrael from Eretz Yisrael.

We can understand why Mikvah and Zevicha is included in this list. Mikveh of course serves as the core of Tahara, purity in Jewish life. Zevicha is an expression of Kedusha/holiness, as the Rambam includes Hilchot Shechita in the Sefer Kedusha section of his Mishneh Torah. Our observance of Shechita and all the other Kashrut laws certainly elevates an animalistic existence to a redeemed and dignified life. How, though, does Eruvin bring about a redemption? Is not Eruvin a mere convenience that permits carrying beyond where we otherwise would have been forbidden to carry?

Establishing Firm Boundaries

Recently someone called an hour before Shabbat saying that he discovered that the hotel in which he was staying for Shabbat is located a few feet outside the Eruv. He wondered whether there is some allowance to carry a few feet beyond the Eruv. After advising him to consult the rabbi for the exact boundaries, I informed him that if hotel lies beyond the Eruv he may not carry beyond the boundary line. While regarding Eruv Techumin (at least in the time of the Mishna according to Rabi Shimon; Eruvin 4:11) we might presume a fifteen Amah extension, Eruv boundaries are absolute.

This teaches us a lesson of profound importance. A major part of Torah life is establishing boundaries. Boundaries between property, neighbors, males and females, parents and children are examples of essential hallmarks of proper and

appropriate behavior. Indeed, Tehillim (104:9) states that Hashem establishes boundaries which if not observed will destroy the world.

Essential to the world's creation is Hashem setting ironclad boundaries between day and night, land and sea and even wild animals and humankind (see Rashi to Breishit 9:2 s.v. V'Chitechem). If we fail to restrain ourselves and live within the boundaries set by Hashem we risk His unleashing the boundaries He set for the world, thereby enveloping the world in chaos. Indeed Rashi to Breishit 6:13 states כל מקום שאתה מוצא זנות ועבודה זרה, אנדרלמוסיא באה לעולם והורגת טובים ורעים, promiscuity causes the unleashing of pandemonium resulting in the killing both the good and the bad.

On the other hand, the disaster of Bilaam's curse is averted due to that evil man noting how we lived "each tribe dwelling by itself, not intermingling [with other tribes], and he saw that the openings of their tents did not face each other, so that they should not peer into each other's tents" (Rashi to Bemidbar 24:2 citing Bava Batra 60a). Our respecting each other's boundaries staved off the terrible potential effect of Bilaam's evil speech.

The establishing of the Eruv boundary and its weekly inspection, upkeep and Shabbat observance reminds and reaffirms the notion of an ironclad boundary. The Eruv creates a firm boundary to which we may carry but beyond which we cannot. Before Shabbat, visitors to a community often search for the Eruv boundaries to see whether they may carry on Shabbat. Eruvin are a positive reminder of the essential role healthy boundaries have in our lives.

In this manner Eruvin play a redemptive role and help stave off pandemonium. Eruvin help inculcate the notion of inviolable boundaries, which an indispensable aspect of healthy and proper Torah living.

Reaching Beyond our Limitations

Each Tefillah begins with the phrase from the Pasuk (Tehillim 51:17) Hashem Safatia Tiftach, Hashem open my lips. Ramban interprets Safah as also referring to Sefat HaNahar, the edge of a river. According to Ramban, we are also

asking Hashem to free us from our limitations and allow us to do and accomplish far more than our innate abilities.

This idea is very much expressed by our Eruvin. An Eruv extends our boundaries beyond which they are “naturally” set. Our homes are our natural boundary but the Eruv frees us to extend beyond. The redemptive and protective expression of the Eruv lies in its expression of the notion of freeing ourselves from our natural limitations.

Conclusion

Eruv helps penetrate into our consciousness Sefer Tehillim's (34:15) expression of the basic moral building blocks of life – Sur Mei'r Va'Aseh Tov, avoid bad and do good. Respecting boundaries is key to averting the bad and reaching beyond our limitations allows us to accomplish the good.

Far from being a clever mechanism to permit our carrying throughout our community on Shabbat, the Eruv expresses deep ideas that in the view of the Ba'al Shem Tov can even bring about protection and redemption. The community's Eruv therefore should not simply be viewed as a convenience item but rather an institution whose deep ideas are to be contemplated deeply in a manner that elevates and ennobles a life rich with content and meaning.