

A Relish for Eruvin – Community, Continuity, Eternity and the Occasional Caress from Hashem

A Relish for Avodat Hashem

When taking my older children to visit the celebrated American Revolutionary War site Valley Forge, the guide taught us the secret of the success of the young American army's famous German military adviser Von Steuben. She said that Von Steuben succeeded in instilling a relish for soldiering among the American soldiers. This in great part explains why the outgunned and outmanned fledgling American army was ultimately able to prevail over the mighty British forces in the American Revolution.

The Torah long ago recognizes that this indeed is a very potent strategy. One certainly performs far better when one is blessed with a relish for his work. It is for this reason we pray each day to Hashem that He sweeten the words of Torah in our mouths and in the mouths of our children and future posterity (“V’Ha’arev Na Et Divre Toratecha B’Finu” etc). This also explains why we recite the Pasuk in Tehillim (100:2) urging us “Ivdu Et Hashem B’Simcha”, serve Hashem with joy. This also explains why Hashem holds us accountable “Tachat Asher Lo Avadta Et Hashem Elokecha B’Simcha”, for not serving Him with joy. If we fail to serve Hashem with joy our performance will be abysmal.

A Relish for Eruvin

A community Eruv requires great vigilance, care and upkeep. The way to insure the community maintains the Eruv is to try to instill, as Von Steuben did, a relish for the sacred task. As such, competent Eruv advisors try to make their interactions with the communities they serve highly interactive, collaborative and enjoyable. A high compliment is when the Eruv advisor is told that he makes Eruv inspection fun and enjoyable.

It is important that those involved in the Eruv also find it challenging and meaningful – this will maintain their enthusiasm for the holy work. Eruv maintenance is inherently challenging. We seek to set forth why it is deeply meaningful.

Helping the Jewish Community

The deep satisfaction one derives from the hard work invested working on an Eruv begins with the sense of fulfillment one receives when working for the community. Hillel famously remarks (Avot 1:14) “Keshe’ani L’Atzmi Mah Ani” if I am for myself alone, what am I. Healthy minded people instinctively seek to be part of something bigger than themselves. This drive can be channeled into meaningless sense of involvement in a larger project, such as a sports team and league. Alternatively, this desire can be channeled into a constructive community project such as devoting time, energy and talent to the creation and maintenance of an Eruv.

Continuity

However, the following story illustrates that an even greater level of satisfaction that can be derived from Eruv work.

When I visited my cousin Yehuda Brandriss for a Shabbat in Modi’in, Israel he took me to a site he knew I would love. He took me to an ancient Mikveh unearthed at the outskirts of modern-day Modi’in. When I looked at the site shivers ran down my spine. The design of the Mikveh from two thousand years ago matches exactly the Mikva’ot we create today. The immersion pool stands side by side to the pool of rainwater with a hole in the intervening wall connecting the two pools. What a stark and stunning example of Jewish continuity!

Although we have not unearthed ancient examples of an Eruv, the Gemara (Eruvin 11a) describes an Eruv where an individual planted four poles at the corner of a valley and stretched a vine from one pole to the other until he encompassed the area with Tzurot HaPetach (Halachic doorframes). The rabbis of the Talmud approved these as valid Halachic structures. Rav Mordechai Willig derives from the image of a vine serving as the top post that the top post need not be perfectly straight but can meander a bit (similar to a vine) and still be deemed kosher.

In creating a blueprint for community Eruvin I instruct the people involved in the project to bear the image of the Talmudic Eruv in mind as we try to apply

the same standard in the Eruv we are about to plan. I also take pains to note the grand enterprise in which we are engaged. We are seeking to recreate that which the Gemara describes! To live a life that is deeply and meaningfully connected to the past brings a priceless and profound level of satisfaction. The devotee of Halacha is not an orphan in history. He who faithfully observes the Halacha is part of one long chain anchored in a rich past, solid present and an even greater future.

Eternity

There is an even greater level of satisfaction involved with Eruv work. It stems from the fact that the human being is endowed with both a body and soul. While the body craves for Chayei Sha'ah, matters of temporal concern, the soul yearns for Chayei Olam/eternity. While the body enjoys the outdoor activity involved with Eruv work, the soul experiences incomparable delight from the very essence of the project at hand.

An Eruv transforms a utility pole into a Halachic entity. Talmudic concepts such as Pi Tikra Yored V'Sotem are possibly applied to railroad overhangs and Tel HaMitlaket is sometimes applied to highway embankments. In the process of elevating the ordinary modern day infrastructure into Halachic units, something extraordinary happens. Chayei Sha'ah is transformed and converted to Chayei Olam. For the spiritually astute, this brings an unparalleled sense of intense fulfillment.

A Caress from Hashem

Although it happens at entirely unexpected moments, the sensitive soul can detect the occasional caress from Hashem in their Avodat Hashem. Chazal (cited by Rashi to Shemot 15:22) teach that after Keri'at Yam Suf, Hashem caused the extremely valuable jewelry from the drowned Egyptian soldiers to rise to the edge of the sea for us to take.

One may ask why this necessary for us for Hashem to bestow us with this wealth. After all, we had already accumulated great wealth when leaving

Mitzrayim. A possible explanation is that as a loving Father, Hashem presented us with this extra jewelry as a special sign of His love for us.

Similarly, Chazal (cited by Rashi to Shmuel I 17:49) teach that after David HaMelech slew Golyat, Hashem made a miracle so that Golyat would fall forward (instead of backward) to spare David HaMelech from having to walk twelve Amot/ eighteen feet to complete his task. One may ask why Hashem found it necessary make this miracle. After all David walking an additional eighteen feet was hardly a difficult task. Rather, we suggest, Hashem created this miracle as a fatherly gesture of love to David HaMelech.

I believe that this past summer I was on the receiving end of such a caress during our yearly walking tour of the Teaneck Eruv which I conducted together with Rav Michael Taubes, Rav Daniel Feldman and Rav Micha Shotkin. My wife had advised me to buy a pair of sunglasses to use when reviewing Eruvin on long hot summer days to reduce the stress on my eyes. My extremely busy schedule did not allow me the luxury of time to make the purchase.

However, five hours into the walking inspection of the Teaneck Eruv I noticed a pair of inexpensive sunglasses that was slipped into one of the Eruv's Lechis. It was apparent that such an item placed in such a public area was deliberately abandoned (Hefker MiDa'at) and is now permissible to take. I seized the opportunity to henceforth use these glasses during my Eruv reviews, as per my wife's wise advice.

Why did a pair of sunglasses appear ready for the taking on our Eruv route? I believe it was a caress from Hashem acknowledging the considerable time and hard work I was doing on behalf of the community.

Conclusion

Many Rebbetzins have told me that their husbands love working on their community Eruvin. The active outdoor work is only part of the explanation. More significant are the remarkable and abundant spiritual opportunities Eruv activity presents for those with a discerning spiritual eye. This is what truly fuels the passion for Eruvin amongst so many rabbis. May Hashem bestow all those who

have this relish for Eruvin specifically and Avodat Hashem in general with great success and blessing.