

Be Happy!

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Torah command us times to “rejoice” on Sukkot. The fact is that one should enjoy all festivals (with the possible exception of Yom Kippur). And if you check out Deuteronomy 28:47 you’ll find that in general, in every part of our lives, we are expected to see the good and worship God through joy and that is the source for it in Jewish religious law.

So in truth we are expected to be happy clappy all the time. Yet, that’s surely not possible! The Greeks were rather keen on “states”, states of agape, angst, pain, joy, happiness, catharsis and romance. Christianity has always been rather gung ho on “states of sin” and, on the other hand, of “bliss” and “grace” and so on.

Judaism is weak on “states of”. It doesn’t believe that you wake up one morning, say “I believe” and, glory halleluiah, the gates open and you enter “bliss”. Rather it talks about actions being the sorts of actions that can be joyful or not or bring about satisfaction or fulfillment. Visiting the sick isn’t going to make you feel happy but it might be very, very worthwhile!

But by the same token we are not really too keen on asceticism either. Yes the Bible asks us to suffer one day a year. And in truth we have been rather eager to add fasts on to it since, and it is my theory that current obsession with adding layers and layers of unnecessary legal strictness is a way of delighting in suffering that certainly strikes me as overcompensation!

But when we look at Catholic processions that involve lacerating one’s body as one follows holy icons, and Shia celebrations that involve barbed whips raining down in rhythm on the bare backs of the faithful, one can feel fortunate that the only vestige we have is a little breast beating when we enumerate our sins at Tachanun or on Yom Kippur (and in our family we don’t even approve of that).

So to get back to Sukkot—why specifically on Succot does the Torah insist three times on joy? One explanation is that we are so relieved at being let off on Yom Kippur. Another is that it’s the end of the harvest and our bellies are full and our storehouses overflowing, the equivalent I guess of the Christmas bonus on Wall Street. And another is the simple opportunity to be happy to be alive after the summer season of earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados and of course the military campaigns that in days gone by when technology was more primitive, always started up in the spring and then usually mercifully stopped for the winter!

But then the often-asked text question is why does the Bible add that strange “but” word, “but you must enjoy” (“v’hayita ach sameach” Deuteronomy 16:15). That word “but”, “ach” in Hebrew, is always used to limit, to qualify. What’s the qualification?

Rabbeynu Bahya (Eleventh Century Spain) said you should always limit your rejoicing because there are others less fortunate and besides all joy has limitations.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810), who famously said, "It is a great mitzvah to be constantly joyful" (which does actually sound like a "state") understood this "but" to mean quite the opposite. He said you should rejoice to the point of stupidity, be silly, go over the top!

The Gerrer Rebbe Sfat Emet (1847-1905) said you have to rejoice all year round otherwise your rejoicing on Simchat Torah will not be as great as it should be. Get into training for the big day.

But I have a problem. You see to tell you the truth I don't enjoy wildly, throwing oneself around in the company of sweaty boozers or perfunctorily shuffling around in a circle of closely packed bodies. I don't like getting drunk. Most of what goes on on Simchat Torah in most Synagogues I've been in, doesn't do it for me! I'm a cerebral sort of chap. I regard myself as being very, very lucky and very, very, very happy and every day I thank the Lord for my life. But singing myself hoarse and trying to be jolly when I really don't enjoy it, doesn't wash.

So for me the "ach" is quite literal. I am happy, you betcha. And I love the Torah and am delighted to have got through it again. I AM happy. But not THAT way.

Sure I know, my Lubavitch friends will tell me and I need to get drunk to loosen up a bit and I'm an uptight Litvak (actually I haven't a drop of Lithuanian blood in my veins to my knowledge, perhaps its just that I'm English). But by that token I should take skunk, coke, LSD and anything else if it will send me off into the stratosphere. I don't think so and I don't buy it. I believe in conscious pleasure, conscious spirituality. I like to think I'm a thinking man.

So if you're sitting there while the lunatics around you are going wild, or alternatively if you're in the average English synagogue where any loss of decorum is frowned upon and Simchat Torah is positively funereal, DON'T WORRY, BE HAPPY! Really HAPPY!

Chag Sameach!

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