

Water and Joy

Water and Joy

The last days of the festival of *Sucot* have, over time, turned from a sort of last-minute postscript called *Shmini Atzeret*, the farewell get-together to round things off the season of festivals with, into the joyful *Simhat Torah*. But why is joy so important?

The Torah actually specifies that joy is the foundation of Judaism.

“If bad things will befall you it will be... **because you would not serve your God in joy and gladness** over the abundance of everything (Deuteronomy 28:45-48).

Joy is not the same as the intangible idea of happiness. In the Torah, *Simcha* is always related to doing something positive and joyful and acting rather than a state of something. It is the capacity to be positive and see the good even when things around you may be going badly wrong. Joy can also be related to doing good things that may not in themselves be particularly pleasant but are of moral value, like visiting the sick, helping a friend, and giving to charity.

We are commanded to enjoy all the festivals of *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Sucot*, precisely because they involve charity, sharing, and supporting the community. But uniquely, the need to be joyful is reiterated in the Torah for *Sucot* more times than the others.

As the quote above makes clear, joy should suffuse the whole of our lives (sometimes easier said than done). The festivals specifically remind us of the importance of joy, as a general command, to gather and celebrate, to be joyful. Joy is a core feature of how we are meant to regard our religion. Not so much as a series of laws, customs, and petty restrictions which is what so many people see them as. Important as they may be for any human institution, culture, or nation. But rather as the mood and spirit that religion when practiced as it should, excites and inspires.

When I am asked why I am religious and what it does for me, I reply that it has little to do with ideas and theologies. They are all almost the same everywhere. Be a good person, love your neighbor, and do the right thing. These are utilitarian imperatives that we can all recognize even if many human beings refuse to abide by them. But it was the pleasure and delight that my parents showed and passed on to us and that I experienced later in Jerusalem, that made Judaism a fun, inspiring way of life that they clearly enjoyed, even in its serious moments. Even on *Yom Kipur*, tired and hungry, there was something in the prayers, the tunes, and the way the text was savored, and its solemnity, that I found elevating and even enjoyable. I am a devotee of Judaism both because it gives me structure and a framework, regardless of my relation to God, but also because emotionally it reminds me all the time to be joyful and appreciative.

The Book of Proverbs reiterates the phrase " Turn away from bad and do good ."My father used to say that it really should read "Do good and turn from evil." Some religious people are so busy avoiding evil, turning from sin, and being concerned only with piety, self-discipline, and self-flagellation, that they never get around to doing good. But if instead one made doing good things the priority, putting goodness and joyfulness first, these in themselves help one turn from evil. *Yom Kipur* is the "Turn away from bad" part. But doing good and being joyful is the *Sucot* part.

Another feature of *Sucot* was that more than any other, pilgrims came to Jerusalem from the Land of Israel and from exile in Persia, Egypt, and Rome which all had numerous communities many of which went up to Jerusalem each year for the festivities. The city hosted thousands and the temple sacrifices provided food in plenty to be enjoyed by the populace. It was a communal fiesta of reunion and shared experiences that reinforced their sense of belonging to a people and their heritage. Something of this that been revived in our times with the huge influx of pilgrims to Israel from the Diaspora each year. Like *Pesach*, it is both a celebration of family and home life but also of community and the nation. Indeed, you might say that these were the three pillars of Jewish survival, nation, family, and individual.

After the Torah the prophets added a new celebration during the intermediary days called *Nisuch HaMayim*, Pouring out Water in the Temple as part of the ceremonial prayers for rain. And *Simhat Beit HaShoevah*, the Rejoicing around the Temple Well House, with huge festivities each night with bonfires, music, conjurers and acrobats, and famous rabbis performing feats of athleticism. " Anyone who hasn't seen the "Rejoicing of the Well House" has never seen true rejoicing at all (*Mishnah Sucot Chapter 5:1*).

"On *Sucot* we are judged for Rain" (*Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2*). It is the start of the rainy season in Israel. So, we mention how important it is. But we do not actually ask for rain in our prayers until December. Why? Because it took pilgrims over a month to get back home. And if the rains came too early their journey home could have been dangerous, even tragic. A minor, if a significant indication of consideration for others!

Joy can quickly turn to pain. But now more than ever it helps to rejoice in what good fortune we have in many areas. And pray that it continues. And to those who are suffering trying to focus on the good and the positive really helps. After all, that's what the Torah says that God wants and, frankly, it is what we should want for ourselves as well!

Chag Sameach.