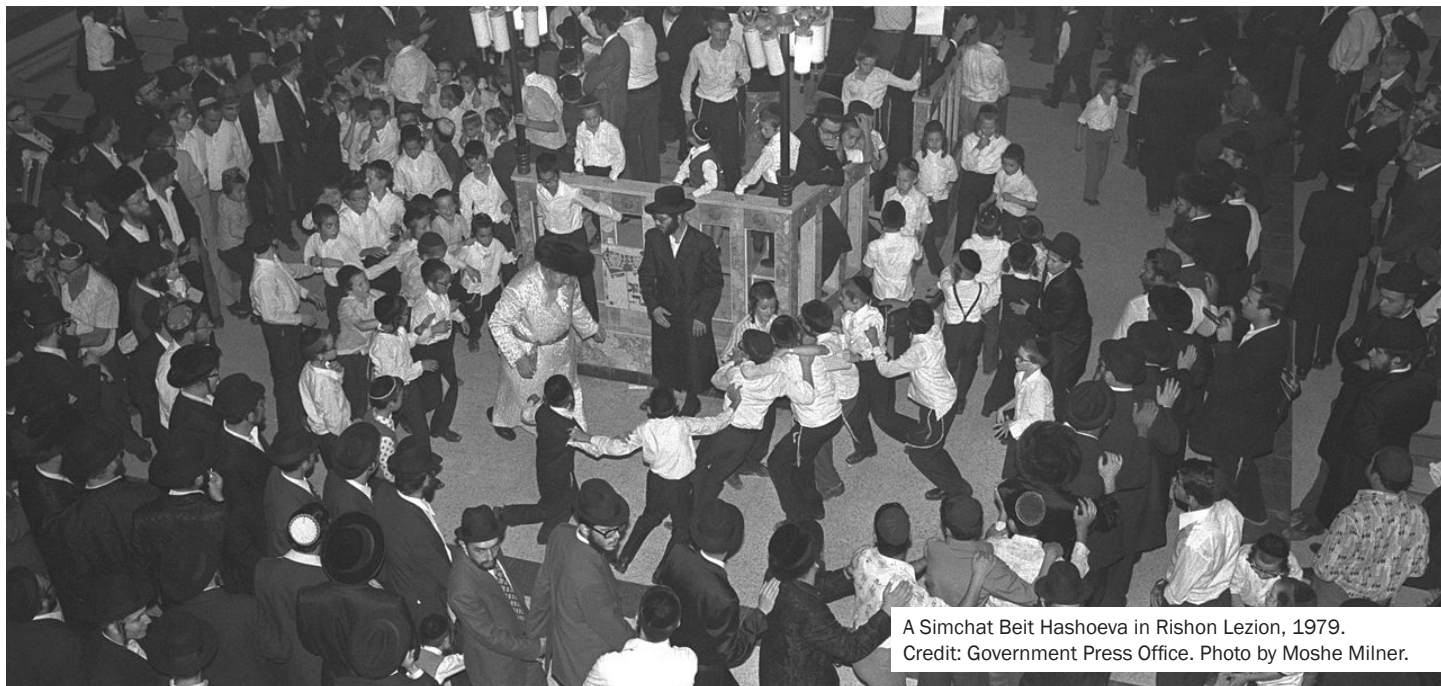


The Lessons of Sukkot

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A Simchat Beit Hashoeva in Rishon Lezion, 1979.
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ON SIMCHA AND SUKKOT: A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE ON THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

In Sefer Devarim, which recounts the fortieth and final year of the Jewish people's long journey through the desert, Moshe gives his final teachings to Bnei Yisrael. On the threshold of finally entering the Land of Israel, Moshe reviews the foundations of Torah. He enumerates many mitzvot that Bnei Yisrael had already learned, hoping to ensure this generation's success in entering the land of Israel, and solidifying the Jews' relationship with G-d for the present and the future. Among

the mitzvot that Moshe reviews are those surrounding the Shalosh Regalim (Devarim 16). This perek is the third and final time that the Shalosh Regalim are detailed in the Torah; the first was in Parshat Emor (Vayikrah 23), the second in Parshat Pinchas (Bamidbar 28-29), and the third in Parshat Re'eh (Devarim 16). According to the *Sifrei*, the reasons for each reference vary. In Vayikrah, the purpose of mentioning the Shalosh Regalim is to present each yom tov in the order that it is observed; in

Bamidbar it is to explain the korbanot that are given on each chag; and in Devarim, the chagim are mentioned "*mipnei hatzibbur*," for the benefit of the community. Many commentaries attempt to explain what, exactly, the phrase "*mipnei hatzibbur*" means. The Malbim, for example, explains that this final reference was for the sake of the Jewish people as a whole, who were assembled to hear details of the chagim that were not previously mentioned. Others say perhaps the *Sifrei* is misprinted, and the correct

text is not because of the “*tzibbur*,” but really because of the “*ibbur*,” the leap year.

The emphasis in Parshat Re’eh’s reference to the regalim is on their agricultural cycle, and the time of year they must occur.¹ Pesach begins the agricultural cycle with the planting of the crops, followed by Shavuot, which celebrates the first of the crops to grow (the *bikkurim*) — *me’hachel chermesh bakamah* — from the time the sickle is first put to the standing corn — and completing the cycle with Sukkot, Chag Haasif, the gathering of the harvest — *b’ospecha migornecha umiyikvecha* — the gathering in of the threshing floor and the winepress. Each chag, therefore, must take place in the correct time of year seasonally. However, because the Jewish lunar calendar is shorter than the solar calendar, the timing of the chagim would fall out seasonally differently each year. Adding an extra month to the Jewish calendar periodically will solve the timing problem and will ensure that each chag occurs in the appropriate time of year. Rashi seems to follow this approach in his first comment in Parshat Re’eh on the words “*shamor et chodesh ha’aviv*” — observe the month of aviv — where he explains that to ensure that Pesach falls out in the spring, at the beginning of the harvest period, there are times that a leap year must be established (Rashi on Devarim 16:1). The extra month of Adar periodically will ensure that Pesach always falls out in the spring, thus setting off the agricultural cycle of the year.

Sukkot is further explained in the Devarim reference to the Shalosh Regalim as a time that we are recognizing G-d’s role in sustaining us and demonstrating gratitude for

our harvest, *ki yevarechecha Hashem Elokecha b’chol tevuat’cha* — for the Lord your God will bless all your crops (Devarim 16:15). Additionally, we are exhorted to be happy during these chagim, with *simcha* mentioned once in the context of Shavuot and twice in the context of Sukkot, *v’samachta b’chagecha* — you shall be joyous on your holiday (Devarim 16:14), and then *v’hayita ach sameach* — you shall have nothing but joy (Devarim 16:15). This requirement to rejoice during these chagim is perplexing, however, since rejoicing at harvest time would seem to be the natural human reaction. Yet the Torah usually does not command us to follow our natural instincts, but rather to control our natural instincts in order to elevate us in holiness. So why command us in this instance to simply follow our natural inclination?

To answer this question, we must understand the meaning behind the word “*simcha*” — happiness — and what G-d means when He tells us to be happy. The American dream of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is most often translated in hedonistic terms, with “happiness” being defined as materialistic success. A student of mine who converted to Judaism as a young adult was inspired to convert because, as she explains, she saw her parents working hard to make money in order to buy a house, a car and go on vacations, and she felt strongly that there must be more meaning to life — that happiness must stem from something deeper than just material success. We as Jews are encouraged to pursue happiness, but that happiness is qualitatively different from the general American definition.

Real long-term happiness comes from a deep sense of fulfillment and

meaning. In this day and age, parents will do anything to make their kids happy, and yet often they do things that will make them temporarily happy but thwart their long-term happiness. As a teacher, I often get requests from parents to switch their child out of a difficult class so they can be in a less challenging class with their friends. While that move may make them momentarily, superficially happy, perhaps real happiness would come from the child staying in the class, working hard and feeling a deep sense of fulfillment from succeeding in that environment. Similarly, parents are often hesitant to discipline children or uphold rules because punishing or restricting them will make them unhappy. Yet by disciplining children, parents are enabling their children to experience the long-term happiness that comes from the fulfillment of living life according to their values.

Commenting on the phrase *v’ahavta et Hashem Elokecha* — you should love Hashem your G-d — in the first pasuk of Shma, Seforno explains the word “*v’ahavta*” not as a command to love G-d but as a promise that we will experience happiness from fulfilling G-d’s will by understanding that there is no greater purpose than this:

תשמח לעשות דבר שייטב בעיניו כאשר תבין שאין תכלית נכבד כזה.

You shall be happy to do that which is good in His eyes when you understand that there is the most honorable purpose.

Seforno on Devarim 6:5

The happiness that we as Jews are encouraged to pursue is a feeling of contentment that comes from the realization that doing G-d’s will (i.e. following Torah and mitzvot) is the only path to living a meaningful life and fulfill our purpose.

The Malbim in *Sefer Hacarmel* defines the word “simcha” as consistently content, as opposed to *gila*, which is a sudden happiness that is fleeting. Often the *gila* that we feel following a single, exciting event is followed by simcha, which is a more consistent happiness, a *simchat olam*, or eternal happiness that comes from an appreciation of G-d and the recognition that following G-d’s will is our recipe for a meaningful and fulfilling life.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word “happy” as “feeling or showing contentment, having a sense of trust and confidence in (a person, arrangement or situation).”

Interestingly, the first time the verb “sameach” appears in the Torah is in Parshat Shemot, when Moshe is chosen by G-d to be the leader of the Jewish people, with the initial mission of bringing the Jews out of Egyptian bondage. The Torah tells us the reaction to this appointment by Moshe’s older brother, Aharon: *v’ra’acha v’samach b’libo* — when he sees you he will rejoice in his heart (Shemot 4:14). Aharon is praised for this emotional reaction, because in place of the instinct of jealousy at his younger brother’s appointment, he showed contentment and confidence in G-d’s choice. The Torah encourages happiness that stems from the contentment that comes from trust and confidence in G-d, not just in ourselves. In Megillat Esther (5:9), Haman leaves Esther’s first party *sameach v’tov lev* — joyful and exuberant — with his simcha defined

as personal feelings of contentment due to confidence in himself. And that simcha, of course, was fleeting and ended badly for him.

The simcha that we are commanded to feel on Shavuot and doubly on Sukkot is the Jewish definition of happiness, which stems from having a sense of trust and confidence in G-d and finding meaning in that relationship.² Perhaps for that reason, the element of simcha is highlighted more in reference to the agricultural component of the Shalosh Regalim. As we gather the first of our crops and harvest them at the end of the agricultural cycle, we are happy because we trust that G-d is sustaining us. Commentaries question the wording of the second command to be happy on Sukkot, *v’hayita ach sameach* — asking why the word *ach* is used and what exactly it means. The Ibn Ezra defines *ach* as “only,” explaining this phrase as meaning we should do nothing else but rejoice. Rashi explains that this phrase is not a command but a statement, a promise from G-d that we will only be happy because He is taking care of us (Devarim 16:15). Both Rashi’s and the Ibn Ezra’s approach strengthen the entire thematic approach to Sukkot. If, in fact, on Sukkot we are celebrating our trust in G-d and His sustaining us, then it makes sense that we are commanded to be only happy. Human nature would allow us to be happy only if the harvest gathered is a strong and plentiful one. Our happiness would naturally be dependent on the success of the harvest in each particular year, and in

a year with a less plentiful gathering, our happiness would be tempered or nonexistent. The Torah is telling us *v’hayita ach sameach* — be only happy, regardless of the outcome of that particular harvest because of our trust and confidence in G-d. The Malbim, after defining simcha, differentiates between *sameach b’*, *sameach l’* and *sameach al*. *Sameach b’* is to be happy in the thing itself, as is used in the phrase *v’samachta b’chagecha* — be happy in the chag itself, because of the holiday, not because of the harvest. It is ultimately that relationship with G-d that we are celebrating on Sukkot as we go out in our temporary huts, which demonstrate our trust in G-d and our confidence that He takes care of us and is the source of all our needs. That recognition leads to a feeling of contentment, which should enable us to feel nothing but simcha on Sukkot.

The verb “sameach” is mentioned ten times in the Torah, once in Shemot (as cited earlier), once in Vayikra (23:40) and the rest in Devarim. Aside from the Shemot reference and *v’hayita ach sameach* on Sukkot, every other reference to “sameach” is about being happy in the context of our family: *v’samachta atah uveitecha* — you and your household shall be happy (Devarim 14:26); being happy before G-d — *v’samachta lifnei Hashem Elokecha* — you shall be happy before the Lord your G-d (Vayikra 23:40, Devarim 12:18, 16:11, 27:7); and being happy in all the good that we have from G-d — *v’samachta b’chol hatov* — you shall be happy for all of the good (Devarim 26:11) as well as *usmachtem b’chol mishlach*



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yedchem — you shall be happy for all that [Hashem] bestowed upon you (12:7). The simcha we feel from an appreciation of our family and our good fortune is most often followed by the command to take care of others less fortunate than us. In Devarim 12:18, when we are commanded to be happy, it states:

כי אם לפני ה' אלקיך תאכלנו במקום אשר יבחר ה' אלקיך בו אתה ובנך ובתך ועבדך ואמטך והלוי אשר בשעריך ושמחת לפני ה' אלקיך בכל משלח ידך.

These you must consume before the Lord your God in the place that the Lord your God will choose — you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, and the Levite in your settlements — happy before the Lord your God in all your undertakings.

It is not just you, but your son, your daughter, your slave, your maidservant, and the Levi who is in your cities. The “*v’samachta*” is followed by a warning lest you forsake the Levi all the days on your land. (12:19) Similarly in Devarim 14:26-27, *v’samachta atah uveitecha* — you and your household shall be happy, is followed by:

והלוי אשר בשעריך לא תעזבנו כי אין לו חלק ונתתה עמו.

But do not neglect the Levite in your community, for he has no inheritance portion as you have.

In Devarim 16:11, the pasuk in which we are commanded to be happy on Shavuot, Moshe tells us:

ושמחת לפני ה' אלקיך אתה ובנך ובתך ועבדך ואמטך והלוי אשר בשעריך והגר והיתום והאלמנה אשר בקרבך במקום אשר יבחר ה' אלקיך לשכון שמו שם.

You shall rejoice before the Lord your God with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite in your communities, and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your midst, at the place where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name.

Rashi comments:

לוי גר יתום ואלמנה. ארבעה שלי פנגד ארבעה שלך – בנך ובתך ועבדך ואמטך, אם אתה משמח את שלי אני משמח את שלך: *The Levite, the stranger, the fatherless and the widow — these four are Mine, corresponding to four that are yours, your son, your daughter, your slave and your maidservant; if you gladden Mine, I will gladden yours.*

We see an obvious correlation between our happiness that we experience as a result of Hashem’s caring for us, and our caring for

other people. Like Aharon who was happy not for himself but for Moshe’s honor, our simcha during the chagim is not just about our own satisfaction, but how it translates into helping others. The practical application of G-d providing for us is that we must provide for others. The Rambam in *Hilchot Yom Tov* explains that the key component of *simchat yom tov* is sharing with others. Those who enjoy their food on Yom Tov without sharing it with others do not experience *simchat yom tov*, only *simchat kreiso* — happiness of the belly (*Hilchot Yom Tov* 6:18).

The simcha that we experience on Sukkot should inspire us to translate that simcha into helping others experience that same simcha, which comes from knowing we are being taken care of. As Rashi says so beautifully on the words “*asiti k’chol asher tzivitani*” — I’ve done as you commanded me: “*samachti vsimachti vo*” — I was happy and I caused others to be happy (Devarim 26:14). Ultimately, that is our goal in general and on Sukkot specifically. May we enjoy both personal and communal simcha during Sukkot and beyond, and help spread that simcha to those less fortunate.

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