

Parashat Emor 5775, 2015:

*Understanding True Jewish Simcha (Joy)*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Beyond question, the most joyous *chag* (Festival) of the year is Succot. As we learn in our *parasha*: “And you shall take for yourselves on the first day, the fruit of the hadar tree, date palm fronds, a branch of a braided tree, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the L-rd your G-d for a seven day period.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 23:40, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) The word for rejoicing in this verse is “*usmachtetem*.” It means “and you [plural] shall rejoice.” It appears two other times in *Sefer Devarim* (12:7 and 12). Neither of these *pasukim* (verses) refers to Succot; yet, both clearly entail the notion of *simcha* (joy and rejoicing). Verse seven speaks in terms of rejoicing with one’s family, via the eating of the *korbanot* (sacrifices) in *Eretz Yisrael*, in the “... the place which the L-rd your G-d shall choose from all your tribes, to set His Name there; ... And there you shall eat before the L-rd, your G-d, and you shall rejoice in all your endeavors you and your households, as the L-rd, your G-d, has blessed you.” In contrast, verse 12 clearly specifies with whom one should rejoice. Herein, the joy motif and obligation extends well beyond one’s immediate family: “And you shall rejoice before the L-rd, your G-d you and your sons and your daughters and your menservants and your maidservants, and the Levite who is within your cities, for he has no portion or inheritance with you.”

Likewise, enabling others to celebrate before Hashem is found in five out of the six instances in *Sefer Devarim* wherein the individual is commanded, in the singular form, “*v’samachta*” (“and you shall rejoice”). One illustration will suffice: “And you shall rejoice before the L-rd, your G-d, - you, and your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite who is within your cities, and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are among you, in the place which the L-rd, your G-d, will choose to establish His Name therein.” (16:11) The Torah’s message seems very clear: There can be no true *simcha* without lovingly attending to the needs of the unfortunate and the downtrodden. Stated somewhat differently, our *simcha shel mitzvah* (mitzvah based joy) is defined, by what we do for others. Therefore, self-focused and self-absorbed *simcha*, devoid of care and concern for those outside of our family and friends, is not *simcha* at all.

In many ways, my above-stated analysis is foreshadowed by the Rambam’s (1135-1204) presentation in the following famous passage:

And one is obligated to be joyous in them [the Festivals] and of a happy demeanor (*tuv lav*). This refers to himself, his children, his wife, the members of his household, and everyone who is dependent upon him; as the Torah states: “and you shall rejoice.” Even though the direct referent in this verse is the Peace Offering sacrifice, as we explain in *Hilchot Chagigah*, within this category of *simcha* there exists an obligation to rejoice [independent of the sacrifice]. This extends to and includes, himself all the members of his household – each one according to that which is fitting to them... And when he eats and drinks [on the Festivals,] he is obligated to provide for the needs (*l’hachil*) of the convert, the orphan, the widow – along with the needs of the rest of the poor and downtrodden [among our people]. But, one who locks the doors of his courtyard and eats and drinks, he, his children, and his wife, and does not feed and give drink to the poor and the psychologically depressed (*u’l’mari nefesh*) – this is not the mitzvah of *simcha*. Instead, it is the “joy of his belly” [i.e. a selfish act, and the polar opposite of the Torah’s commandment.]... *Simcha* of this nature is nothing other than a curse to them... (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yom Tov* 6:17-18, translation my own).

Authentic Jewish *simcha*, like life itself, is reflective of Hillel’s famous words found in

*Pirkei Avot*: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? ...” (1:14) Yes, my family’s needs must ever be my highest priority. Yet, if this is my sole focus, then who or what am I? In sum, self-centered selfishness is antithetical to living a genuine Jewish life. Therefore, true Jewish *simcha* can only be realized in the context of reaching out to those in financial and psychological need.

With Hashem’s blessings, may we rejoice in our personal lives while ever helping those less fortunate to do the same. If we can achieve this goal, it will surely be one more step in bringing *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the righteous Messiah), may he come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

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