

Chag Sameach- Putting the Happy into the Holiday

Many Jews do not realize that Sukkot, the eight day festival that begins tonight, was historically the most celebrated holiday on the Jewish calendar. Its national significance was so important that the dedication of Solomon's Temple was specifically scheduled to coincide with the holiday, when the throngs of Jews made their annual pilgrimage. In the Temple in Jerusalem, there were nightly festivals called *simchat beit hoshoeva*- the festival of the water drawing. The mishna describes that there was entertainment, flame throwers, jugglers, and states 'anyone who was deprived of the opportunity of seeing this festival has never seen joy in their lives'.

It makes sense that this day is one of celebration. It is the culmination of three interconnected cycles. First of all, it was the conclusion of the agricultural festival cycle, which began with Passover and Shavuot; on Sukkot the final crop was harvested. Secondly, historical significance was imprinted upon these holidays. The Exodus is remembered on Passover, the revelation of Mount Sinai on Shavuot, and God's constant providence in the Desert on Sukkot. Through the annual repetition of these festivals, the Jews became aware that God liberated them, God gave them their historical mandate, and that God will continue to protect them in precarious times. Finally, the holiday is the culmination of the three fall holidays beginning with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Sukkot is a festival celebrating the renewed relationship with God, following the atonement and forgiveness of Yom Kippur. It is the honeymoon, after love has been renewed.

This joyousness can still be felt in Israel. When I lived in Jerusalem, the spirit of the holiday and the days leading up to it was palpable. It is almost a ritual that all Israelis travel during these days. In Jerusalem, during the festive meals, you can hear the singing from the neighboring sukkah. Enormous street fairs sell lulavs and decorations for the sukkah. (Interestingly, many ultra-Orthodox Jews sell Christmas ornaments to hang in the Sukkah without an inkling of their intended purpose.) In fact, in the Torah the holiday is simply referred to as *chag*- the holiday, the archetype of all other Jewish holidays.

The *Sefer hachinuch*, an anonymous medieval work which codifies the 613 mitzvot, counts rejoicing on the three pilgrimage holidays as a biblical commandment. Why would the Torah command us to be happy? There are many people who are happy and content. Is this a mitzvah? If a farmer has just harvested a bountiful crop- or to use a modern metaphor, you just got a large bonus at work, does the Torah need us to be happy? Is not happiness the natural affective state? Furthermore, what is the religious or moral value?

To answer this one must look at the context in which the commandment is given. According to Deuteronomy 16, the commandment is not to simply be happy, but to rejoice before God in Jerusalem, when people went to offer sacrifices of gratitude for the

bounty they received. **The difference between ‘being happy’ and ‘being happy before God’ is fundamental.**

In the first case, a person is happy because they are celebrating their own power. One of the great temptations is the illusion that if we have material goods, it is solely because of our tenacity and initiative. A person who celebrates a promotion by creating a large extravagant party is really celebrating themselves. (How many bar or bat mitzvoth exhibit this characteristic?) This form of celebration is distinctively unJewish, and in fact is pagan, because it places humanity in the centers, and creates the illusion that we are in control. The book of Ecclesiastes, traditionally read on the holiday of Sukkot, thoroughly dispenses of this Ayn Randian delusion of grandeur:

I have further observed under the sun that
The race is not one by the swift,
Nor the battle by the valiant;
Nor is bread won by the wise,
Nor wealth by the intelligent,
Nor favor by the learned
For the time of mischance comes to all... And a man cannot even know his time!
(Ecclesiastes 9:11-12)

In truth, we have as much control of our lives as the company executives in the World Trade Center or those workers for Enron. Life is uncertain, and while we can plan, we have little control.

Rejoicing ‘before God’ is a recognition of the source of one’s blessings. At the very point when we are tempted to celebrate the fruits of our own labor, we celebrate before God, and we recognize that we have benefited from God’s blessings. We are fully cognizant of the uncertainty of life, and therefore do not take these blessings for granted. We celebrate specifically in a Sukkah- a small hut, which reminds us of our humble origins, and serves as a metaphor for our lives. It provides shelter and protection, but can collapse at any moment.

At Federation, we work with many people who are blessed with the gift of wealth and abundance. Sukkot holds a fundamental message for all of us. During the times of the Temple, the person would give a sacrifice to recognize the blessings they had received. While we no longer bring sacrifices, we do have special opportunities to rejoice before God. The Torah tells us that we are to rejoice collectively, with our servants, the widows, the orphans, and the strangers in our midst (Deut. 16:14). We are really no different than them. In making sure their needs are met as well, we realize how fortunate we are, and recognize that our luck may change overnight. Ultimately, there really are no givers or receivers; we all our receivers from God.

For those of you who will celebrate, I wish you chag sameach- a holiday where we can take stock of all our blessings in life.

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