

# **“The Pursuit of Fun”**

By **NORMAN LAMM**

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# The Pursuit of Fun

By NORMAN LAMM

WHEN the Founding Fathers of America wrote the Declaration of Independence, they included one new phrase which was to have wide repercussions later in the history of this country. That phrase is, "the pursuit of happiness."

The idea of happiness is, of course, nothing new. Americans did not invent it. It has been known in a hundred languages and experienced universally for millennia. Our own Torah dedicates three entire sections as *parashath moadim*, the description of the major holidays on which we are commanded *ve'samachta bechagekha*, "thou shalt be happy in thy festivals." What was new in the formulation of the Founding Fathers was the emphasis on happiness as something to pursue.

Serious thinkers have not always looked with favor on this phrase. Not that there is anything wrong with being happy—their outlook is not jaundiced—but they have two reservations: first, is happiness really to be the highest goal of man? Is it subordinate to or more important than, let us say, the idea of duty, or respect for others, or faithfulness, or honor? And

second, can happiness really be acquired by pursuing it? Is it not really a rather elusive prize which you can win only indirectly by living in a certain way, and not by a direct chase?

But all these debates are really academic. Today we accept happiness as terribly important; for many it is the highest value that life has to offer. And we no longer ask questions about the wisdom of pursuing it in order to attain it. We do not simply pursue it; we are relentless, fanatic, single-minded in our hot chase of happiness. Also, we have changed the word "happiness" to "fun," and with it has come a change of the content of our aspirations. Happiness, at least, implies an ordered, harmonious way of life which offers deep satisfactions. Fun is nothing of the sort. It is escape, pure and simple. It is a matter of losing yourself consciously in a world where all tensions are released and inhibitions loosened. And the pursuit of fun has become America's chief avocation.

IN ESSENCE, there is nothing wrong with occasionally having fun, provided it is decent, clean, con-

trolled, and harmless. There is no Mitzvah to be a humorless bore. Some diversion or escape is always necessary and welcome. My concern is, however, with that great number of Americans — and American Jews — who have unconsciously transformed fun from entertainment to *weltanschauung*, from casual distraction to consuming passion, from occasional release to total immersion in escape from the challenges to which life summons us. Perhaps life in this complicated, dangerous world is too deadly serious for most people; but that is an explanation, not an excuse for avoiding its problems.

Consider how the original concept of "the pursuit of happiness" has degenerated into the "fun for all" disease that affects every part of our society. At Cape Canaveral not long ago a human being was shot into space. Fortunately he returned safely; G-d was good to him, his wife and children, and the injured prestige of his country. The days and hours before the firing were tense ones. They should have been, as they were for many, a time for prayer, and the sobriety that comes from knowing that a man's life is at stake. Yet one reporter told of the carryings-on at the entertainment spots surrounding the missile area: large crowds overflowing, drinking, joking, and dancing in anticipation of the firing. Commander Shepard hovers between immortality and eternity — and Cape Canaveral turns into a carnival. A man faces the terrible loneliness of outer space, and his fellow men clutter up whatever inner space they possess with the kind of inconsiderate nonsense which degrades their stature as humans.

Here is a second example. A certain Jew who lives in the South has

made a great success as a humorist by drawing upon immigrant Jewish experience in the Lower East Side. He has painted funny verbal pictures with "Only in America," and admonished us to "Enjoy, Enjoy." Some of us may like his brand of humor, others may not. That is irrelevant. But what does one say in response to a supposedly funny piece in which he writes a kindly, good-humored description of a Jewish girl taking her vows as a Roman Catholic nun? When a prominent Yiddish writer took him to task for it, Harry Golden insulted his critic and replied that he takes such conversions in stride—with gentility, kindness, and a sense of humor! Is this not carrying the idolatry of fun a bit too far? Jews know that on occasions of this sort you tear *keriah* and sit *shivah*—and the apostle of good humor has fun!

THE word "fun," according to Webster, comes from the Middle English *fonnen*, which means: to be foolish, to fool someone. Too much concentration on "having fun" is indeed the epitome of foolishness. And if you spend your life in that nervous, anxious, guilt-laden pursuit of fun, then you fool no one but yourself. No, this is not happiness. And it certainly is not *simchah*.

I recently chanced upon something known as "Chase's Calendar of Annual Events," which is a compendium of eight hundred occasions of celebration, fun, and festivity observed in the United States. We are, a reading of this book reveals, a holiday-ridden people. There is scarcely a single day in the year when some citizens in some part of this great country will not be celebrating something or other. We have every conceivable kind of holiday, from weeks



dedicated to the peanut and girl scouts to months celebrating children's art, and the egg, to days hailing mothers, fathers-in-law, buzzards, and bachelors. For everything there is a parade and the occasion for some group just "to have fun." Amazing: a complete *luach* dedicated to the principle that every day is a time for fun! And yet, no one will disagree, there is not a day that passes but what more and more people become more and more miserable. Fun is, evidently, a failure.

**O**UR OWN Jewish calendar is one that presents us with a number of *chagim u'moadim*, holidays and festivals. They are days of happiness, of *simchah*. Do our *chagim u'moadim* bear any resemblance to the fun-fare that we have been describing? Assuredly not—yet sometimes it seems that we have so assimilated to the fun-culture of contemporary America, that we have failed to appreciate the vast abyss that separates them. That is why only a few years ago one of our "defense organizations" published a book purporting to acquaint our non-Jewish neighbors with the essentials of Jewish belief and practice. Although a fairly good book, a remarkable picture emerges from it: Jewish life is a merry-go-round of joy upon joy, a breathless round of celebrations, all smiling faces and wine-drinking and feasting. Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur are primarily happy times filled with laughter and fun. Even Tisha B'Av "has lost much of its tragic overtones." The Jews, we are told, "are overjoyed that freedom is flourishing in so many parts of the world." Of course, the remnants of Eichmann's victims and the Jews in Morocco and behind the Iron Curtain are not aware of this—but then, they do not appreciate that the Jewish

calendar is like the American calendar, and that both are dedicated to the proposition that the pursuit of fun is the noblest goal of man created in the image of G-d.

Real *simchah* is, of course, nothing of the sort. True joy, in the Jewish sense, is not an escape from life but an intensification of its loftiest features. *Simchah* is the elation of man, the elevation of his soul that comes with the realization that he stands in the presence of G-d—that he is not alone on the face of the earth. That is why *simchah* is the special characteristic of the three pilgrim festivals, the *shalosh regalim*, for then the Israelite would ascend to the Temple to "be seen before the Lord." To enjoy the companionship of G-d and His gifts, that is the gist of happiness. *Simchah* does not come from avoiding the knowledge that there is evil in the world, from blinding oneself to the enormous threats of pain and death. It comes from an appreciation that in this kind of world, despite evil and sickness and pain, there *is* a G-d Who watches over us, that we *do* have the opportunity to vanquish evil, that there *is* a vibrant, active principle of holiness and purity and goodness. We do not use the historical origin of our holidays as an excuse just to pursue happiness or have fun. The holidays are themselves expressions of joy when man faces the world with open eyes and open heart, and each holiday has its own character and its own joyousness.

**I**T WOULD be too much to try to exhaust the meaning of each of the *yamim tovim*. A Jewish holiday is like a human personality: it has a thousand different facets, each more intriguing and fascinating than the next. Let us, rather, examine only one

facet of each as a source of *simchah*, as interpreted by the Chasidic sage and saint, the author of *Sefath Emeth*. He points out that in Vayikra the *parashath Moadim* follows immediately upon the Mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem, the sanctification of G-d's Name. "And I shall be sanctified amongst the Children of Israel," was interpreted by our Rabbis to mean that a Jew must submit to martyrdom rather than violate any of the three major sins known to Judaism: idolatry, unchastity, and murder. The three major festivals of Pesach, Shavuoth, and Sukkoth, the *Sefath Emeth* maintains, come to preserve and enhance each of these three principles for which we must be ready to give our lives in Kiddush Hashem.

A man must give up his life if ordered to take the life of another, for homicide is an unforgivable sin. The positive principle is celebrated in Pesach when we recall that G-d took us out of the land of slaves where life was cheap and man worthless, where babies were tossed into the Nile. Pesach fills us with joy as we appreciate the transcendent value of life in a world where people usually speak of the destruction of millions of people in the impersonal terms of cold statistics. We do not just "have fun"; we are instead suffused with happiness that life was granted to us, and that we were entrusted with its safe-keeping.

The principles of morality or chastity must not be violated even under pain of death, for so is G-d made holy in Israel. And the festival of Sukkoth reaffirms that concept by emphasizing the importance of the home. For an immoral act is in essence an offense against the family. In the presence of immorality husband and wife can have no love for each other

and children and parents at worst do not know each other, and at best despise each other. Sukkoth is the time we remember how our G-d took us out of Egypt with its lust and flesh-pots, its incest, its sexual degeneracy, and led us through the desert in order that for forty years we learn to dwell in sukkoth, each family protecting the wholeness of its home and its sacred integrity. On Sukkoth we are joyous that every Jewish family can hold aloft the banner of *tzeniuth*, that we can learn to respect the personality of another human being and not treat another as merely an animate object of our desire. We are happy that we can preserve the family and home even in a world filled with *gilui arayoth*, a world where obscenity more and more becomes legally accepted and morally respected, where degeneracy receives the sanction of literature and the blessing of art, and where home after home falls apart.

**F**INALLY, and perhaps most important, a Jew must perform Kiddush Hashem and relinquish life itself rather than submit to idolatry. Shavuoth, which commemorates the giving of Torah at Sinai, affirms the Jewish appreciation of Divinity itself. We are happy that in a civilization which has silenced the voice of G-d by denying that He is concerned with man, and set up the idols of money and science instead, we Jews are the recipients of His Torah and can to this day partake in the supernatural experience of Revelation by studying the Torah. When we study Torah we know that G-d is not silent, that He speaks through its pages, that He has let us know how to live without loneliness, without despair, without emptiness. What a source of joy!

Here, then, is an example of how Jewish joy differs from secular "fun," of how the Jewish calendar, based upon *simchah*, is different from the ordinary calendar. Unlike fun, which is a form of escape by being blind to life's dangers and evils, Judaism's *moadim* provide *simchah* by a direct confrontation with them. Unlike fun which is amoral, and often immoral, *simchah* is eminently moral and ethical and spiritual. It shows you the face of a murder-bent world and tells you to revere life: the ethics of *sim-*

*chah*. It reveals to you a society corrupt with unchastity and commands you to respect the integrity of every home and family: the morality of *simchah*. It bares before you a civilization that has forgotten G-d and reminds you of His ever-loving presence: the spirituality of *simchah*.

*Ashreynu, mah tov chelkeynu, u'mah na'im goraleynu, u'mah yafah yerushateynu.* "Happy are we!—for how good is our destiny, how pleasant our lot, how beautiful or heritage!"

