

THEY LIVED WITH THEIR BOOTS ON

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1. The tendency to glamorize the past and attribute every virtue to it that we lack is, I believe, not limited to our own age. Every generation regards the past one superior to it in one way or another. I frankly confess my own guilt and complicity in this idealization of the past. We tend to imagine our grandparents* and their contemporaries as better people, more honest if less sophisticated, more educated even if a bit naive, and by all means more religious.
 2. Nevertheless, while we should beware of these pitfalls in always comparing ourselves unfavorably with generations gone by, there is no doubt that at least in one respect the words of our Rabbis hold true: IM HEIM K'MALACHIM, ANACHNU KI'VNEI ADAM, V'IM HEIM KI'VNEI ADAM, ANACHNU KA'CHAMORIM...if the earlier generations were angels, we are, by comparison, just ordinary humans. And if they were only ordinary humans we are, by comparison, donkeys! In what way do I think this statement and poor estimate of our contemporaries is fully justifiable? - in one particular quality that can best be described as "wholeheartedness". It is the quality of doing a thing with your whole heart and soul, and not just off-handedly and ~~a~~ indifferently. An angel, according to the Talmud, is merely another name for some Divine agency that has one particular function or mission in this world and that is all - he performs that and only that with all it has. A human being, on the other hand, has so much and so varied a field, that he dissipates himself. Further, a thoroughly human human being, a man who lives as a man should, lives deeply and profoundly; whereas a donkey does not even eat its ~~grass~~ hay with much enthusiasm. Earlier generations seem to have had that angelic, or supremely human quality, of living deeply, of living life to the hilt. We moderns seem, quite to the contrary, to skim over life, we never achieve fullness and thoroughness, and usually most of what we do, no matter how important, is done as if it were just an afterthought, or an oversight.
 3. Just choose any ordinary facets of life and you will see the difference. Love of one person for another was so deep and thorough-going, that Maimonides pointed to marital love as the model for love of G-d. King Solomon - in the Book of Ecclesiastes which we shall read next week - experiences it wholeheartedly. "For love is as strong as death... many waters cannot quench love". Those are strong words, not merely polite tributes. Compare that to the expectations of most married people today. The ideal is: a happy married life - as long as I stay out of the divorce courts and keep haggling and arguing down to a minimum, that's quite sufficient. No wonder so many do NOT stay out of those courts! The matter of Indignation is a case in point. Once - in our lifetimes, but hardly any longer - when people were shocked and indignant because of some repulsive immorality or unethical practice that had taken hold, they went out, heart and soul, to DO something about it. The Reformer and Crusader for social justice or anti-alcoholism or any such project was a usual "type" not so long ago. Today, people still have righteous indignation. But is it whole-hearted? - No, it is expressed by a shrug of the shoulders, a "tut-tut", and blame is placed on "conditions" - and that is where the matter ends. It was not so long ago that Ambition was a real force in the life of a young American. His hero was a Horatio Alger - whether or not we approve of that particular kind of ambition - or some outstanding personality. Today the great majority of college youth are quite satisfied to "get along" and "adjust to society". Even personal ambition lacks the spark and verve that was so common one generation ago. Religion is the most important field where this difference becomes obvious. Our parents or grandparents took it seriously, and gave their lives to it, if not for it. With the Psalmist they said KOL ATZMOSAI TOMARNA, or TZAMAH LECHA NAFSHI. The Jew was always ready to give his life for his beliefs, and he lived it with all the power and zest and energy he had. Today, even when a man is sincerely religious, his religion is just one compartment of his life, and he lives it with sort of a polite diffidence and is faintly apologetic about it. He gives to it his sentiment rather than his soul. It is half-hearted, and treated as an oversight.

4. It is in connection with this holiday of Succoth and the little huts - the Succoth - we build, that the famed Rabbi Bunam made a wise remark concerning whole-heartedness in Religion. He said that he preferred Succoth to any other Mitzvah, any other religious observance. Because the others require only part of his person - study Torah - mind; prayer - heart and mouth; Tefillin - hands and head; Mezuzah - his house....but Succah, he said, is the kind of Mitzvah you can go into with your whole body, EVEN WITH YOUR BOOTS ON. That is the observance of a man who lives whole-heartedly. He must get into his religion even with his very boots on. No surface skimming, no superficiality, no sentimentalism, but living religion to the hilt. Here were people - our grandparents and for many of us, our parents, who threw themselves into Torah with their boots on. They preferred Succah because they were able to get into it all at once. People who literally as well as figuratively lived with their boots on - never knowing if their home would be in some place next day, or destroyed in some pogrom...if banished to another and worse fate by ^{secondary} ~~relegated~~ unfriendly and bigoted govt. Yet what they did in their religious lives was not ^{secondary} ~~relegated~~ to the very crucial problem of their security and very existence, but was something they hurled selves into with all they had and were - their very boots. The Jew has always had as his aim in life LAASOS RETZONCHA BE(LEIVAV SHALEM - wholeheartedly. We have lost that quality of depth and wholeheartedness, and hence religion has begun to fade from the scene of our lives.

5. How can you help achieve that wholeheartedness? The way they did: SIMCHA, joy. Despite all the tragedies of a life in exile, in the midst of bitterness and woes of all kinds, they taught themselves to enjoy their religion. Their greatest happiness and merriment were reserved for their religion - SIMCHAH SHEL MITZVAH the only valid SIMCHAH. They enjoyed their every religious act. When one great Rabbi was asked why he prayed so quickly, he answered that he enjoys the words so much, he hurries on to say them quickly, he simply cannot wait...So with all aspects Torah living.

Most moderns, however, even if religious, are rather tense and anxious, sometimes even morbid and hysterical. Look to religion for relief, for peace of mind, for a way out, as something to grab onto when in trouble. Well, religion may be very valuable for such purposes, but no matter how good a medicine tastes, no one really ENJOYS taking it. If Judaism will be approached in the spirit of true joy and full happiness, then religion can become for us what it was to those who preceded us and what it should be: a wholehearted, fullsome, deep way of life. If we shall consider it as medicine, as the psychology-preachers do, or as a morbid faith, as the Existentialists do, then we shall not ever achieve that depth. With plain happiness and joy we can and shall.

6. And that element of SIMCHAH in the performance of religious duties can be acquired in many ~~two~~ ways. One of them is by PERSONAL PARTICIPATION. It is only when you yourself participate actively in the discharge of your duties that you can find joy in it, and through that joy the quality of whole-heartedness. We may appreciate coming into a beautiful, well-functioning synagogue, but it is a rather shallow kind of satisfaction unless we know that we have personally worked for its upkeep and its continued functioning. We may admire prayer, but it must remain an impersonal admiration if we allow the Rabbi and Cantor to pray for us, as we pointed out on Yom Kippur. If we pray ourselves, and recognize that it is only we who can do that for ourselves, then we can enjoy it and do it with enthusiasm and heart and soul. Sometimes I think that despite all the benefits that are attendant upon the system of united welfare funds in the giving of charity, we lose something wise of great importance - the personal participation in the various individual organizations, and hence the joy and the depth of feeling and interest that go with it. Writing out a single check to cover a variety of worthy purposes is certainly a virtuous deed, and saves a lot of time. But it remains largely an impersonal discharge of obligations, and that can never be truly enjoyed or done with depth. That is why I have a real admiration of those few of our Kodimoh people who take a deep personal interest in particular charitable pursuits - whether Day School or hospitality for strangers or other such. I suspect that they get more than they give; for what money can buy the joy and the thrill of personally doing a completely unselfish deed, and doing it well.

If those of us who are parents think we derive pride - nachass - from our children who are studying in a Hebrew or Day School, let me tell you that it is nothing as compared with the profound depth of happiness you derive from participating personally in your child's education - of learning with him or teaching him, of studying his Chumash with him.

It is told of the sainted Rabbi of Berditchev that before he became a Rabbi, whilst yet a young man, married to daughter of a wealthy and pious man whose home always open to poor strangers, travellers and passers-by. He provided them with food and lodging, never bothering to ask who they were. R. Levi Yitzchak would put himself completely at disposal of the guests - personally make their beds and serve them their food. His father-in-law once commented to him, Levi-Yitzchak, here you are a renowned young scholar and rather well-off, isn't a bit unnecessary for you to personally do these menial things? Why don't you give a few pennies to the servant and have him do these things for you. "What," replied L-Y, "you expect me to give the servant the privilege of personally doing the Mitzvah, and I should PAY him for it yet?" That is what we mean by personal participation. It is something we should strive for, not try to evade.

7. Second, we can achieve this SIMCHAH in our lives by dedicating our every act and thought, no matter how mundane or prosaic, to G-d. It sounds so difficult or other-worldly, yet it is not really so.

8. It is too late of course to plead with you for that personal participation in the Mitzvah of Succah for this year. But perhaps someone here will yet remember it for the years to come, Please G-d. In order to make of this holiday a true ZMAN SIMCHASEINU, a wonderful and joyous conclusion to the somber High Holiday season, there is nothing quite as effective as - building your own Succah. It hurts to realize that of our entire congregation there are so few who personally construct and decorate their own Succoth. Here indeed is a family project: an opportunity for every man's own constructive abilities his wife's liking for doing her own decorating and the children's thrill with both constructing and decorating. Here is an opportunity to involve the whole family in the Torah - the sort of Mitzvah which the whole family can get themselves into WITH THEIR BOOTS ON. I promise those who will try it in the future, that their sense of happiness and joy and their wholeheartedness and depth of feeling will be unequalled.

9. The Halacha, too, recognizes this element of achieving SIMCHAH by personal participation in religious living. The Tosafists (Moed Katan 11b) maintain that the legalistic expression of SIMCHAH on a festival was achieved, in the days of the Temple, by eating of the sacrificial meat. And they explain that this refers to the particular sacrifice offered up in honor of this festival - the SHALMEI CHAFITZAH. This is usually interpreted, by students of the Halachah, strictly: only by eating of the meat of this particular offering. But the famed MINCHAS CHINUCH (#488) maintains that the decision of the Tosafists applies not only to this sacrifice, the special holiday offering, but to the eating of any food which has been sanctified in the Temple "EINO RAK BE'SHALMEI SIMCHAH ... IKKAR HA'MITZVAH LE'ECHOL KOL BSAR KODOSHIM"... There is no strict formula for achieving SIMCHAH, this Sage of three generations ago wants to assure us. Happiness can be attained thru any personal participation in real religious living. As long as you participate yourself, without delegating it to others, in a religious act, you can find Happiness. And that is but one step away from wholeheartedness, from making life deeper, more purposeful and more meaningful.

10. Let us, on this ZMAN SIMCHASEINU holiday, determine that we shall enter the arena of Torah, the Succah of religious living, even with our very boots on. Let us achieve wholeheartedness by making all our days ZMAN SIMCHASEINU, days of thorough happiness, by means of personal participation in all aspects of religious life. Perhaps then we shall not have to feel inferior to the generations that have preceded us. Perhaps then we shall become truly human - and even perhaps develop that part of us which is truly angelic. It is a great task, and a difficult one. But it is a happy one, and the most worthwhile one that we can ever undertake.

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