

“HOW CAN WE BE HAPPY ON THIS SIMCHAT TORAH?”

Earlier this week, a number of people called me to express their very deeply held feelings. Considering the difficult position of Israel, the carnage, the dangers, and the grim outlook, how can we possibly sing and dance when we celebrate Simchat Torah? When all American Jews walk around distraught, depressed, and unhappy, how can we bring ourselves to be cheerful and joyous? Is it not inappropriate to act merry at a time of this sort?

I confess that I too am troubled by this conflict of emotions and sentiments. How, indeed, shall we participate in a joyous Simchat Torah when Israeli soldiers have suffered such high casualties? How shall we sing while Jewish mothers weep? How shall we dance while Jewish families in Israel grieve?

And yet, shall we act on these sentiments and therefore mute, moderate, or even cancel out our Simchat Torah celebrations?

The answer is No, most-certainly no. My conclusion issues not only from halakhic considerations, but from my reading of the spiritual judgment of Judaism as well. What is *Simchah* (joy, happiness)? Maimonides tells us first what it is not; it must never be סכלות, frivolousness and levity. Rather, true Jewish joy must contribute to עבודה ליוצר הכל, it must be a form of service to the Creator of all that exists.

We can, I believe, discern at least four specific strands in this complex emotion called *Simchah*.

First, Jewish joy is a sign of אמונה, faith. It is an expression of our commitment to the existence of God as the Source of all. ושמחת לפני ה' אלקיך, we are joyous “before the Lord our God.” Halakhically, the presentation of oneself “before the Lord” occasions *Simchah*. The very knowledge that you stand in the presence of the Lord, that itself is a greatest source of joy. That is why our happiness is called *Simchat Torah*, the happiness with the Torah. How happy are we that we are a people of Torah, a people whose base passions are restrained and whose aspirations are refined - by Torah.

In the psalm that we usually recite on Saturdays and Holidays before the ברכת המזון (*grace*), we say the following words: אז יאמרו בגוים הגדיל ה' לעשות עם אלה הגדיל ה' לעשות עמנו שמחים -- “then it was said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them. The Lord has done great things for us, we rejoiced.” Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch makes a most incisive comment on these two verses. The nations of the world were able to appreciate God’s greatness to us after they saw the full victory of Israel’s restoration. However, we Jews were able to be happy even before that, even during the bitterness of exile, even during the long oppression which the *goyyim* visited upon us. אז יאמרו בגוים -- only אז, then, at the time of triumph, were the *goyyim* (nations) able to understand happiness. But הגדיל לעשות עמנו, we ourselves were able to appreciate God’s greatness and goodness to us, and היינו שמחים -- in the past tense -- we were able to rejoice and achieve happiness even before our liberation and triumph, even at the time that adversity surrounded us from all sides. For Jews are possessed of אמונה, faith, and this is what gives us *Simchah*.

HOW CAN WE BE HAPPY ON THIS SIMCHAT TORAH?

The second strand in *Simchah* is: בטחון, confidence in the Almighty that He will help us. As we shall say tomorrow during the *Hakafot* or circuits about the synagogue: עוזר דלים הושיעה נא, God who helps the poor and the downtrodden and the disadvantaged will help us.

Just yesterday, a nurse returned to the United States directly from serving with the Israeli army at the Suez front. What she reported was most revealing. She served with a group of young Sephardi soldiers, most of whom were so-called secularists or non-religious. She described how they gathered on the eve of Sukkot to "daven" *Ma'ariv* without lights but under the full moon over the Sinai. Afterwards they retired to a Sukkah, and there they ate their festive meal. She described the utter devotion and of the soldiers who prayed fervently and ate in the Sukkah performing the *mitzvah* with such great attentiveness and love. Then they left the Sukkah -- and the Sukkah traveled away on the back of a truck! She was asked: what did you find most unnerving, most upsetting? Her answer speaks volumes: when I returned to New York and saw the long, drawn, sad faces on the Jews of the United States!

Many of us were rightly disturbed by the unwarranted over-confidence and even cockiness of the Israeli spokesmen in their initial reactions to the Yom Kippur attack. But the Israelis are not fools. They learn quickly. And they are not fools when they refuse to succumb to depression and despair. They are greater realists than we are. Consider how wise is their perspective. They know that although the situation today is not as good as in 1967, it is better than in 1948! And it is a million times better than in 1940, or 1941, 1942, 1943 or 1944!

Third, *Simchah* for the Jew issues from a recognition of the complexities, ambivalences, and ambiguities of life. The Jew knows that there is no sorrow without מנוחה consolation; no joy without sadness. His *Simchah* is one that has been tested in the crucible of life; it is not a blind fiction that he creates as a means of psychological self-defense.

The Rabbis taught in the Ethics of the Fathers: אל תתיאש מן הפורענות. This can be interpreted in two ways. One is, that when things are going well, when good fortune smiles upon you and you bask in affluence and good health, do not imagine that it will always remain thus. Do not distract yourself from the underlying misery and sadness and insecurity of life. Do not "give up" on the possibility that adversity may strike, cruelly and suddenly. But there is another way to interpret the same Mishnah: never despair because of adversity! When misfortune strikes, when life seems to crowd you in, when you are caught in narrow straits, when the sun has set and life seems to have darkened -- nevertheless, do not give up, do not yield to despair, do not imagine that help will never come!

That is why we break a glass at a wedding, the time of supreme joy, as a token of זכר לחורבן, in memory of the destruction of the Temple. And that is why on Tisha Be'av, the day of national calamity, we do not say the תחנון prayer, because this very day is called מועד, a holiday! We introduce a note of sadness during the wedding, and a note of joy during Tisha B'av. Yet -- we do weep on Tisha Be'av and we do dance at weddings! Our sorrow is never untouched by a realistic recognition of the disasters of life. To be sad does not mean to interpret all of existence as an unmitigated evil, and to be happy does not mean to ignore the tragic dimension of life. No wonder the Halakhah teaches that there are times we must recite two blessings simultaneously - - דיין האמת and הטוב והמטיב, the blessing over good news and the blessing over evil tidings!

A great Sephardic sage, Rabbi Hayyim Alfandri, was once asked why we recite the מן נשתנה on Passover and not on Sukkot. After all, with all the differentness of the Passover Seder, there is

HOW CAN WE BE HAPPY ON THIS SIMCHAT TORAH?

something much more blatantly unusual about the Sukkot festival -- especially leaving one's home and repairing to a little booth built outdoors. He answered, that the nature and the meaning of the Sukkot festival is *צא מדירת קבע לדירת ארעי*, leave your permanent home and go in to a temporary domicile. The symbol of Sukkah is temporariness, exile, wandering. It is a sign of *Galut*. And that is the answer: *Galut*, wandering, exile, suffering, all this is no *חידוש*, no surprise to a Jewish child! When he sees this he is not moved to ask *מה נשתנה*, "why is this night different?" And nevertheless, despite the symbol of exile and wandering and persecution, it is a holiday that is called *זמן שמחתנו*, the time of our happiness. And we sing. And we dance.

For this is the Jewish way: we recognize the interpenetration of sadness and joy, of fortune and misfortune, of adversity and gladness.

Simchah is a paradoxical phenomenon, especially with us Jews. We are not always happy because things are going our way, but often we manage to retain our emotional equanimity and spiritual composure *despite* adversity, and sometimes even *because* of adversity. If Jews had decided to spurn *Simchah* because of misfortune, we would have had a year-long Tisha Be'av for the last 1900 years! After the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, there was indeed a group of people who declared that they would never again eat meat or drink wine or celebrate at weddings, because of their disconsolate grief at the destruction of the Temple and the loss of national independence. Certainly, their hearts were in the right places. But the Halakhah disagreed with these *אבלי ציון וירושלים*. It declared that we institute *זכר לחורבן* -- various ceremonies to memorialize the destruction -- but not a life-long reenactment of the *חורבן*.

Furthermore, if *Simchah* is to be expressed only when our joy is complete and unmarred, by what moral right has any Jew in this country or any other country sung or danced or gone to the theater or watched television or made a party these past 30 years?!

In reading the various diaries of the survivors of the Holocaust, and in talking to members of this congregation -- some of whom are here this morning -- who lived through the death camps, I learned that in the very concentration camps, during *Simchat Torah*, when the Nazis increased their viciousness and their bestiality, nonetheless Jews continued to sing and, if possible, dance, and to will themselves into a happy frame of mind! They did not yield to the grief and the depression that the enemies wished and visited upon them!

Of course we will not forget the soldiers who fell on the Golan Heights or in the Sinai desert. They are our flesh and blood. We weep with their broken-hearted parents, their bereaved wives, their orphaned children. They are part of us, and their pain is our pain. After the sermon, and before beginning the Yizkor service, we shall recite a special memorial prayer for them. And of course we will do things -- we will pray, we will give more than we promised to UJA and Bonds, and perhaps we will even try to use our automobiles less often, saving gas, thus depriving the Arab oil blackmailers of their nefarious devices. But we will also be happy and we will dance. Because this is the Jewish way.

A fourth element is this: *Simchah* is itself a weapon with which to forge good news and battle evil. The author of *Tanya* asks the following question: the Rabbis taught us that on Sukkot, during the days of the Temple, seventy sacrifices were offered up, equivalent to the traditional number of nations in the world, seventy. But why should that be so? Do we not know that *בידוע לעקב*, *עשו שונא לישראל*, that the overwhelming majority of them hate Israel? In that case, if they are our mortal enemies, why should we offer sacrifices for them? The answer is this: the sacrifices were

HOW CAN WE BE HAPPY ON THIS SIMCHAT TORAH?

expression of *Simchah*. And with a Jew, *Simchah* trumps שמחה, happiness overcomes hatred, joy is the Jew's secret and most effective line of defense.

If we give in now to depression and despair and gloom, we will hand a psychological and spiritual victory to Sadat and Faisal, to Malik and Fulbright. But when we dance on *Simchat Torah*, that is the greatest expression of Jewish defiance. עם ישראל חי our people of Israel will live!

We all saw that picture in the New York Times last week, the picture of an Israeli soldier, carrying a *Sefer Torah*, surrendering to the Egyptians at the Suez. I wept when I saw it, as I am sure you did. It reminded me of those painful pictures of Jews, enrobed in *Tallit* and *Tefillin*, and carrying *Sifrei Torah* as they were taunted by the Nazis. Furthermore, I felt a special connection to that young man, because I have been told that there was an exceptionally large number of Yeshiva students (coming from the *yeshivot ha-hesder*, schools like Kerem b'Yavneh, Yeshivat Hakotel, Yeshivat Har Etzion, Yeshivat Shaalvim) who happened to be manning the lines on that fateful Yom Kippur day. I know quite a number of these youngsters, and I know their friends. So I wept, and I still do, for that boy and for his *Sefer Torah*. But I will also sing for that boy this *Simchat Torah*. And I will dance with other *Sifrei Torah* for that *Sefer Torah* which now lies in captivity. Because no one can take our Torah from us -- and no one can take us from our Torah. Because no one can take Israel from us -- and no one can take us from Israel.

Of course it is not easy to engage in *Simchah* when your heart is "sitting *shivah*." But Torah wasn't made for convenience, for emotional luxury. Torah demands of us not only a discipline of action and appetite, but an iron discipline of emotion as well. It commands us to laugh even when we want to cry, to dance when we want to faint, to sing when we want ashes and sack-cloth.

So we shall be happy tomorrow: שישו ושמחו בשמחת תורה. We shall be happy because it is an act of אמונה, faith. We shall be happy because it is an expression of בטחון, confidence in things to come. We shall be happy because our happiness issues not from childish and naive simplicity but from a recognition that life is complicated and complex and paradoxical. We shall be happy because our joy itself will overcome enmity and adversity, animosity and hostility. We shall try to restrain the sobs and sing out. And if a tear falls, we shall wipe it away and continue to dance. Because when we hold the Torah, we know that no defeat

is permanent, and that victory will surely come. כי תצא למלחמה על אויבך וראית סוס ורכב עם רב ממך לא תירא מהם כי ה' אלקיך עמך. "When you go out to war against your enemies," (Deut. 20:1-4), and you will see all his armies gathered against you, horse and chariot, tanks and jets and missiles, an army far greater in number than yours, outnumbering and overwhelming you -- you shall not be afraid of them, for the Lord your God is with you, the God who took you out of the land of Egypt, and who let you triumph 3 times in the last 25 years against Egypt.

והיה כי קרבתם אל המלחמה וגנש הכהן ודיבר אל העם ואמר אליהם, that the spiritual leader, the priest, shall come forth and speak to the people and say unto them אתם קרבים היום למלחמה על אויביכם—"Hear O Israel, you are approaching this day war against your enemies. Do not let your heart melt and become faint. Do not be afraid. Do not panic. Do not buckle down in front of them. For it is the Lord your God who goes together with you to do battle with you against your enemies להושיע לכם, and He will help you, redeem you, and bring you your victory.

And ultimately – שלום, peace.