

Sukkot

Ve'Samachta Be'chagecha: Sukkot Joy Rabbanit Michal Kohane - Class of 2020

On an overly crowded train making its way to Jerusalem, I share a couple of stairs, the last seat to be found, with three kids (sadly, not my own) indeed, every spot is taken and people are standing everywhere. There are strollers, bags, suitcases; it's noisy with every joyful sound imaginable. It's a mess, and yet, I have tears in my eyes. It's Sukkot and I can't help but remember the words of the prophets, telling us how one day, once again, on the *shalosh regalim* (Sukkot, Pesach, Shavuot), we will join from everywhere, coming up to gather in Jerusalem.

Sukkot has several *mitzvot*. The most famous are dwelling in the *sukkah* and taking the Four Species. In recent decades, we have seen the “come-back” of *Hak'hel* – a huge “gathering” at the Kotel, traditionally held during Sukkot and possibly serving as a small reminder of the huge celebrations held long ago at the Temple.

But Sukkot holds another *mitzvah*, possibly among the most difficult *mitzvot* we have, and that is the *mitzvah* of being joyful. Twice says the Torah, first in Leviticus and then in Deuteronomy:

<p>On the first day you shall take the product of <i>hadar</i> trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and <u>you (pl.) shall rejoice</u> before Hashem your God seven days. (Lev. 23:40)</p>	<p>וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרֵי עֵץ הַדָּר כַּפֹּת תְּמָרִים וְעֵנָף עֵץ-עֵבֶת וְעֵרְבֵי-נַחַל וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵי-יְכֶם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים:</p>
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Similarly:

<p>After the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths for seven days. <u>You shall rejoice</u> (singular) in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the [family of the] Levite, the stranger, the</p>	<p>חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת תַּעֲשֶׂה לָךְ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בְּאַסְפֹּךָ מִגְרֹנֶךָ וּמִיִּקְרָבֶךָ וּשְׂמַחְתָּ בַחֲגֹךָ אִתָּהּ וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְּךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ וְהַלְוִי וְהַגֵּר וְהַיְתוּם וְהָאֵלֶּמְנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ:</p>
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<p>fatherless, and the widow in your communities. You shall hold a festival for Hashem your God seven days, in the place that Hashem will choose; for Hashem your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and <u>you shall have nothing but joy...</u> (Deut. 16: 14-15)</p>	<p>שְׁבַע יָמִים תַּחֲלֵל לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי-יִרְבֵּן בְּמָקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר ה' כִּי יְבָרְכֶךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵי-יִרְבֵּן בְּכֹל תְּבוּאָתְךָ וּבְכֹל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֶיךָ וְהָיִיתָ אֲהַבְּתָם ...שְׂמֵחַ</p>
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How can we be told to be happy? How can we be commanded to be joyful?

The culture most of us live in has taught us that in order to be happy, we have to do things, get things, or have certain things happen. We learn to think that, one day, when everything is exactly how we want it, *then* we will be happy. The Torah on the other hand, shares a radical idea: that joy is not a result or an achievement, but rather a choice. It is the ticket we take with us when we embark on the journey, not a conditional destination we arrive at.

True, it is not always clear how to be “nothing but joyful” and it’s definitely not easy, but we also know that the Torah does not command us to do things that are impossible or beyond our reach. And while we’re not given a precise recipe, we are told that more of our happiness is in our own hands; and that after the High Holy Days with their seriousness and weight, we are now invited to God’s “summer house,” where we can set aside our worries and concerns, celebrate, and enjoy.

In Tractate Sukkah 48b, we come across a very strange short story, describing a discussion between two “*minim*” (heretics), one named Sasson (gladness) and one named Simcha (joy), who argue with each other over which of them is better:

<p>Apropos this verse, the Gemara relates: There were these two heretics, one named Sasson and one named Simcha. Sasson said to Simcha: I am superior to you, as it is written: “They shall obtain joy [<i>sasson</i>] and happiness [<i>simcha</i>], and sorrow and sighing shall flee” (Isaiah 35:10). The verse mentions joy first. Simcha said to Sasson: On the contrary, I am superior to you, as it is written: “There was happiness [<i>simcha</i>] and joy [<i>sasson</i>] for the Jews” (Esther 8:17).</p>	<p>הִנְהוּ תַרְיָ מִיָּנִי, חַד שְׂמִיָּה שְׂשׂוֹן וְחַד שְׂמִיָּה שְׂמֵחָה. אָמַר לִיָּה שְׂשׂוֹן לְשְׂמֵחָה: אָנָּה עֲדִיפְנָא מִיָּנָה, דְּכַתִּיב: “שְׂשׂוֹן וְשְׂמֵחָה יִשְׂגוּ וְגו'” אָמַר לִיָּה שְׂמֵחָה לְשְׂשׂוֹן: אָנָּה עֲדִיפְנָא מִיָּנָה, דְּכַתִּיב: “שְׂמֵחָה וְשְׂשׂוֹן לְיְהוּדִים” אָמַר לִיָּה שְׂשׂוֹן לְשְׂמֵחָה: חַד</p>
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Sasson said to Simcha: One day they will dismiss you and render you a messenger [*parvanka*], as it is written: “For you shall go out with happiness [*simcha*]” (Isaiah 55:12).
Simcha said to Sasson: One day they will dismiss you and draw water with you, as it is written: “With joy [*sasson*] you shall draw water.”

יִמָּא שְׂבָקוֹה וְשִׁינְה פְּרוּוֹנְקָא,
דְּכָתִיב: “כִּי בְּשִׂמְחָה תֵּצְאוּ”
אָמַר לִיה שְׂמִיחָה לְשִׁשׁוֹן: חֲד
יִמָּא שְׂבָקוֹה וּמְלוּ בְּךָ מִיָּא,
דְּכָתִיב: “וּשְׂאֲבַתֶּם מִיָּם
.....בְּשִׁשׁוֹן.”

What’s the point of this?

Perhaps we should start by understanding the difference between *sasson* (gladness) and *simcha* (joy). While they might seem like synonyms, they express different aspects of being happy. For example, possibly *simcha* – joy – refers to happiness due to the physical things in our lives, while *sasson* – gladness – refers to the spiritual things.

Another explanation suggests that *simcha* and *sasson* are two different aspects of the joy in our life: *Simcha* is joy in the sense of “being,” that is, just feeling good and happy about where we are here and now. *Sasson*, on the other hand, is the good feeling we have when we’re in the process of becoming happy, as we might feel when working hard and noticing some progress on our way to reaching our goal.

Either way, those sound like two very valid ways of experiencing happiness in life. Why is the gemara calling them “*minim*,” heretics?

Possibly the issue is in the argument between them, each thinking that it is better than the other. We cannot and should not live only on a completely physical plain, or a completely spiritual one; and we cannot just “be” without participating in the process and the ventures that life offers us, propelling us forward, with all the challenges those bring. It is as if the text here is upset with their argument, not realizing how valuable each, and its counterpart, both are.

After Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, which moved us to think about judgment and atonement, Sukkot is very much about our feeling unity in and with the world: the *sukkah* that blends and invites our insides out (and outsides in); holding the Four Species together as one; the ancient Water Libation that mixed the water from above and water from below; and the People of Israel in their Land coming together as one for *Hak’hel*.



Sasson and Simcha, tells us the gemara, are “heretics” because they think one is better than the other, when in reality, especially on Sukkot, we ought to seek oneness; a place without divisions, strife and competition; where everything comes together as One – our physical gladness and our spiritual joy; the place we’re going to and where we are already at. No wonder that we will end this holiday with “Simchat Torah.”

Wishing you and yours a wonderful and joyful Sukkot!



Now back in Israel where she grew up, Rabbanit Michal Kohane continues to be a teacher of Torah and Talmud in Israel and abroad in various settings: school, adult-ed, scholar in residence and more. She’s completed her chaplaincy certification, and is now working on her official tour-guiding license in Israel. Prior to that, Rabbanit Michal was a long-time leader and educator in Northern California, serving as rabbi, Federation executive director and more. She was also the Rosh Kehila of the Prospect Heights Shul in Brooklyn. An avid learner, Rabbanit Michal holds a BA in Studies of Israel and Education, an MS in Jewish Studies, an MA in Clinical Psychology, and a PsyD in organizational psychology. She writes regularly: her first novel, *Hachug* (“Extracurricular”) was published in Israel by Steimatzky and her weekly blog about Torah, travel and life can be found at www.miko284.com.