

The Joy of Judaism: The Message of Sukkot

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Most Jews think that fasting is more righteous than feasting; that Judaism is essentially about self-denial in order to set ourselves apart from the rest—we deny ourselves certain food because of Kashrut, we deny ourselves certain pleasures because of Shabbat. And so, based on these criteria, people often consider Yom Kippur—the day we deny all ourselves everything but prayer--the holiest Jewish day of the year.

We are certainly meant to set ourselves apart as Jews and we are to be a special people—a goy kadosh—striving to be holy and special in relation to God. Yet, the perception that asceticism is superior to enjoyment is not Jewish. In fact the Talmud suggests that in the world to come a person will have to answer for every legitimate pleasure in this life that he/she renounced. The Nazirite—the person who gives up the pleasures of wine and family life to devote himself entirely to God—was criticized by some rabbis in the Talmud and called a sinner on the grounds that he gave up the joys of wine when the Torah did not require him to do so.

Often when I meet people unfamiliar with Judaism and they learn that I am a rabbi, they will ask me if I am allowed to have children. They have the idea from general society, Christian society, that serving God means denying yourself the pleasures of life. I always respond that we all—rabbis and nonrabbis—are enjoined to follow all the commandments in the Torah including and most importantly the first one: to be fruitful and multiply.

Sukkot comes to teach us this valuable lesson of Judaism—that joy and pleasure are an essential part of life and are meant to be a significant part of religious life and Jewish observance.

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch taught this on our Torah Portion: As it says in the Torah: ‘On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the feast of Sukkot for seven days unto the Lord.’ Rosh Hashanah was a day of supplications and soul-searching. Yom Kippur was similarly a day of fasting and forgiveness and atonement. These were only one day [observances] but Sukkot, which is the day of our happiness (z’man simhateinu), the Torah tells us to observe for seven days. The reason is that God wanted to extend Israel in joy as it is written: Serve God in Joy (ivdu et haShem b’simha).”

Rosh Hashanah, although observed as two days is considered by the rabbis to be one long day. Yom Kippur is one lone day. Sukkot is seven days. God doesn’t have us fast or afflict ourselves for seven days, but God does command us to enjoy ourselves for seven days. Ivdu et HaShem b’simha. We are to serve God in joy and happiness. We are conscious after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that we have been given the gift of life. And now, on Sukkot, we are commanded to enjoy it.

The depth of our joy on Sukkot comes from the depth of our sorrow and mourning on Yom Kippur. Our consciousness of the fragility of life leads us to treat life as precious. This joy of the mitzvot not only enables us to enjoy life but it helps us to observe Judaism. Can you imagine being Jewish and only observing Yom Kippur each year? Can you imagine if all the holidays were like Yom Kippur? If all our holidays were filled with fasting and mourning? How difficult it would be to continue observing Judaism. The festival holidays of Sukkot, Pesah and

Shavuot come to balance out the cycle. Jewish life is filled with mourning and joy, fasting and feasting, wailing and singing.

I grew up going to a Reform Temple, eating in a kosher home, going to Orthodox cousins for Shabbos and going to Lubavitch for Purim and Simhat Torah. After my brother, sister and I moved away to college, my mother worried about our Jewish identities and worried that she didn't do things correctly. She thought that she had given us mixed messages and made Judaism too confusing. I tell her as often as possible that she did OK—that the path she chose was right for my father and for her and taught us well. Look, if you're going to go to the Orthodox for anything, what better to go for than Shabbos, Purim and Simhat Torah. From the singing and dancing and lively celebrations, we learned and experienced simhat shel mitzvah—the joy of the commandments. And what a gift that is. It is one that we all have been given by God in the form of Sukkot.

“On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the Feast of Sukkot for seven days unto the Lord. On the first day shall be a holy convocation, you shall do no manner of work.” What should you do? You should gather with your community and your family, feast in the sukkah, sing and dance with the Torah and enjoy the gift of the mitzvot. In our sukkahs, in our synagogue, may we all enjoy this Sukkot—Z'man simhateinu. And may it be our time for rejoicing in God's mitzvot, in God's Holy days and in God's Torah.