Shemini Atseret & Simchat Tora

ושמחת בחגך אתה ובנך ובתך ועבדך ואמתך

והגר והיתום והאלמנה אשר בשעריך

דב’ 16:13-15

“And you shall rejoice in your celebration, you, and your sons, and your servants, and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow that dwell in your people”

During the festival of Sukkot, we reside in the Sukka for seven days and we take the four species of plants (etrog, lulab, hadas, ‘araba). Also during Sukkot, we have another Mitsva called “simcha”, which means “to celebrate” or to be happy. This is the only one of the three Mitsvot of Sukkot that also continues for the next festival: Shemini Atseret, this coming Shabbat Oct 6th and 7th and Simchat Tora, Sat night Oct 7th and Sunday, Oct 8th.

What is Simchat Tora?

Outside Erets Israel, as on any other festival (= Yom Tob), the holiday is celebrated for two days in a row. In this case, the second day of Shemini Atseret is also known as Simchat Tora, in which we celebrate the completion of the annual cycle of Tora reading and the uninterrupted beginning of the new cycle of reading from Bereshit.

The Tora tells us to be happy and to manifest our joy during these holidays. We sing and dance around the Tora, expressing our joy at being a part of the people chosen by God to study and observe His Law.

Material joy is also part of the celebration. During Yom Tob we share several festive meals with our loved ones. We eat, drink, honor the day of Yom Tob, and make it as pleasurable as the Shabbat (Shulhan ‘Arukh OH 529: 1).

In honor of Yom Tob we also dress well, as we do when we go to a wedding. According to the Shulhan ‘Arukh we must dress in Yom Tob “better” than in Shabbat. (Idem).

The Rabbis also explained that each individual enjoys material happiness in a different way. They said that before Yom Tob

begins, the parents will give their children "… nuts [to eat] and nuts [to play]. The equivalent today would be "candies and small toys [not electronics!]". The husband must give his wife clothes and/or jewelry, always according to his possibilities (and the husband is happy seeing his wife happy).. On the other hand, the woman of the house prepares a good meal for her husband and her family. Wine and meat are "mandatory" on the menu of Yom Tob. Meals are prepared with care and in abundance, but still within each person's budget.

Although we are accustomed to the idea that happiness is the result of success and that success consists of having more, gaining more, showing more, etc., the Jewish view of happiness is a little different. In Yom Tob, we learn to rejoice with what we have, regardless of "how much" we have. In our materialistic society, it is considered that success is having what one wants; we must learn that happiness consists in wanting what one has and sharing with others what one has.

By offering others—those who do not have enough to eat, or those who do not have a family, especially orphans and widows—to participate of our family meals (SH 'A 529: 2).

Maimonides said about this last point: "The person who closes the doors of his house [to the needy], eats and drinks [by himself] together with his wife and children and does not feed and drink the poor, is not practicing the joy of this Mitsva, but the joy of his own stomach … "(MT Yom Tob 6:18)

Finally, material joy also requires moderation:

"During Yom Tob [and this includes Simhat Torah, YB] a person should not drink too much [alcohol] … because drunkenness and frivolity are not part of the Mitsva to be happy. [drunkenness is rather] part of vulgarity and ignorance … and [the Tora commanded us] to attain a level of happiness that is compatible with our service to HaShem … a person can not serve HaShem from frivolity, lightheadedness or drunkenness "(6:19).

"The highest way to serve HaShem is to feel happy that we are able to fulfill [His will by observing] His commandments …" (Maimonides, MT H. Sukka veLulab, 8:15).