The Season Of Our Simcha

Each one of the three Festivals has its own special character. Two of them are identified with the historical event they invite us to relive. Pesach is the “Season of our Freedom” because that is the time of the year when G-d liberated us from Egyptian bondage. Shavuot is the “Season of the Giving of the Torah” because that is the point on the calendar when we stood at Sinai and became G-d’s chosen people by being the only ones to accept this Torah sight unseen.

Sukkot is the “Season of our Simcha” for a reason not related to history, but rather to the commandments and services connected with this Festival. While there is certainly an obligation for a Jew to be joyous on every Festival, there is a special emphasis on simcha during Sukkot.

“You shall rejoice before your G-d for seven days” commands the Torah in regard to the mitzva of taking the four species on Sukkot. Rabbi Aharon Halevi in his classic “Sefer Hachinuch” offers a penetrating insight into the connection between simcha, the four species and this particular time of the year.

This time of the year, he notes, is called the Festival of Ingathering. It is a time of great simcha for Jews, for it is the time for gathering grain and fruits from their fields into their homes, which is a time for great rejoicing. G-d therefore commanded His people to celebrate a festival at that time in order to elevate them by channeling that simcha to His service.

Aside from channeling the inherent simcha of the climax of the agricultural year into a positive service of G-d, the mitzva of the four species, adds the Sefer Hachinuch, also acts as a brake on the excesses which inevitably accompany human celebrations. G-d commanded us to take four species from the world of agriculture which bring joy to the hearts of their holders and beholders in order to remind us that our festival celebration should be Heavenly directed and disciplined.

An interesting parallel to this observation may be drawn by recalling a study made almost half a century ago of alcoholism in New York State. By analyzing the backgrounds of a large number of people admitted to hospitals in the state because of alcoholism the researchers aimed to determine which ethnic groups had the greatest tendency to drinking too much. What came as a shock was that in a state with such a large population of Jews their representation amongst hospitalized drunks was so tiny.

Through the words of the Sefer Hachinuch we can easily understand their study’s results. From the earliest moments in his life the Jew associates spirits with the spirit. The wine at the brit of a baby boy or the kiddush celebrating the birth of a baby girl continues to serve as the way a Jew ushers in his Sabbaths and festivals and adds a special dimension to his wedding ceremony and the feasts which accompany and follow it. When one uses drinking for reaching greater heights in his service of G-d he does not “become high” in the vulgar sense.

Simcha is truly a wonderful thing, especially on Sukkot. In the time of the Holy Temple this expressed itself as well in the music, dancing, singing which accompanied the Simchat Beit Hashoeva celebration of the drawing of water for the libations on the altar which took place only on Sukkot. Today we can only experience an echo of the simcha which took place in the Holy Temple, the music, dancing and singing in the Simchat Beit Hashoeva celebrations in Eretz Yisrael.

Even though our simcha without a Holy Temple is far from complete, we still have, in our mitzvot and our customs, an opportunity to link the simcha inherent in our festival, especially one which is the “Season of our Simcha,” to our service of G-d. The lesson we can draw from this festival is how to consecrate all of the occasions of simcha in our lives — birth, marriage and happy events — by channeling them into opportunities for recognizing the Divine source of our prosperity. Not only do we thus learn to discipline our celebrations, but also to elevate them from ordinary “fun” into sacred “simcha.”
**The Flaming Sword**

Roland Ndayahoze wrote:

*When Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden of Eden, the book of Genesis says that an angel guards the Tree of Life with a flaming sword. I read an incredible explanation that this angel is the evil inclination which distracts and invades the mind, keeping one’s mind from G-d. What does the flaming sword stand for?*

Dear Roland,

The evil inclination often appears to us like a “good little angel.” But it comes hand in hand with the destructive force of a flaming, double edged sword. It cuts both ways.

Sometimes people sin thinking they will get pleasure. Other times, they think the sin itself is a mitzvah or good deed. Think of the hijackers who recently killed thousands in New York, Washington, and near Pittsburgh. Their evil inclination convinced them that they were doing a good deed.

The Talmud says that the evil inclination is also the angel of death: It lures a person way from G-d, then destroys him.