

Zman Simchateinu - Finding Joy During Sukkot

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A man is spending the night out in his sukkah when suddenly he hears a rustling sound. He opens one eye and, to his horror, a brown bear has entered the sukkah. Trapped and frightened for his life, he closes his eyes and begins to recite "Sh'ma Yisrael" in anticipation of his final moments. When he is finished, he opens his eyes and is surprised to see the bear has seated himself in one of the chairs and has also closed his eyes and begun to pray. The man thinks to himself "how lucky am I -- this must be a Jewish bear! We're *mishpocheh* - I'm saved!" And then he hears the end of the bear's prayer "Praised be Thou, O Lord, who bringest forth food from the earth."

Our liturgy calls the festival of Sukkot *zman simchateinu* -- the time of our joy. This comes from the Torah. In Deuteronomy 16, it says:

After the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths for seven days. You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities. You shall hold a festival for the Lord your God seven days, in the place that the Lord will choose; for the Lord your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings --

(וְהָיִיתֶם אֶךְ שִׂמְחָה) "and you shall have nothing but joy." (Deut. 16:13-15)

Now, on the one hand, this makes perfect sense. Sukkot is *Hag HaAsif*, the festival of the ingathering, the culmination of the harvest season when all the crops have been brought in. It also follows Yom Kippur, a national fast day when all citizens of Israel deny themselves while atonement was made in and for the Temple. So if the Temple has been purified and our crops have been harvested, then everything is in order and it's a perfect time for joy and gladness.

On the other hand: is it always that simple? What about the times when the harvest doesn't look like enough? Or when things in society are looking scary? Or when Sukkot is totally rained out? Or work is too hard or school gets so hectic or... [...]?

Scientific study of the brain has revealed that there are several neurochemicals that related to the experience of happiness. Dopamine "is responsible for reward-driven behavior and pleasure seeking. If you want to get a hit of dopamine, set a goal and

achieve it.”¹ From monitoring brain activity, we have found that an increase in dopamine in the brain correlates to reporting a feeling of happiness or joy.²

So...there we go, right? Since we understand how these chemicals work in the brain, we can control our minds to always experience joy whenever we want or need to.

There are a lot of things that can steal our joy: envy, jealousy, disappointment, loss, boredom, numbness, stress. And while we may do our best to order our lives according to the Torah’s command, sometimes there are things that are out of our control. Yet the Torah exhorts us to be joyful.

- Yet the Torah hangs our fate on this: in the *tochacha* or reproof passage of Deuteronomy 28 (the series of curses or warnings pronounced over Israel if they fail to heed the message of the Torah), it says that God will send Israel into exile
:לֹא־עֲבַדְתָּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְטוֹב לֵבָב מִרֵּב כָּל: -- because you would not serve the LORD your God in joy and gladness over the abundance of everything. (Deut. 28:27)
- Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the great Hasidic teacher who famously struggled with depression, taught that at all costs you must find ways to be happy and joyous. He found that for him it was the best—in fact, the primary—way to connect with God. “Joy is not merely incidental to your spiritual quest,” he taught. “It is vital.”³

This morning I want to point out ways we can find joy during Sukkot, in hopes that this would be a helpful reminder for all of us and perhaps especially helpful to anyone who might “just not be feeling it” this holiday season:

1. We can feel joy by **taking time to enjoy life’s physical blessings.**

- From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happiness_in_Judaism: In Jewish Law, rejoicing during the Jewish holidays is considered a biblical commandment. Maimonides ruled that this obligation is fulfilled by drinking wine and eating meat.^[17]
- There is a precedent for this idea in the Torah’s command of *maaser sheni*, the second tithe, given in the 1st, 2nd, and 4th and 5th years of the seven year cycle.
 - **124** And if the way be too long for thee, so that thou art not able to carry it, because the place is too far from thee, which the LORD thy God shall choose to set His name there, when the LORD thy God shall bless thee; **25** then shalt thou turn it into money, and bind up the money in thy hand, and shalt go unto the place which the LORD thy God shall choose. **26** And

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-athletes-way/201211/the-neurochemicals-happiness>

² Interesting study about measuring neurological effects of spiritual retreats:
<http://www.jhunewsletter.com/2017/04/13/spiritual-retreats-alter-dopamine-serotonin-levels/>

³ <http://ninaamir.com/a-reminder-to-practice-joy-and-gratitude/>

thou shalt *bestow the money for whatsoever thy soul desireth*, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever thy soul asketh of thee; and thou shalt eat there before the LORD thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou and thy household.

- Spirituality of the brachah:
 - The Sages said (concerning the Nazir, the person who takes on vows): 'It isn't enough that which the Torah forbade that you want to forbid upon yourself other things?!' (Jerusalem Talmud Nedarim 9:1).⁴ The general principle is that one should not deny oneself from experiencing that which God has permitted to you.
 - Accordingly, the Talmud teaches that we should acknowledge God whenever we enjoy anything: "It is forbidden to a person to enjoy anything of this world without a blessing" (b. Berachot 35a).
 - The standard berachot can enable us as Messianic Jews to fulfill Paul's charge: "everything you do or say, do in the name of the Lord Yeshua, giving thanks through him to God the Father" (Colossians 3:17).

2. We can feel joy by **experiencing gratitude**.

- It is appropriate, at the conclusion of the harvest, to experience and express gratitude to God for provision.
- Some historians have traced the roots of the American holiday of Thanksgiving to the biblical harvest festival of Sukkot.
 - (Now of course there are some differences: chief among them being the fact that Sukkot comes at only the beginning of the football season...)
- But perhaps Sukkot is the time of joy because it is then that we feel complete: "When you harvest your crops from your granary and your vineyard, you should be happy on your holiday, you and your children..." (Deuteronomy 16:13) That dopamine spike of having made it through another harvest season, or, in our case, another high holy day season, the start of another school year, or ... ?

3. We can feel joy by **connecting with others or inviting them into our lives**.

⁴ <https://torah.org/learning/mlife-ch3law1/>

- It is customary during Sukkot to invite others to share meals with us in the sukkah.
- There's something timely about this in the Jewish calendar: if we have done the sort of spiritual accounting that is exhorted of us during the *Aseret Ymei Teshuva*, the Ten Days of Awe, then presumably we have a clean slate with all our family and friends. It would seem like a perfect time to celebrate together.
 - One interpretation of the lulav is as a symbol of *achdut*, of unity. By bringing together the *arba minim*, the four species, and waving them before Hashem, we're making a symbolic declaration: *Hineh ma tov u-mah nayim shevet achim gam yachad*.
 - This unity can bring us joy.
- The Jewish mystical tradition introduces the idea of inviting spiritual guests from the past into our sukkah each night. This is the Sukkot custom of *Ushpizin*, which identifies a different one of our ancestral giants into the sukkah each night (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and King David). In describing this, the Zohar adds 'you should rejoice with a shining countenance each and every day of the festival together with these guests who lodge with you.'

This idea brings us back to another word that we use when we talk about the time of our joy - *ZMAN simchateinu*. *Zman*, time. The Hebrew root - *zayin, mem, nun* - is also associated with other words - *hazmanah* and *zimun*, two different types of invitation. When three or more people come together for a meal, they bless God through a *zimun*, a collective dialogue that invites the assembled group to say the words of *Birkat Hamazon*, blessing after meals.

From this we can learn that while inner satisfaction may be felt alone, exuberant celebration is best experienced in the company of others. So, we invite each other to share our space, to share our food, to share our company, to share our holiday, and there is joy in the togetherness, in the interaction, in the opportunity for connection and growth. And, we invite one another to bless God, to share in the sanctity of the moment, and to recognize the bounty we have been given. And, no matter what else might be going on in our lives, for a moment, we find happiness by giving thanks for all that sustains us: shelter and food, faith and morality, caring friends and loving family.⁵

- Not forgetting the poor (Yeshua's teaching)

⁵ <http://ziegler.aju.edu/default.aspx?id=5733>

- Maimonides said: "For there is no greater and more wonderful joy than to make happy the hearts of the poor..." (Hilchot Megillah 2).⁶

4. We can feel joy **by renewing our commitment to study the Torah.**

- Every seven years during Sukkot is what is known as the *Hakhel*, a command in Deuteronomy 31 for all the men, women, and children of Israel, as well as the foreigners sojourning with them, to assemble together at the Temple in Jerusalem for the Torah to be read by the king of Israel.
- This practice contained within it the roots of our weekly Torah service.
- Next week we will begin our Torah cycle once more.
 - *Pirkei Avot* records a saying from a Torah scholar called Ben Bag Bag: "Turn it and turn it again, for all is in it; see through it; grow old and worn in it; do not budge from it, for there is no better rule than it. (Avos 5:22)
- The purpose of Torah is to help you rejoice before the Lord, your God. Rearrange the letters חמישה (ChMiShaH) [as in *chamisha chumshei Torah*, the five books of the Torah]) and you will find the word שמחה (SiMChaH), happiness. (85)⁷

5. We can feel joy in **sensing the presence of God.**

- **Psa 16:11** You will show me the path of life: *in Your presence is fullness of joy (simchah)*; at thy right hand *there are* pleasures for evermore.
- In today's Torah portion (for Chol HaMo-eid Sukkot), God commands Moses to, "Lead this people forward," (Exodus 33:12) through the wilderness. Immediately preceding this command, the people Israel, lacking trust and seeking reassurance, make for themselves a Golden Calf. Moses knows that the Israelites yearn for the Presence of God, and though God assures him, "My

⁶ Broader context is Purim and *matanot l'evyonim*: "It is better for a man to increase gifts to the poor (on Purim) than to enlarge his feast and to increase gifts to his friends.

⁷ R. Benjamin Blech. Fuller context of quote: "The purpose of divine law is not to restrict us for the purpose of deprivation. It is rather to discipline us so that through self-control we gain true happiness. Hedonism is self-defeating. Excessive gorging leads to sickness, excessive sex to boredom."

presence will go in the lead and will lighten your burden," (32:14), Moses reminds God of the need of the people as they transform from slaves into servants of God. He includes himself in the plea, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here." (33:15).

- In Kabbalistic sources, the Sukkah symbolizes the wedding canopy – the "chuppah" that hovers over the bride and groom as they enter into a covenant of mutual commitment and exclusivity. It is the time the Song of Songs refers to when it says: "The King has brought me into His chambers, we will be joyful and happy together." (Song of Songs 1:4)
- I find a certain symbolism in the *schach*, the natural materials we use for the roof of the sukkah. The halakha has it that the *schach* should be substantive enough to create more shade than sunlight inside the sukkah, but thin enough that one can still see the stars at night. Perhaps by keeping this *mitzvah*, by re-enacting the sort of dependence our ancestors lived with during their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness, we actually feel a little bit closer to heaven. Glimpsing the stars through the *schach*, we're reminded of God's promise to Abraham to make his ancestors as numerous as the stars of heaven...and we feel a little bit closer to God.
 - Maybe this works figuratively as well: after an intense period of beseeching heaven during the Days of Awe, we are rewarded with a hiatus from some of the fixed structures of our minds, ushered instead into a dwelling place with an open roof or lattice, where it's easier for our minds to connect to Hashem. I'm reminded of Song of Songs 2.9:
 - "My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice."

6. We can feel joy **from knowing Messiah**.

- Every Jew has a dream. It is basic to the vision of our Prophets. There will come a day when the world will be at peace. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn the art of war any more. Implements of warfare will be used for productive and peaceful ends; spears will become pruning hooks. God will be universally recognized and all peoples shall stream towards JErusalem, the city of peace. That day will be brought about by מָשִׁיחַ (MaShiYaCh), the Messiah, or the anointed one. It is his name, its consonants

rearranged, that spell משיח (YiSMaCh) [one will rejoice]. With the Messiah will come true happiness for the entire world.

- If this is true, then it is no wonder that Paul exhorted the Philippians to “Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again, rejoice!” (Phil 4:4)
- And Peter to Messianic Jews who believed - Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory. (1 Peter 1:8)
- We are privy to an incredible secret and blessing, to know, love, honor, and serve Messiah Yeshua here and now, even as we await his return and revelation to all Israel. This is by no means an easy role...but it is a privileged one and a reason for rejoicing.

7. We can feel joy **from knowing that our names are written in heaven.**

- In the besorah of Luke chapter 10, Yeshua appoints and sends out seventy-two apostles. [Review context, content of Luke 10 passage cited in handout.]
- The idea of having your name written in God’s book is ancient (and part of Ancient Near Eastern culture)...in fact it possibly precedes the idea of resurrection.
 - Background context:
 - Exodus 32:32 (from our Torah reading): “Please forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.”
 - Daniel 12:1-2 - “At that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has never occurred since the beginning of the nation until then. But at that time your people—everyone who is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake—some to everlasting life, and others to shame and everlasting contempt.”
- From <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:441709/FULLTEXT01.pdf> ()
 - Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night, and Daniel blessed the God of heaven. Daniel said: “Blessed be the name of God from age to age, for wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep

and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with him. To you, O God of my ancestors, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and power, and have revealed to me what we asked of you, for you have revealed to us what the king ordered.” (Dan 2:19–23)

- “ It is to them that he reports his vision, and it is their names that are written in heaven, meaning Satan could no longer accuse them before the Father. “
- “ Jesus may either be interpreted as telling his disciples that the present joy is nothing compared to the greater joy that is to come,⁶¹ or he may be warning them that the present success they enjoy is only temporary. I find the latter interpretation more likely.“

8. We can feel joy, **paradoxically, when we undergo trials.**

- Lulav => God('s rule) everywhere, peace everywhere
 - Eschatological dimension
 - Haftarah (Ezekiel)
 - Brit chadasha reading (Revelation)
- Joy in the struggle
- Howard Thurman (preached a philosophy of Common Ground, which taught that humans need to seek an inner spiritual happiness that would lead them to share their experience in community with others. In 1944, Thurman cofounded San Francisco's Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, the first integrated, interfaith religious congregation in the United States. In 1953, he became the dean of Marsh Chapel, the first black dean at a mostly white American university, mentoring, among many others, Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS'55, Hon.'59) as he developed his philosophy of nonviolence.⁸ ... During his tenure as dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, theologian and minister Howard Thurman sent Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King his 1955 volume on spirituals, *Deep River*. He inscribed the book: “**To the Kings—The test of life is often found in the amount of pain we can absorb without spoiling our joy**” (Papers 6:299).” Thurman's commitment to a spiritually and physically integrated society, and to the methods of Gandhian nonviolence, served as major influences in King's life.
- Promises in the vision of Revelation that we need today
 - Those who endured the tribulation will be shepherded
 - Sheltered by the Lamb
 - He himself wipes away their tears

⁸ <https://www.bu.edu/today/2011/who-was-howard-thurman/>

Conclusion:

- There are other ways to find joy during Sukkot beyond these that I've listed. What are the things that bring you joy? Let's give ourselves time to enjoy them...and share them with others...during this holiday.
- If you have had difficulty feeling joy during this *zman simchateinu*, I pray that you would be able to *Lech L'cha* -- go for/from yourself, to "go up" to Jerusalem, if not physically
- R. Abraham Joshua Heschel famously wrote: "People of our time are losing the power of celebration. Instead of celebrating we seek to be amused or entertained. Celebration is an active state, an act of expressing reverence or appreciation. To be entertained is a passive state--it is to receive pleasure afforded by an amusing act or a spectacle.... Celebration is a confrontation, giving attention to the transcendent meaning of one's actions.
- So, during Sukkot, this *zman simchateinu*, let's celebrate God's goodness to us and our community in Messiah, together. Shabbat shalom.