

“Finding Joy ~ A Story for Sukkot”
Sukkot 2001

Sukkot is one of the three pilgrimage festivals, one of three times during the year when the Jewish people ascended to Jerusalem to worship in the Holy Temple.

We build huts to commemorate the time we left the land of Egypt and wandered for forty years in the desert. We fulfill the mitzvah to eat and sleep in the sukkah, this temporary structure. And, we also shake the lulav (palm branch) together with the hadasim (myrtles) and aravot (willows), along with the etrog (citron fruit).

It is described in the Torah, the Talmud, and the liturgy, as the festival of joy, zman simchatenu.

It is, I think, one of only two times, which comes to mind, when we are actually commanded to have a particular emotion. The v'ahavta, part of the Shema, commands us, “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your might, and with all of your possessions.” And, we are commanded to be happy on Sukkot. It is difficult to command an emotion. Usually, most of the mitzvot center upon actions, things we are supposed to do.

How can one be compelled to be happy? In light of recent events, and all that is going on, this is a particularly hard mitzvah to perform.

So, let me tell you a short story, and see how this mitzvah was performed, in a time of adversity.

The story is told of Reb Mordechai Neshchizer. A very poor man, he found it difficult to eke out a living for his family. But one mitzvah he was always sure to perform was the purchase of a lulav and etrog each year. One year he had scrimped and saved for weeks, sometimes skipping meals so that he would have enough money to purchase the beautiful lulav and etrog. A day before the holiday, when the prices tended to drop a little, he set out to the market with six rubbles in his hand.

As he approached the marketplace, he came across another Jew, who was sitting by the road weeping. Reb Mordechai could not just pass him by. He stopped to ask the stranger what was ailing him.

The man looked up and said, “I am a wasser trager (water carrier). I deliver buckets of water to the people every day in a horse-drawn wagon. Today my horse died, and I will not be able to deliver water anymore, and I am afraid that I will need to become a beggar.”

Reb Mordechai asked the man, “How much would it cost you to buy a new horse?”

The water carrier said that he could probably find one he could purchase for about six rubles. Reb Mordechai, realized that this was exactly the amount he had in his pocket, and took out the money he had saved to buy the lulav and etrog and placed it in the hand of the water carrier.

To really appreciate this act of kindness, you have to know how poor Reb Mordechai was, and how important to him it was to fulfill every mitzvah, especially the mitzvah to own a beautiful lulav and etrog. In fact, there is a concept known as, *hiddur hamitzvah*, which means we should try to enhance a mitzvah by being sure that our ritual objects are beautiful.

That night, Reb Mordechai walked into his modest cottage, and said to his wife, “Praised be the Holy One who has allowed me to fulfill the mitzvah of the blessing of the lulav and etrog.” His wife looked at him, somewhat incredulously, for she noticed that he had come home empty-handed. He explained to her, all other years we blessed God while holding a lulav and etrog in our hands and standing on the ground. This year we will perform the mitzvah while standing on a horse.”

Through deeds of loving kindness, we can find joy.