



Shmini: Genuine Joy

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In the aftermath of the tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu, God appeared to Aharon, the bereaved father, and instructed him:

“And the Lord spoke to Aharon saying, ‘Do not drink wine that will lead to intoxication, neither you nor your sons with you, when you go into the Tent of Meeting, so that you shall not die. [This is] an eternal statute for your generations.’” (Vayikra 10:8-9)

The *Kohanim* (priests) may not drink wine either before or when performing the Temple service. On a most basic level this was to ensure the sanctity and appropriateness of Kohanic behavior. In addition, the *Kohanim* were often consulted on matters of Jewish law and therefore, had to possess the clarity of mind to rule on complex issues. But why was Aharon given these instructions now? This could have been communicated at the beginning of the *Mishkan's* inauguration. Yet, God chose to communicate this to Aharon in the aftermath of the loss of his sons. Why?

The commentaries offer many different approaches. I would like to share with you an incredible insight by the *Ben Ish Chai* (Chacham Yosef Chaim, Chief Rabbi of Baghdad, 1835-1909):

“...For the Temple and wine are two opposites. The Temple itself has the ability to fill the heart of a person with incredible joy...however, wine was created to comfort mourners or those who have suffered misfortune, as the verse states, ‘give wine to the embittered soul.’ Therefore, when one comes to the Temple which is the source of all joy, why would he need to drink wine?”

Wine was created to dull pain, to take the edge off of difficult situations (when used in moderation). The Talmud explains that upon returning from burying a loved one, mourners were given a “cup of consolation,” a large glass of wine. God created something that can help remove some of the searing pain of life’s challenges. But this is not true joy. This is a masking or a dulling of the pain. At times, this is necessary as one is not yet ready to confront and tackle his broken heart. True joy comes from the Temple. True joy comes from connection with God. Happiness comes from within. The *Kohen* cannot drink wine when he comes to the Temple because God wants the *Kohen's* joy to come from his service and connection and not from an intoxicating beverage. God wants the *Kohen* to experience true and complete joy and not a contrived state of happiness resulting from masking life challenges. God wants the *Kohen* to feel *simcha*, not simply the absence of *tzaar* (pain).

God was speaking to a bereaved father. Aharon’s world had imploded as he had just experienced the loss of his beloved sons. God tells Aharon: *I know that life will never be the same for you. I know that although you have accepted My will and decree, your heart is shattered in a million pieces. But you can find a way to reclaim some measure of happiness through a life of sacred service and connection to the Divine. Don’t seek out happiness through dulling your pain; find joy in a life of meaningful, dynamic service.*

Wine has its place. There is no Jewish life-cycle event which doesn’t include wine. We will soon demonstrate our freedom by drinking 4 cups of wine at the Seder. ***Wine can help you feel happy – but it can’t make you happy.*** True happiness comes from within. True happiness is the result of living a meaningful life filled with connection to God and the Jewish people. Real *simcha* is the result of knowing that I am making a difference, and my life is purposeful. Genuine joy comes from knowing that I am striving to become the best version of me. The wine can help at times, but true joy can only be found in the Temple.