

Tue 6 April 2010

Dr Maurice M. Mizrahi

Congregation Adat Reyim

D'var Torah on 8th Day of Pessah [Weekday: Deut 15:19-16:17 + Maftir: Num 28:19-25]

You Shall Rejoice

Today's Torah portion is a special Torah portion reserved for the eighth day of Pessah when it falls on a weekday. In it, we read the following injunctions:

And you shall keep the festival of Shavuot to the Lord your God ...

And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite who is inside your gates, and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are among you... [Deuteronomy 16:10-11]

You shall observe the festival of Sukkot seven days...

And you shall rejoice in your feast, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite, the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are inside your gates. [Deuteronomy 16:13-14]

Samachta. You shall rejoice. How can you be commanded to rejoice? How can you command an emotion? We can be commanded to follow the rites and go through the motions, but what if we can't feel the inner joy we are commanded to feel?

Let's turn to the Talmud for enlightenment. In tractate Pesachim (a very appropriate tractate for today), it says

Our Rabbis taught: A man has the duty to make his children and his household rejoice on a festival, for it is said, 'And you shall rejoice in your feast' [Deut. 16:14].

-With what does he make them rejoice? With wine.

-Rabbi Yehudah said: Men with what is suitable for them, and women with what is suitable for them.

-Men with what is suitable for them: with wine.

And women with what? Rabbi Yosef said: In Babylonia, with colored clothes; in Eretz Yisrael, with ironed lined clothes. [Pesachim 109a]

So you rejoice with what makes YOU rejoice. It's different for every person. If you like wine, drink wine. If you like to wear fancy clothes, wear fancy clothes. This latitude is designed to make it easier for you

to rejoice. Of course, there will be times when circumstances prevent you from rejoicing. But you must try. The Talmud realizes the difficulty by asking the question: "With what does he make them rejoice?" It is not obvious.

Note that the Talmud goes beyond the Torah. The Torah merely says that you must rejoice. But the Talmud says that, in addition to that, you must make others around you rejoice as well. It says: "A man has the duty to make his children and his household rejoice." That extra duty may actually make it easier for YOU to rejoice. Sometimes the road to your own happiness passes through other people's happiness.

Finally, the Torah clearly implies that you do not rejoice alone. You rejoice with "your son, and your daughter and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite, the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are inside your gates". You rejoice with your entire community. Companionship is a key element of rejoicing.

[I note that the list does not mention your spouse, but let it pass. ☺]

In spite of the flexibility of letting you rejoice with what is best for you, our Sages had a saying: "En simchah ella be-bassar ve-yayin" -- "There is no rejoicing except with meat and wine." This custom is deeply entrenched in our tradition, but fortunately it is only a custom. I am personally not a fan of meat or wine. I will have them on special days as custom requires, but I happen to "rejoice" mostly with fancy cheese and sparkling fruit juice, preferably apricot, but it has to be dark, concentrated, tart, and with very little sugar, or I won't like it. So don't force yourself to eat meat or drink wine if you don't really enjoy them. And if they hurt you, there is no question that you should not have them. That's where pikuach nefesh comes in: Most commandments fall by the wayside to preserve life.

Another key element of rejoicing is that it must be something that you not only like but don't do very often. The Talmud says, in Tractate Shabbat:

The sons of R. Papa b. Abba asked R. Papa: We have meat and wine every day, so how shall we mark a change?

He answered: If you are accustomed to [dine] early, postpone the meal, if you are accustomed to [dine] late, have the meal earlier. [Shabbat 119a]

So do something different for Shabbat and the holidays.

There is another Talmudic principle when it comes to rejoicing: “En me’arvin simchah besimchah” — do not mix rejoicing and rejoicing. That is, you should not enjoy two different things at the same time. The Talmud in Tractate Chagigah is more explicit:

-Rabbi Daniel b. Kattina said in the name of Rav: How [do we derive] that weddings may not take place during Chol Hamoed [the Intermediate Days of a festival]?

-Because it is said [in the Torah]: "And you shall rejoice in your feast", [in your feast] but not in your wife. [Chagigah 8a-b]

Tractate Moed Katan elaborates:

-Rav Yehudah said, quoting Samuel; and Rabbi Eleazar said, quoting Rabbi Oshaia; and some say, Rabbi Eleazar, quoting Rabbi Hanina [it's very important to attribute proper credit in our tradition!]: ...

‘One rejoicing may not be mixed with another rejoicing.’

-Rabbah son of Rabbi Huna said: [One may not marry on Chol Hamoed because the groom would] abandon the rejoicing of the festival and busy himself with the rejoicing of his wife...

[Why is that a problem, as long as he rejoices?]

-Ulla said: Because of the exertion [required to rejoice with his wife. It prevents the groom from enjoying the festival.] [☺]

-Rabbi Isaac ben Nappaha said: Because it may [also] cause a decline in marriage and parenthood. [If people postponed marriage until a festival, they may not marry at all.] [Mo'ed Katan 8b]

So Jewish law says that weddings may not take place on Pessah or Sukkot or Shabbat or other special times, because one is obligated to rejoice specifically because of the festival and not because of a new wife. The rabbis relented, however, when it came to Hanukkah, Rosh Chodesh and Purim and allowed weddings at those times, as they are more minor holidays (Shulchan Aruch, OC 696:8).

While we are on the subject, Judaism seems to be definitely against certain forms of mixing. We can't mix two different kinds of celebration, we can't mix milk and meat in our food, we can't mix wool and linen in our clothing, we can't sow a field with two different kinds of seeds, we can't plough with two animals of different species, we

can't mix the holy and the secular in our activities (and when we switch from holy to secular we mark the switch with a Havdalah ceremony). Each activity must be experienced exclusively, and not shared with another activity. It's probably a bad idea to eat a good meal while watching a movie on TV. Another reason is that if something goes wrong with one activity, it does not spoil another activity.

In my experience, and in the same vein, it's also best to avoid two-track relationships. Your doctor should not be your friend, your lawyer should not be a relative, your significant other should not be your business partner, your boss should not be your spiritual advisor, your neighbor should not be your creditor. That's because when a problem develops with one track, you end up losing both tracks. If you fire your doctor because you don't think his advice is helpful, don't expect to keep him as a friend. And if you really like him as a doctor, but your friendship suffers because he ran off with your girlfriend, don't expect to keep him as a doctor. But that's a subject for another discussion.

So let's summarize. How can you rejoice on a holiday when you don't feel like rejoicing? Our Sages give us six ways:

- First, go through the motions required by the holiday.
- Second, think of something special you can get for yourself.
- Third, do something different.
- Fourth, surround yourself with family, friends and community.
- Fifth, consider it your duty to make sure THEY rejoice.
- Sixth, try to focus on only ONE source for rejoicing at a time.

Chag sameach. Let us rejoice.