

Kol Mevasser

SHABBAT RE'EH

25 Av 5769

August 15, 2009

Kahal Joseph Congregation • 10505 Santa Monica Boulevard • Los Angeles, CA 90025

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The True Meaning of Happiness

Rabbi Yosef Benarroch

I don't know about all of you but for me "Elul", the last month of the Jewish year, brings a certain amount of angst. First of all as much as I enjoy the "Selihot" that are recited throughout the month, I do not enjoy waking up at 4:30 am every day. Secondly the High Holidays, especially when compared to the other Jewish holidays, are not days that most people look forward to. Holidays like Pesah, Sukkot, Hanukah, and Purim, all revolve around customs that are not only fun, but also very family oriented. What most people associate with the High Holidays are long services, fast days, and fire and brimstone sermons. They are called the "Days of Awe" for a reason. As we near the beginning of the High Holiday season I would like to put this important part of the Jewish calendar into perspective.

This week's Torah portion entitled "Reeh" offers insight into the Jewish calendar. The Parasha discusses the three pilgrimage holidays of Pesah, Sukkot, and Shavuot. Although Jewish law obligates us to rejoice during all the three holidays, the Torah only specifically mentions the obligation to be joyous in association with the festival of Sukkot.

Regarding Sukkot the text states the following, *"You shall observe the festival of Sukkot for seven days after you have gathered your corn and wine. And you shall rejoice during the holiday, both you and your sons and daughters and servants and maidservants... seven days you shall celebrate before the Lord your G-d in the place that he has chosen, and the Lord will bless you... therefore you shall surely rejoice" (Devarim 16:13-15).*

In this short passage the Torah mentions the obligation to rejoice twice. Both times they refer to the festival of Sukkot. The obligation to rejoice does not appear by the other festivals. The Rabbis

PRAYER SCHEDULE

SHABBAT RE'EH

24 Av / Friday, August 14th

Shaharith6:30 am
Minhah & Arvith6:45 pm
Shabbat Candlelighting.....7:22 pm

25 Av / Saturday, August 15th

Shaharit8:30 am
Minhah & Arvith7:00 pm
Motzei Shabbat.....8:25 pm

Weekdays

26 Av / Sunday, August 16th

Shaharith7:30 am

27-30 Av/ August 17th to 20th

Shaharith6:30 am

SHABBAT SHOFTIM

Rosh Hodesh Elul

1 Elul / Friday, August 21st

Shaharith6:30 am
Minhah & Arvith6:45 pm
Shabbat Candlelighting.....7:14 pm

extend the obligation to the other festivals but that is done through association with the festival of Sukkot.

Why is rejoicing only written with regards to the festival of Sukkot? Furthermore if we take into account what I wrote earlier, then it is not altogether clear why rejoicing is associated with Sukkot. Why would rejoicing come at the heels of holidays (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) that are intense, are anything but fun, and frankly speaking by the time Sukkot rolls around most people are holidayed out? What message is the Torah trying to get across by juxtaposing the obligation to rejoice at the end of the High Holiday season?

The answer to this question is extremely significant and gets at the heart of what real happiness is all about. The main reason why most people are not happy is because they are not getting something that they want. Unhappiness is a state of mind that

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is usually caused by the feeling that something is missing. Ask the average person and they will tell you they are unhappy because they don't like their job, they don't earn enough money, and their spouse didn't turn out to be what they thought (these are to name just a few of the usual beef's).

The Rabbis offer a simple solution to this problem. In "Ethics of our Fathers" they state, "*Who is truly a rich person? One who is happy with their lot*" (*Ethics of our Fathers 4:1*). Happiness, explain the Rabbis, can only be achieved when we realize that whatever we have is exactly what we need. Happiness is a spiritual state of mind where a person accepts whatever lot they are given in life. Happiness is realizing that G-d gives you exactly what is good for you, not just part of the time but all the time. It is not easy to feel this way especially when things don't go our way, but the happiest people are those who feel satisfied regardless of their circumstances. It is for this reason that our Rabbis said, "*One is obligated to bless over seemingly negative events as they do over good events*" (*Talmud Berachot 54a*).

When we enter into this state of mind then we no longer worry about the way we look, the amount of money we have, or the people we live with. When we realize that G-d gives each and every one of us exactly what we need then we automatically feel joy. It is for this reason that faith is one of the crucial components needed to lead happy lives. When we have proper spiritual perspective then, and only then, can we begin to feel joy.

Perhaps we can better understand why joy is specifically mentioned in association with the festival of Sukkot and the strange juxtaposition of Sukkot (as the holiday of joy) coming immediately after the High Holidays. True the High Holidays are filled with angst. During the High Holidays we pray too much, fast more than we care for, and are hit over the head more frequently than we would like. But more than any other time of the year the High Holidays allow us to put our spiritual lives into perspective. They set down a simple idea that as we start the year what really matters is our spiritual wellbeing. We begin the New Year with such intensity to make sure that we will get our priorities straight. Namely, that we are in the world to live spiritually. The High Holidays come in order to inject us with a strong dose of faith as we begin the year. During the High Holidays we crown G-d as king and realize that he not only loves us but gives us exactly what we need (no more and no less) to live the best lives that we can.

Once we come to this realization then we are ready to enter the festival of Sukkot and to feel the joy that is the

result of this realization. It is for this reason that our Parasha mentions the obligation to rejoice during Sukkot. It comes to teach us that joy is a state of mind that is the result of proper spiritual living and perspective.

There is a verse in Proverbs that says the following, "*All the days of the poor person are bad, but he that is of a merry heart lives in a continual feast*" (*Proverbs 15:15*). One of the explanations of this verse is that the poor person refers to a person who has a poor perspective on life. The days of that person will always be bad because their state of mind does not allow anything different. But "the merry of heart" is a person who has worked to create a positive perspective and as such they "live in a continual feast".

The Talmud brings a good example of this principle in action in a story about one of the great Rabbis whose name was Rabbi Hiya. The Talmud explains that his wife would constantly cause him strife. In short she drove him crazy. He had good reason to complain and be bitter or even to divorce her. But in spite of her behavior the Talmud explains that when Rabbi Hiya would visit the marketplace he would always find a nice gift and bring it to her. Seeing this, one of his students asked him how he could buy presents for a woman who caused him so much grief. Rabbi Hiya answered, "*It is enough that she has raised our children and saved me from sin (that I owe her my gratitude)*" (*Yebamot 63a*). Instead of wallowing in negativity, Rabbi Hiya chose to be thankful and to see the good. In this way he accepted his lot and lived in joy. His spiritual perspective allowed him to make the best of a not so good situation.

As we enter into the final month of the year and get closer to the High Holidays we would all do well to remember (and internalize) this message. This time of the year is a time where we are supposed to be building our faith and strengthening ourselves spiritually. Success is not measured in what we have but in our ability to feel inner joy when the holiday of Sukkot comes around.

Published courtesy of the SEC

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Ge'onim: The Great Sephardic Scholars

Rabbi Saadia Gaon

Rabbi Saadia Gaon was born in Al Fayyum, Egypt, 882 and died in Sura Babylonia, in 942. During his life he was the universal leader of Jewry and a religious philosopher.

At the time, Baylonia was the primary focus of Jewish learning for many centuries. The heads of the Babylonian academies of Sura and Pumbedita were called *Gaonim* and were widely recognized as the preeminent scholars of their day. With this distinction came the authority to promulgate religious decisions for the community. Saadia was the greatest *Gaon* of all times. He lived during the time that the Muslims ruled Asia Minor.

In Saadia's day, he sought to reconcile the philosophical perspective of Islam, to which Jews living in Islamic countries were exposed, with the Torah. Much of Islamic philosophy at this time was grounded in the thinking of Aristotle and Plato, and so Saadia wrote about this, as well. His most famous book is entitled *Ha'Emunot Ve'hade'ot* ("Faith and Belief") and it was written originally in Arabic, later translated into Hebrew by the Ibn Tibbon family. In this book, Saadia attempts to reconcile Judaism with the philosophical thinking of Aristotle and Plato, his goal being to bring assimilated Jews back to Torah and halacha. Saadia demonstrates that the teachings of the Torah will stand the test of logical inquiry. He offers unassailable proofs that the universe was created *exnihilo* - out of nothing, that the Creator is One, that man has a soul, that the Torah was given to the Jewish people by God on Mount Sinai, and that man has the freedom to choose between good and evil and receives reward or retribution accordingly.

In addition, Saadia wrote the first Arabic translation of the Bible, which includes commentaries and grammatical notes. He also wrote the first Hebrew dictionary, and a book about Hebrew grammar. Muslims at this time were involved in Arabic language and grammar studies and Saadia hoped to inspire Jews to explore their own religious roots more deeply. The RAMBAM (Maimonides) said of Saadia, "If not for our master Saadia Gaon, Torah would have been forgotten in Israel." Among his many books, Rabbi Saadia also wrote a commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*.

In Saadia's day, one of the most significant threats to Jewish life came from the Karaites, a group whose origins lay in the Jewish community, but who had separated from the Jewish community in opposition to rabbinic Judaism. The Karaites maintained that the laws of the Talmud were not obligatory upon Jews because they were written not by God, but by the rabbis. The Karaites claimed that only the Torah comes from God and it, alone, should serve as the basis of Jewish authority and life. Traditional Judaism has always maintained that the Talmud is the Torah she'b'al peh (the Oral Torah, given at Sinai but transmitted orally for much of our history until it was finally written down in the academies of Babylonia). Saadia defended rabbinic authority against the claims of the Karaites.

Saadia maintained that human beings possess free will, the capacity to make choices about their behavior. Muslim philosophers at this time promoted the *Kallam*, a system of thought which denies the existence of free will as an illusion and even

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In Memoriam

These anniversaries occur from Shabbat, the 25th of Av (August 15, 2009) to Shabbat, the 2nd of Elul (August 22, 2009). It is customary to light a memorial candle in the evening and donate tzedakah. Family members are encouraged to attend services.

Shabbat / 25 Av

Simha bat Sulha Mitana

Sunday / 26 Av

Sasson ben Moshe

Monday / 27 Av

Lulu bat Shereen

Tuesday / 28 Av

Malka bat Rivka

Wednesday / 29 Av

Rivke bat Sarah

Thursday / 30 Av

Yisrael ben Mashiach

Shabbat / 2 Elul

Miriam bat Saul

**Yahrzeit names with asterisks are missing contact information for family members. To update the Kahal Joseph database, please call 310.474.0559.*

Refuah Shlemah

Please include these individuals in your prayers
Yonatan ben Alizah ▪ Mazal Tov bat Sulha
Mitana ▪ Jack Wickett ▪ Ayala bat Naomi
Yosi ben Esther ▪ Yaheskel ben Regina
Matilda Louisa ▪ Victor ben Pauline
Haim ben Mordechai ▪ Khayah Noa bat Sara
Pnina bat Esther ▪ Moshe ben Naji

Shabbat Kiddush
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denies causality of events in the universe, ascribe all power and will to Allah. Saadia parted company with Muslim philosophers over the issue of free will, for several reasons. First, if God is the first and only cause in the universe, then there is no difference between the righteous and sinners; all do the will of God. Hence there is no difference between a righteous deed and a sin. Second, if God is fully in control of people's behavior, then it makes no sense to punish one who breaks the law, since s/he is merely doing the will of God. Finally and most importantly from a Jewish perspective, in a universe totally dominated by the will of God, mitzvot have no purpose or meaning, since people are incapable of "obeying" or "disobeying" them. There can only be a commandment if there is someone capable of accepting the commandments. In an effort to emphasize the role of free will in Jewish thinking, Saadia placed great emphasis on the covenant made at Sinai, in which the Israelites freely obligated themselves to God. Hence Saadia maintained that God created us with free will, a concept that has always been central to Jewish thinking. May the merit of the tzaddik Rabbi Saadia Gaon protect us all, Amen.