

SUKKOT
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Is Fun Kosher?

For this morning, just a little unorthodox thought from an Orthodox rabbi.

First the question: what do you think is more important – fasting on Yom Kippur or being happy of Sukkot? The question sounds ridiculous; after all, if someone came over to you at 12 o'clock on Yom Kippur and said, “Why don't you eat something?” you would never dream of listening to them. But if someone came over to you on Sukkot and said, “Why aren't you happy?” you would feel comfortable in replying, “It's none of your business!” Fasting on Yom Kippur, or being happy on Sukkot? ... doesn't seem to be much of a question. But I read something written by a Gil Locks that really provides food for thought. The fact of the matter is, nowhere in the Torah are we told that you must *fast* on Yom Kippur. It doesn't say that in the Torah! All it says in the Torah is: “*V'inisem et nafshoteichem* – and you shall afflict your souls.” It doesn't say “don't eat!” It just says “afflict your souls.” Who says that “afflict” means “to fast?” The rabbis do! It is the rabbis who tell us that one means of affliction is to refrain from food for the whole day.

But when it comes to Sukkot, we don't need the rabbis to tell us what to do. God tells us! It is clearly stated in the Torah: “*Usmachtem lifnei Hashem Elokeichem shivat yamim* – and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.” Joy and being happy is so fundamental to this holiday that, in fact, it is the name of the holiday: “*Z'man simchateinu* – the season of our rejoicing.” In fact, this commandment is considered so important that whereas any “positive commandment that must be performed at a set time” – like eating in a Succah, women are exempt from, this one – being happy on Sukkot, is obligatory for both

men and women as well! Yes, a case can be made that being happy on Sukkot is as important – or more important – than fasting on Yom Kippur. After all, if one is ill, they can break the fast whereas during Sukkot, if one passes away, the mourning period is delayed. Happiness takes precedence.

So we are only left with the question: what are we to do to show that we are happy on Sukkot? How do we fulfill this mitzvah? I asked this question to “Reb Google” and these are some of the answers I found:

From the Ohr Somaych website, I was told: “The lesson we can draw from this festival is how to consecrate all of the occasions of simcha in our lives – birth, marriage and happy events – by channeling them into opportunities for recognizing the divine source of our prosperity.” On the Torah Web Foundation website I was told that because Sukkot comes right after Yom Kippur, “Teshuvah brings him into the presence of Hashem. It is this realization that brings about the immense joy of Sukkot. Since simcha and ‘being before’ Hashem go together, the closer we are to Hashem the more intense our simcha becomes.” These and other websites seem to see the simcha of Sukkot as being something spiritual, something linking us to God. But you know what? That’s not what Maimonides says! And that’s not what the Talmud says! Quoting from Maimonides’ book, The Commandments, “The words thou shalt rejoice in thy feast” include the further injunction of the sages that we are to rejoice by all possible modes of rejoicing, as by eating meat on the festivals, drinking wine, putting on new garments, distributing fruits and sweets to children and women and making merry with musical instruments and dancing in the sanctuary.” That doesn’t sound very spiritual to me! That sounds like fun! And I’m afraid that too many Jews today have forgotten that, yes, there is a time to have fun.

This week I read in the blog, Emes v’Emunah, how a business owned by ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel had scheduled its annual Sukkot outing for its employees, but some of the women working for the

company went to the rabbis and asked if it was appropriate for them to just go and have fun on a jeep tour. And the rabbis said no ... what they should do instead is go to Tsfat and tour the graves of the righteous. That sounds like fun!

And this is no aberration ... in recent years ultra-Orthodox rabbis have put a ban on concerts and celebrations, even where men and women were to sit separately. Some rabbis banned a Sukkot celebration that was being run by Chabad Chasidim! I wonder how these rabbis would have felt about some of their forbearers – the sages in the Temple times – where during Sukkot we are told, there was the Simchat Beit Hashoeva, a celebration at which they used to juggle flaming torches. The sages of old knew that there was a time to be spiritual but there also has to be a time to get physical. I read of a group of Lakewood rabbis who didn't like the idea of their children going on Chol Hamoed Pesach to the Great Adventure Park in New Jersey, feeling that it was a waste of learning time. Instead they arranged for special classes for the children to learn Torah and named the program "The Greater Adventure." I hope the children felt that way ... but I have my doubts! These are kids who have no TV, no Internet, no concerts, no movies ... no fun. I would recommend that they all take to heart the words of a respected educator from their own community, Rabbi Eli Teitelbaum, who wrote on the Orthodox blog, Yeshiva World, "When sports and concerts are forbidden and all forms of kosher entertainment are off limits, we are asking for trouble. If our kids can't find a place to vent their energy within a kosher environment they will find it elsewhere."

We, in the modern Orthodox world, as part of American society have got to recognize the importance of fun as well. We so structure the lives of our children ... the moment they get out of school their lives are filled with soccer and piano lessons and horseback riding and enrichment classes and ice skating ... without a minute to breathe and just have a little fun. In some schools there is a move to cut back on recess to give the kids more time to learn. But statistics show that less recess can lead to more obesity and depression.

Our day school tries to find the proper balance. Of course, we strive to create an atmosphere where children will take their Yiddishkeit and their learning seriously. But at the same time, we strive to create an atmosphere where our children will come to school with a smile on their faces and be greeted by teachers and administrators who are smiling as well.

And we adults should learn to put a bit more fun into our lives. In tough economic times, oftentimes the first thing to go is entertainment and a night out on the town. But in the long run that is not healthy. These things are usually looked up as being luxuries, when in fact they really are necessities. Life without fun and joy is not life in its fullest sense. We face so many challenges during the course of a lifetime: illness and pain, death, social and economic problems ... we are entitled to a little fun! The truth is, after Yom Kippur we have earned Sukkot!

So when you leave the synagogue today I don't want you to think that the rabbi said it wasn't important to fast on Yom Kippur ... it is important, very important! But it is also important to be happy on Sukkot, to find a little time to enjoy yourselves; fulfilling the words of the Torah: "*V'samachta b'chagecha* – and you shall rejoice in your festival." Amen.

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