

Simcha in Adar:

An Instrument of Truth and Completion

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On *Rosh Chodesh Adar*, I attended a funeral. It was an odd experience, trying to reconcile the *simcha* of this happiest of months with the necessary sadness of mourning. The officiating Rabbi said that on *Rosh Chodesh* we do not say a traditional *hesped*/eulogy. Instead, we say *divrei shevach*, words of praise about the person. The family members did just that; they spoke of a man who lived his life happily, showing his love through his “silliness” and light-hearted pranks, singing to his children and grandchildren in public places, building organizations and structures intended to help *klal yisrael*. They described a truly happy life, and it felt fitting to the day. As I sat in the last row, I contemplated my mixed feelings. *Adar* is the happiest month of the year, and as a woman, *Rosh Chodesh* holds even more sanctity and joy. I normally wear pearls to mark any new month, but it felt inappropriate to wear them to the funeral – even getting dressed was a philosophical exercise. What was I meant to feel? How was I meant to be *marbim b’simcha* in a situation like that?

The Torah has much to say about what *simcha* truly means. “*Simcha*” is not the same thing as “happiness.” In fact, they are almost exact opposites. The root of the English word “happiness” is “hap,” which means chance or luck, as in happenstance. Thus, the Western understanding of happiness is that it is something to be stumbled upon, or even pursued, but that comes with no depth or weight of meaning. It is an enjoyable emotion, a worthwhile feeling to have. Even if it is considered the main goal in life it carries no real significance in the end; this is why so many who pursue it for its own sake end up miserable.

Not so in Judaism; the very idea of “luck” or “happenstance” does not exist in our worldview. So what is the Jewish view of *simcha*, and how does one increase it in *Adar*? I will address three central aspects of *simcha*: using it as a means to an end, its relationship to Truth, and its connection to *shleimus* or completion.

First, is *simcha* a goal to be pursued? “Relief happiness,” according to Harvard Professor Tal Ben-Shahar, is the temporary feeling of relief we feel when we finally complete a goal or project, which we mistake for happiness. That feeling is always ephemeral. Once the goal is attained and the elation wears off we feel empty, and search for something else to work towards: another fix of relief happiness. This is the rat race in which so many of us run. Shahar says that if only we would focus on the journey rather than the final success or attainment, we would all truly be much happier, in a permanent way.¹ Happiness as a means rather than a goal is much more aligned with the Jewish understanding of *simcha*. In his commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, Rav Chayim Volozhin (1749-1821) says that one hour of Torah study while happy will lead to much more knowledge than many hours of study while sad.² Rav Chayim clearly holds that happiness is a tool to be utilized, particularly in the pursuit of Torah. So our first aspect of *simcha* according to Judaism is that it should be used as a means, rather than sought out as an end.

A second aspect of *simcha* is its connection to truth/*emes*. According to the Chazon Ish (1878-1953), “For one who knows the light of truth, there can be no sadness in the world.”³ “Truth” or “*emes*” is a tricky word

¹ Ben-Shahar, Tal. *Happier*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2007.

² *Ruach Chayim* 6:6*

³ Kovetz Igros Chazon Ish 1:36*

to define by any standard, and the Torah provides an almost limitless array of truths by which to live. But one universally accepted and all-encompassing understanding of *emes* is the reality of *Hashem's* Oneness, in the deepest sense of the word. Based on the Chazon Ish's assessment of the joy that accompanies truth, I put forth that knowledge of the total Oneness of *Hashem* and indeed of everything in creation is an essential aspect of *simcha*. We say this daily in the *Shema*: "Listen, Israel, *Hashem* is our G-d, *Hashem* is One." What is so comforting about this declaration? It is the understanding that all things in this world, from good to evil, joy to sadness, *Haman* to *Mordechai* and *Rosh Chodesh Adar* to a funeral all emanate from the same unified source. At the highest level, there is no true distinction; we only perceive the world as such because *Hashem* gives us the opportunity to choose between apparent opposites. In the end, we will finally understand how it all fits together, how it is all part of the grand plan for the world, and how not one moment was ever out of place. This is, in fact, the power of *Adar* and of the Purim story: everything that seemed disconnected and meaningless, was, in the end, all part of the unified design.

This of course implies that there is meaning and purpose in the world. Nothing just "happens," whether it is a "happy" occasion or a trying one. There is nothing that lies outside the realm of *Hashem's* oneness; it follows that nothing is meaningless, including the attack of Amalek or the death of a loved one. As we see in the Purim story, the Jewish people forgot this for a time; they lost sight of *Hashem's* involvement in the world, and thus His name is not mentioned once in the Megillah. It is up to us to notice that "*Hamelech*" refers to the true King, and that all of the seemingly random events of the Purim story and of our lives are not random at all.

The last aspect of *simcha* I'd like to explore is that of *shleimus*, or completion. According to the Gur Aryeh (1520-1609), *simcha* and *shleimus* are highly interconnected; one implies the other. He states this concept several times in varying ways: "there is only *shleimus* where there is *simcha*"⁴; "when a person is *b'simcha* then his soul is *b'shleimus*"⁵; "since a mitzvah is the *shleimus* of a person, it is therefore fitting that the *mitzvah* should be [done] *b'simcha*. *Simcha* is from *shleimus*, and when he has *shleimus* he is *sameach*."⁶ But then, what is "*shleimus*," and what makes someone feel complete? The Gur Aryeh implies in his writing that it involves the presence of the *Shechina*. I would go a step further with that and define it as highly related to the previous concept, that of oneness or unity. When one has *shleimus*, one feels not only that the *Hashem* is one and the world is of one unified purpose, but also that one is *a part of* that purpose in thought and action. As the Gur Aryeh says above, only through actively performing *mitzvot*, or in other words, the correct actions at the correct times, can one feel this sense of completion and unity. In fact, Rabbi Dr. Akiva Tatz writes exactly this: "real happiness is what you experience when you are doing what you should be doing."⁷ Perhaps, then, the feeling of *shleimus* comes when one feels unified in purpose, action, and understanding of the world. I can think of no greater *simcha* than that.

Hashem gave us a glorious gift of the Torah, filled with *mitzvot*. These *mitzvot* are not "commandments" as the translators would have us think. They are from the root "tzav," which is to bind. They are connectors, actions by which we can plug ourselves into the deeper spiritual purpose of creation. They are keys to the

⁴ Chumash Gur Aryeh Hashalem, Breishit 6:6*

⁵ Chiddushei Gur Aryeh, Shabbos 30b [1, 14b]*

⁶ Netiv haTorah, 18 [1, 70b]*

⁷ Tatz, Akiva. *The Thinking Jewish Teenager's Guide to Life*. New York: Targum Press, 1999.

*Translations from the Hebrew are my own.

locked and hidden meanings and energies of the universe. Attending a funeral to support a friend and remember a good person is a *mitzvah* because it does just that – it binds me to something deeper. But maintaining my sense of *simcha* on *Rosh Chodesh Adar* elevates this *mitzvah* even more – it reminds me of the oneness of creation, reminds me that there is nothing random in this world as *Haman* would have liked us to believe, and that true happiness is not a smile or a laugh (though those are wonderful and pleasurable benefits,) but rather a knowledge of the right thing to do at the right time so as to be an active participant in the true purpose of the world.

In summary, the Jewish view of *simcha* would seem to almost certainly include *emes* and *shleimus*, defined above as knowledge of *Hashem's* Oneness and personal inclusion in that Oneness through correct action. It is a means towards growth and spiritual greatness rather than an end in itself. In *Adar*, we have a particularly strong ability to feel and utilize this *simcha*, no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in.

I give us all a *bracha* that we should feel the true *simcha* of this time - the unity and purpose of creation and our own actions - and, more importantly, utilize it towards ever higher spiritual achievements in life.