



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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2ND DAY SHAVOUS/יום ב' דחג השבועות

SERMON TITLE:

G-D COMMANDS, "BE HAPPY"

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

2ND DAY SHAVOVS

G-D COMMANDS, “BE HAPPY”

Every Jewish holiday has its unique feature that distinguishes it from all other holidays. For example, Passover has matzah, Sukkos has the sukkah and so on.

But there is one thing that they all have in common—one thing that unites them all.

What might that be? The mitzvah to be happy.

This is the essential difference between Yom Tov, a Jewish holiday, and Shabbos.

On Shabbos, the theme mitzvah is oneg—pleasure. One is supposed to physically enjoy Shabbos—not in an indulgent way, but in a relaxing, refreshing way. One should sleep in, enjoy slow and delicious meals over a table surrounded by family and friends, and take the time at synagogue to find prayers and parts of the Torah that actually having meaning in your active life. That is what we call oneg Shabbos—the pleasures of Shabbos.

On Yom Tov, however, the theme mitzvah is not oneg but rather, simchah: Happiness. One is literally supposed to sing and dance for joy on Yom Tov. And how do you know that you’ve properly expressed the simchah theme of Yom Tov? When you’ve gotten yourself into a festive spirit, and you’ve gotten others into that same spirit too.

Now, how exactly does one make himself or herself happy?

Halachah, Jewish law, states that higher-quality foods should be purchased to honor the holiday: Better meat, fine wine, and so on. Also—gentlemen, listen carefully to this one—one should purchase an elegant gift for the wife before Yom Tov. As a matter of fact, even though Shavuos is a small holiday, the size of the present you buy for your wife isn’t—and the obscurity of Shavuos is no excuse. Maimonides also states that children should be given sweets, nuts and other treats.

As for making others happy on Yom Tov, Maimonides explains that real happiness can only be attained when you cheer up someone else—when you care about someone

else who has nothing. If you only care about yourself and only “happify” yourself—“happify” is a word I just made up; it means, “make happy”—that’s not the simchah of Yom Tov. That’s only making yourself and your belly happy.

In addition, holiday happiness is supposed to be so great that even if someone passes away and is buried on the holiday eve, the Yom Tov cancels out the Shivah seven-day mourning observance—and the Shloshim 30-day mourning observance.

Even moreso, there are two allowances made for Yom Tov that are not allowed on Shabbos. These two allowances further express the simchah of Yom Tov: One, doing food-preparation work (like cooking), and two, carrying in a public domain. The reason for both of these is Simchas Yom Tov: holiday joy. They increase our holiday happiness.

Another defining characteristic of Yom Tov that is specifically tied to holiday happiness is the recital in synagogue of Birkas Kohanim, the Priestly Blessing. Any man who is a Kohen—even if his last name is not Cohen—is asked to step to the front of the synagogue and bless everyone else.

Now, why is Birkas Kohanim recited specifically on Yom Tov? Why not on Shabbos? (As a matter of fact, Birkas Kohanim is recited in the Holy Land on every Shabbos—and every day in the holy city of Jerusalem. And many of our Jewish brethren who are Sephardim—also recite Birkas Kohanim every day.)

The reason, as the Talmud tells us, is that any Kohen reciting Birkas Kohanim must meet two qualifications: One, he must love his fellow Jews and his fellow Jews must love him, and two, he must be happy. And since on regular days in our current exile, everyone has his or her problems and baggage, making it hard to be happy, we recite Birkas Kohanim on Yom Tov—because everyone makes a special effort to forget all the problems and be happy on Yom Tov. (That may be the reason Birkas Kohanim is recited in Israel every day: Because they’re happy there all the time :)

But what really makes Yom Tov happy?

Is it because we eat good food? That’s only temporary. Even the good wine is only temporary. If you get a little tipsy, you may think you’re happy, but once you sober up, it’s back to normal. So while the good food and wine of Yom Tov may make us feel happy, they are only outer expressions that the mitzvah of being happy is being kept.

But, you ask, what really is causing that happiness? So I’ll tell you! The simchah comes from being happy that we are Jews.

As we say every day in our prayers, "Ashreinu! Mah tov chelkeinu, oomah na'im goraleinu, oomah yafa y'rooshasainu!" That means, "We are fortunate! How good is our portion, and how pleasant is our lot, and how fine is our heritage!"

These three things, portion, lot and heritage, refer to G-d, the Jewish Nation and the Torah.

When a Jew gets up in the morning, he or she ought to jump out of bed and dance for joy at being born Jewish. After all, to be born Jewish and have G-d Himself give you the Torah is to be born into a rich, meaningful life.

The story is told of Rabbi Shmuel Munkess, the legendary student of the Alter Rebbe about how he reacted when a fire once broke out in his home.

In those days, they didn't have the equipment we have today to fight fires, and when a fire would break out, it would sometimes destroy entire neighborhoods.

When Reb Shmuel's home caught fire, Reb Shmuel was in the synagogue. Someone called him and told him, "Your house is on fire!" He arrived home to see his entire house going up in flames.

Reb Shmuel began to dance.

People asked him, "What are you doing?" He simply replied, "When a non-Jew's home burns down, his false gods burn down too. But with this Jew, his house may have burned down, but G-d remains with him."

Now, depression alone is no sin. However, it is the root cause of all sins. Conversely, simchah is not a mitzvah in its own right—but it is the gateway to all mitzvos and good things in life.

And what indeed is the greatness of happiness?

For one thing, G-d does not like depressed people. Sure, G-d is with depressed people, and G-d does not abandon depressed people—but our Sages tell us that the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, only settles upon a person when he or she is happy. As King David tells us in Psalms, "Strength and gladness are in His place." So when a person is depressed or down, it's as if he pushes G-d's presence away.

Secondly, let me tell you a secret: Kabbalah teaches us that being happy sweetens Heavenly verdicts. Kabbalah explains that when a person has problems, it's only natural to get depressed. But the real way to sweeten this verdict, meaning, these

problems, is by being happy—because when G-d sees that the person is happy despite the problems, He listens to his prayers.

The reason for this is G-d is like a shadow—whatever you do, that's how He reacts to you too. In other words, if you are down, G-d reacts in a “down” way too. On the other hand, when a person is happy, it triggers happiness on G-d's part too.

As one of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's most famous teachings go: “Mitzvah gedolah lihyos b'simchah tamid”—it's a great mitzvah to be constantly happy.

Thirdly, there is a well-known song in Chasidic circles: “Der Rebbe Hut Geheisen Freilach Zein”—“The Rebbe Ordered: Be Happy!” This song is said to come from the Mittlerer Rebbe, Rabbi Dov Ber, the second Chabad Rebbe, who told his Chasidim on his deathbed to celebrate and be happy on the anniversary of his liberation from Czarist prison—which fell the very next day, the same day on which he was buried. Still, the Chasidim followed orders and rejoiced, dancing and singing, “The Rebbe ordered: Be happy!”

The superiority of happiness is expressed even more on Shavuos, because on that day we began being a nation—which is why there is no greater joy than being part of the Chosen People, which became chosen on Shavuos.

In conclusion, let us mention Yizkor, which is shortly coming up.

In these final moments of Galus, Exile, with all our problems, we must be happy simply because G-d said so (just like the Mittlerer Rebbe's Chasidim rejoiced because the Rebbe said so). And if you want to know what you can do for our dear departed loved ones, I submit to you, my friends: Being happy is what you can do for your loved ones.

There is nothing greater that you can do for them—or for yourself—than showing them that you are continuing in the ways of Judaism, and, most important of all, doing so happily.

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