



## Is Purim supposed to be a happy day (i.e., a day of *Simcha*)?

By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman

At first glance, the question posed in the title: "Is Purim a day of *Simcha*?", is nothing short of preposterous. After all, it is generally accepted that if there is any day of the year which is a day of *simcha*, it is surely Purim. After all, the classic English definition of *simcha* is joy or happiness. Purim is the day where people go all out to bring joy- from dressing up to drinking, joining parties to delivering food packages. What could be more delightful than that?

The Torah makes it very clear that one should serve Hashem with *simcha*, attributing some of the greatest trials and tribulations that can befall the Jewish people for their failure to serve Hashem with *simcha* (*Devarim* 28:47). The need for serving Hashem with *simcha* is explicit in *Tehillim*:

תהלים פרק ק פסוק ב

Serve Hashem with *simcha*; come before him with joyous song.

עבדו את ה' בשמחה באו לפניו ברננה:

This concept of serving Hashem with *simcha* would seem to be the motto of Purim festivities, as the *pesukim* themselves describe:

On the same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had been transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of **festive joy**. They were to observe them as days of **feasting and joy**, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor.

כַּיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר נָחוּ בָהֶם הַיְּהוּדִים מֵאוֹיְבֵיהֶם  
וְהַחֹדֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר נִהְפָּךְ לָהֶם מִיָּגוֹן לְשִׂמְחָה וּמֵאֵבֶל  
לְיוֹם טוֹב לַעֲשׂוֹת אִתָּם יָמֵי מְשֻׁתָּה וְשִׂמְחָה  
וּמְשָׁלוּחַ מְנוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ וּמִתְּנוּת לְאֲבִיוָנִים:

Purim's classification as days of *mishteh v'simcha* seem to clearly indicate: Purim is nothing less than a day of unadulterated *simcha* and joy.

Yet, while the concise definition of *simcha* is joy or happiness, those words themselves lack a precise explanation. The Torah seems to make it clear that *simcha* is a deep emotional experience achieved by one who feels a unique closeness to Hashem. This is expressed clearly in the *pasuk*:

דברים פרק יב, יב

**And you shall rejoice in the presence of Hashem** your God- you, your sons, your daughters, and your servants and your handmaidens, and the Levite that is in your gates for he has no portion and apportioned land among you.

וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אַתֶּם וּבְנֵיכֶם וּבָנוֹתֵיכֶם  
וְעַבְדֵיכֶם וְאִמְהַתֵיכֶם וְהַלְוִי אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֵיכֶם כִּי  
אֵין לוֹ חֶלֶק וְנַחֲלָה אִתְּכֶם:

*Simcha* is as of Rav Yosef Dov Ha-Leivi Soloveitchik zt"l states, "an internal experience; it has nothing to do with the external behavior of man... a quiet meditative experience." (See Days of Deliverance, p. 94-5). He therefore explains how *simcha* can really be achieved:

#### Days of Deliverance p. 104

Joy according to *halakhah* can be experienced only when the person is in the presence of God. Whenever the Torah says "ve-samachta, you shall rejoice", there is always a qualification, "*lifnei Hashem E-lokekha*, before the Lord your God"... the feeling of joy and the awareness of the Almighty are identical. Man feels that he has come to the wellspring of Being. He feels very close to his roots, that he is, somehow, in the presence of his Maker. Man experiences His companionship and then there is joy, in the sense of self-fulfillment.

Joy according to Judaism is not an emotion or a mood. Moods are passing and superficial. They are not integrated into the personality, and they do not express the inner-awareness of the personality. Sometimes people can fall into a depression mood. This does not mean that their I-exist awareness is weakened or undermined. A mood can be due to a smile or a word dropped by an acquaintance, or an item read in the paper. A mood can be provoked by any stimulus. On Purim, it is a mood, not an experience, that is evoked.

If so, is the *simcha* of Purim really *simcha* at all? All the outer expressions of joke and levity associated with Purim don't seem to fit the bill.

## Approach 1: Purim is Not Really a Day of *Simcha*

In fact, Rav Soloveitchik reasons that in all honesty, the Purim festivities associated are not in fact expressions of *simcha* but rather *mishteh v'simcha* as described in the *pesukim*. He states:

### Days of Deliverance p. 94-5, 105

On Purim, the popular concept of *simcha* is accepted: joy and gaiety. It has nothing to do with a feeling of tranquility, serenity, or peace of mind. It is not an inner experience. It is more acting "as if I were happy". Sometimes we see people acting as if they are happy, but it is a false sense. People try to deceive themselves and deceive others and somehow give the impression as if they were happy, while they are in fact very unhappy and depressed. And this concept of happiness was introduced for Purim.

... we do not celebrate Purim like Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. *Hazal* wanted to emphasize the distinctiveness of Purim. It is not the type of holiday that should be celebrated with *Hallel*- with the awareness of being *Lifnei Hashem*. The victory is not final; the triumph is not decisive; a repetition is possible. That is why we cannot equate the celebration of *Purim* with *simchat ha-regel*, the joy of the festival.

Although Rav Soloveitchik's analysis does seem to point out an inconsistency with the Purim holiday and the concept of *simcha*, very possibly Purim's goal is to change our perception about life, and even make sure we redefine our understanding of *simcha*.

## Approach 2: *Simcha* Requires Removing One's Self-Absorption

Very possibly, the reason why *simcha* requires a feeling of *lifnei Hashem* is not only due to the need to feel connected to the ultimate power in the world, but also to be able to be focused beyond one's own personality. Purim forces the individual to take a new look at life, and to realize Hashem's impact in one's life even when His presence isn't announced.

The entire story of Purim involves Hashem's hidden salvation, as Hashem redeems the Jewish people without fanfare, under the disguise of circumstance and coincidence. The beauty of the Purim miracle involved the realization that the real *Melech*, i.e., king, who was calling all the shots behind the scenes was none other than Hashem, the *Melech Malchei HaMelachim*, the king of all kings.

The *simcha* of Purim involves being able to look beyond oneself, and to reframe our vision. Seeing Hashem's hand in our lives allows for a new perception of reality, and helps us recognize the plight of others around us as well, as we share our joy with them.

### *Simchat Purim*- Not a Singles' Event

All the aspects of the celebration of Purim revolve around recognition of the reality that surrounds us, which is often easily overlooked when one is self-absorbed. Purim requires a recognition of Hashem's hand in all the "natural" events that surround us. After expanding our vision and seeing

Hashem's hand, we can further expand our vision to see the others around us as well. A quick look at all of the *mitzvot* of Purim indicates this, indeed, is the focus of the day.

<b>Reading the Megilla</b>	The Megilla is read twice on Purim. Initially it is read at night as an expression of the crying and tears that brought about the salvation, and during the morning as an act of Hallel, praising Hashem for His deliverance, even if He did so in a hidden manner.
<b>Mishloach Manot</b>	Sharing food with others illustrates how our joy on Purim is something we share with others, through consumption of physical delicacies that remind us of our nation's physical survival.
<b>Seudat Purim</b>	The festive meal on Purim is ideally not supposed to be eaten alone, but in the presence of others where one can share joy with others.
<b>Matanot LaEvyonim</b>	These gifts to the poor are beyond the normal giving of tzedaka, and they entail providing for anyone who puts out their hand in need, a clear expression of consideration for others.

Although there is great debate as to whether one is supposed to become inebriated on Purim, it is clear that if doing so is a self-focused attempt to "have a blast", it won't bring one to a deep expression of *simcha*. However, if it is part of an inclusive *seuda* aimed at bridging the gaps between people by breaking down the barriers of separation, then drinking might not be completely off limits. Additionally, although dressing up in costumes is not necessarily part of the Purim festivities, the custom would seem to be partly based on allowing people to realize that our first impressions of what we see in the world might be something else in disguise, is surely Purim-worthy. The Purim miracle finds itself hidden amongst event after event that could be explained logically, overlooked, and even attributed to "chance" or luck. Yet the job of the *megillah* and Purim is to finding the hand of God, the true המלך that lies behind everything, and is really calling the shots- while camouflaged in the costume of a king of flesh and blood or even Haman. Dressing up is a custom that originated in order to highlight the hidden, to remind us that what you see is not always what you get.

### **True *Simcha* Means Making Others Happy**

The fact that *simcha* requires adjusting one's perception to see beyond one's own ego is expressed clearly in the *halachot* of Purim as well. If one were to wonder, what is the most important *mitzva* of the day on Purim; which of the *mitzvot* mentioned before should primarily highlight the day's festivities?

Although common perception might lead one to believe that the time, energy, and expense of the festive meal/ drinking or the elaborate food baskets often given for *mishloach manot* should be one's primary Purim concern, the truth is otherwise. While these *mitzvot* are an essential part of the day, the Rambam notes that the often forgotten *mitzvah* is really the most significant, and the explanation he provides is enlightening:

It is preferable for a person to be more liberal with his donations to the poor than to be lavish in his feast or in sending portions to his friends. Indeed, there is no greater and more splendid happiness than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows and the strangers. One who brings happiness to the hearts of these unfortunate individuals resembles the Divine Presence, of which it is stated (Yeshayahu 57:15): "To revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive those with broken hearts."

מוטב לאדם להרבות במתנות אביונים מלהרבות בסעודתו ובשלוח מנות לרעיו, שאין שם שמחה גדולה ומפוארה אלא לשמח לב עניים ויתומים ואלמנות וגרים, שהמשמח לב האמללים האלו דומה לשכינה שנאמר (ישעיהו נ"ז) להחיות רוח שפלים ולהחיות לב נדכאים.

The Rambam explains that the most significant mitzvah of Purim and its greatest expression of joy is the mitzvah of *matanot laEvyonim*, the special form of *tzedaka* performed on Purim. The reasoning the Rambam provides is that the greatest joy there is involves performing acts that make others, especially those in unfortunate situations, happy. One who gets a high from providing for others who can't afford their own needs, acts in a divine manner. Such acts make man like God and are the greatest expressions of holy *simcha*!

If this understanding is correct, then Purim calls for a double-take on what the *simcha* of Purim is all about. As we engage in the beautiful outer expressions of Purim's joy, let's hope that our focus on the other helps us see God's hand in our life, and in the process strengthening our relationship with Hashem will also remind us that the most holy form of joy is bringing joy to others, just like Hashem does to us.

