

"WHICH WAY THE WIND BLOWS"

The distinguishing feature of every Jewish holiday is simhah, joy or happiness. The Torah commands us: Ve'hayita akh sameiah, "And thou shalt be altogether joyful!"

Now, while this particular commandment is included in the Torah's legislation of the festival of Sukkot, there is no reason to restrict it to that holiday. Indeed, the mitzvah of simhah applies to every holiday. It is somewhat astonishing, therefore, to discover that the Talmud finds it necessary to apply the requirement of simhah specifically to the present holiday, that of shemini atzeret. Thus the Talmud (Sukkah, 48a) says: le'rabet leilei yom tov ha-aharon le'simhah, that the commandment to be happy on the holiday includes not only the first days of Sukkot, but the last days -- which means shemini atzeret -- as well.

(What makes this Talmudic statement even more surprising is the fact that the word akh, as in ve'hayita akh sameiah, is usually understood le'ma'et, to be exclusive; that is, the word akh or "only" usually means to restrict what follows. In this case, however, the Talmud understands it in the reverse: le'rabet, you must be happy not only on the first day of the holiday, but le'rabet, it must be inclusive and extend to the last holiday as well).

Why the necessity for emphasizing simhah even on atzeret?

Perhaps we can understand it by a story that the Talmud elsewhere (Yoma, 21b) tells of a popular custom that used to take place as soon as the entire Sukkot holiday, including shemini atzeret, was over and done with. People would gather about the Temple, and ha-kol tzafin le'ashan ha-maarakhah -- everyone would peer intently at the column of smoke that would rise from the altar, where the logs were burning so as to provide a source of fire for the sacrificial service. As the column of smoke rose, all eyes would be glued to it, to see which way the wind would blow it. If the column would blow to the north, then the poor were happy and the well-to-do farmers were sad, for a north wind indicated that there would be early rain that season, and their produce was in danger of rotting, and therefore they would have to sell their harvest at a low price. If the column tended to the south, the poor were sad and the farmers were happy, because a south wind indicated late rain, and therefore the fruit and wheat could be kept until the prices rose steeply. If it was an east wind, everyone would be happy, for nature would balance perfectly for everyone. If there was a west wind, everyone was sad for it indicated probable drought and famine.

Now we may understand the need for the emphasis on being

happy even on shemini atzeret. For as soon as this holiday was over, people would rush to find out which way the wind was blowing. And so, quite naturally, even during the holiday itself, in anticipation of this event, the peace of mind, the quiet and serene joy that is so essential for the holiday, would already begin to vanish. During the holiday itself, the mind of the Jew and his heart would begin to concentrate not on ve'hayita akh sameiah, "be altogether joyful" before God, but: which way does the wind blow? The Rabbis of the Talmud, therefore, took special caution and went to special pains to remind us that we must banish such anticipation of worry from our hearts, and as long as we are in the midst of the festival we ought retain a full and complete sense of simhah.

That same teaching applies with no less force and relevance to us in the mid-twentieth century than it did to our ancestors during the Second Commonwealth, for we, too, are constantly concerned about which way the wind blows. Here we are, toward the end of a marvelous and joyous holiday. Yet, can anyone doubt that in the minds of so many of us, during our services this morning and during the rest of the afternoon to come, the major concern was not the meaning of our prayers or the attainment of true joy, but worry about tomorrow and the day after? We are still in the midst of shemini atzeret, and already we are worrying: will it be an economy of boom or bust, will the stock market be bullish or bearish, will the economy go up or down, will we experience recovery or recession?

Everyone has his theory, and everyone anxiously awaits some sign of which way the wind blows.

But under such conditions, even if the ultimate result is favorable, the worry and the tenseness, the anxiety and the concern in anticipation, frequently vitiate whatever benefits may obtain later on. In addition, such worry in advance destroys the sanctity of the Yom Tov, it empties the holy day of its contents of holiness. The Rabbis therefore remind us: Ve'hayita akh sameiah, le'rabot. leilei yom tov ha-aharon le'simhah -- hold off your worries, postpone your problems, delay your anxieties. It is still Yom Tov, and we must be observant of the commandment to experience joy even on the eve of the day when we return to office and market place and start wondering about what the future will bring, about which way the wind will blow that column of smoke in its many modern guises.

This is more than just good advice, or a wise recommendation. To experience simhah on the holiday is nothing less than a mitzvah, a commandment. To declare happiness a commandment presupposes a major psychological principle: that joy is the result not only of external circumstances, but of an inner orientation. Whether I am happy or not depends not only upon whether my needs are fulfilled by the world, but also upon whether I know what to want and how to react to the world. In other words, my personal disposition can be controlled by an act of my will. My state of mind is not an infin-

itely plastic piece of clay molded by outside events; it is something that I can create if I exercise enough control.

That is a hard doctrine to accept. Most of us would prefer to believe that our happiness or unhappiness is the result of what life brings us, and that if we lack happiness it is exclusively the result of our miserable fate and that we are the unwilling victims of cruel circumstances. Now there is no doubt that simhah is to a very large extent decided by the conditions of the world in which I find myself; but -- not totally and exclusively so. There is a story that Hasidim tell of one of their great teachers, and that the Mitnagdim tell of one of their great rabbis -- and this in itself is evidence of the authentic Jewishness of the story, whether or not it literally occurred. The great Rabbi and sage about whom the story is told was in the midst of dancing on Simhat Torah, filled with heavenly and rhapsodic simhah. Suddenly a student came into the singing and dancing crowd and furtively handed the Rabbi a telegram. The Rabbi glanced at it, blanched, and returned forthwith to the dancing and the singing. The messenger was stunned, for the telegram had informed the Rabbi that his only daughter was killed in a distant city. The Rabbi thus continued in his state of joy and happiness until the day was done and the havdalah recited; after which he burst out in uncontrollable weeping and mourning. What a superb illustration of self-control: mourning is forbidden on the holiday, and therefore the Rabbi was able to will himself into a state of

simhah, holding off his deeply felt grief until the Yom Tov had passed.

Some will say that this is incredibly inhuman; I will agree only that it is far greater than what is normal. Certainly, few of us could hope ever to attain such a degree of mastery over our own instincts -- may the Lord spare us from such tragedy! But the same principle is available and accessible to each and every one of us in modified form. We can, indeed, exercise some form of control over our state of mind. We may indeed will to be happy, to be joyous, to experience simhah. We can, if we want to strongly enough, emerge from the doldrums of self-pity and achieve a state of tranquility or serenity.

Business worries, professional concerns, even family problems should never be allowed to gain the upper hand over our inner equilibrium. That they often do does not mean that they always must. Ve'hayita akh sameiah, we must remain happy and joyous even at a critical period when the future is unknown and mysterious and we do not yet know which way the wind will blow. No wonder that today we recited the special prayers for geshem, for rain, which is a symbol of prosperity. One would imagine that if the prayers were answered affirmatively by God, there would be no cause for any further concern by us. Yet as soon as the Cantor will announce with a flourish that it is God who is mashiv ha-ruah v-morid ha-geshem, who

makes the wind blow in the right direction and gives us abundant geshem, we will all call out: li'verakhah ve'lo li'kelalah, may it be for blessing and not, Heaven forbid, for a curse. Why is this necessary? Because even prosperity can be a curse if, in the course of achieving it, we worry ourselves to distraction. It is a truism that not everyone who is rich is happy; it is not often appreciated that in the very process of amassing wealth, one often sacrifices his personal simhah on the altar of affluence. Our prayer, therefore, is that we be the recipients of God's gift of wind blowing in the right direction, that of geshem -- but li'verakhah ve'lo li'kelalah: may we achieve it in a blessed way, not in an accursed way. May we attain our hearts' desire for prosperity, but not at the cost of personal simhah. May we each achieve our professional goals -- whether of fame or fortune -- without at the same time ignoring a wife, neglecting children, abdicating character and principles, and forgetting about the spiritual dimension of life.

I expect that there are some who will take exception to what I have been saying. It is an altogether expected reaction of the sophisticated intellectual of today to dismiss with contempt any concern by religion for the peace of mind and serenity of ordinary folk, and to consider such concern contaminated by the dubious doctrines of Norman Vincent Peale. However, such re-

actions notwithstanding, the Torah is interested that we experience simhah, that the tempest within the heart be stilled, that during Shabbat and Yom Toy we enjoy a quiet and sacred serenity. There is, after all, a certain limited validity to the irenic or pacifying quality of religious faith. A calm mind is no less desirable, for one's spiritual welfare, than a healthy body.

Nevertheless, we must confess that if this were the end of the story, our critics would be justified. If religion is meant only to give us happiness and peace of mind and tranquility, then it is not religion; it is nothing more than a sublimated tranquilizer. Even in the course of counselling us to will ourselves into a state of simhah and postpone our worrying about which way the wind will blow, the Torah inculcates us with a spiritual and ethical principle of the greatest significance.

For how, indeed, shall we go about developing this state of mind called simhah at a time when we are consciously enmeshed in worrying about the future?

The answer that Judaism offers is of the utmost importance: it tells us that the more concerned you are with your own happiness, the less likely you are to achieve it. For the constant pursuit of one's own happiness means that simhah is defined in a purely egoistical fashion: How can I be happy? But, "If I

am for myself, who am I?" This way leads only to frustration and bitterness. True simhah is attained only when I forget about myself, only when I lose myself, only when my concern is with making others happy. That is why the commandment to experience simhah on Yom Toy is coupled, in the Torah, by the commandment to provide for the joy and happiness of the poor and the widow, of the orphan and the stranger and the Levite.

Perhaps the best example is that joyous last day of the festival which we shall observe tomorrow: Simhat Torah. What does that mean, to be happy with the Torah? Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Ladi explained that Simhat Torah means not only to be happy with the Torah, but, even more: le'sameiah et ha-torah -- to make the Torah happy, to provide the opportunity for simhah to the One who gave the Torah! Thus, on this day, we determine to live our lives so that we give God the occasion for "nachas," that we make Him happy: yismah ha-Shem be'maasav. Then we shall be the prime recipients of this Divine gift of simhah.

For indeed, when we forget about the satisfaction of our own desires and concentrate instead upon making the Torah happy, upon affording "nachas" to the Almighty, then we shall find that our lives are fulfilled -- no matter which way the wind blows! A life of service is the way to a life of serenity. Living according to Torah will lead to a life of tranquility. Devotion to Judaism brings you unexpected joys. In the striving for holiness

we will discover the possibilities of happiness.

Tomorrow's worries will, eventually, become yesterday's forgotten trivia. No matter which way the wind blows, it will soon dissipate itself and vanish. But true simḥah, as we have defined it, lasts forever; for if it is achieved by means of le'sameiah et ha-torah, of making the Torah happy, and the Torah is eternal -- then our simḥah is eternal too.

If we are concerned about receiving "nachas" from our own children, let us attempt, in our own lives, to grant that same blessing of "nachas" retroactively to our parents and grandparents whom we shall shortly memorialize in our Yizkor prayers. If we want God to make us happy, it is we who must first make Him happy.

Let us, on this great and wonderful day, cease worrying about tomorrow and commence being grateful for today and yesterday; for herein lies the secret of simḥah.