

SHVI' I SHEL PESACH - Unending Joy

Category: Holidays, Pesach

Good Yom Tov!

In the mid-1600s, a high-ranking British government official named Samuel Pepys (pronounced Peeps) kept a diary for about ten years. The diary, one of the best records of daily from that era, made him famous. During the time he kept his diary, Samuel Pepys witnessed a plague of animal disease that swept Europe, the great Fire of London, and war between Britain and Holland.

Among the many things he also described in his diaries was a visit to the first synagogue established in England. So first, a little bit of British Jewish history here.

The Jews of England were expelled in 1290, but in 1656, thanks to the influence of Rabbi Menashe Ben Yisrael of Amsterdam, the great philanthropist and activist, Oliver Cromwell, the leader of England at the time, declared that they were no longer enforcing the existing laws that barred Jews from living in the country and establishing open Jewish communities within its borders.

So on October 14, 1663, Samuel Pepys went to visit the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in the city of London. Now, the actual facility that Pepys visited had been set up in the private home of a member of the Jewish community. This man was a Portuguese Jewish merchant.

Mr. Pepys' visit was actually his second; earlier, he had been present at a memorial service held at the dedication of the synagogue. The memorial service was very lofty and serious in tone— but here, at his second visit, he encountered something else entirely: an exhilarating sight that left him speechless. Here's how he describes it in his journal:

"...after dinner my wife and I, by Mr. Rawlinson's conduct, to the Jewish Synagogue: where the men and boys in their vayles (i.e. tallitot), and the women behind a lattice out of sight; and some things stand up, which I believe is their Law, in a press (i.e. the Aron) to which all coming in do bow; and at the putting on

their vayles do say something, to which others that hear him do cry Amen, and the party do kiss his vayle. Their service all in a singing way, and in Hebrew. And anon their Laws that they take out of the press are carried by several men, four or five several burthens in all, and they do relieve one another; and whether it is that everyone desires to have the carrying of it, I cannot tell, thus they carried it round about the room while such a service is singing ... But, L-d! To see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true G-d, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this.”

To Mr. Pepys’ misfortune, no one had told him that the day he chose to visit the synagogue was no less than the day of Simchas Torah. Never had Mr. Pepys seen such flaming celebration in any house of worship as our celebration on this holiday—when we dance with the Torah scrolls as if the whole world is one big wedding and the scroll is the bride, with everyone dancing with abandon like King David himself as he escorted the Ark of G-d to Jerusalem.

Now, when you say “Judaism,” it’s doubtful that the first thing that comes to mind is “joy” or “excitement.” It’s more likely that one would first think about the stringencies of Halachah (Jewish law) and Jewish philosophy, or about the rivers of tears flowing through Jewish history. Jews love summarizing their holidays like this: “They persecuted us. We survived. Let’s eat!” But still, the piercing truth that emerges from so many chapters of Psalms is a joy of the purest kind.

What’s more, we celebrate Shvii Shel Pesach today, and on our holidays, we typically are quite celebratory.

Some philosophers say that happiness is the highest aspiration of the human race. We desire many things, but most of them are means by which to get other things. Only one thing is constantly desired for its own sake, and not as a tool for some other thing: happiness.

This sentiment and this concept exist in the world of Judaism, too; “Ashrei” is the first word in the Book of Psalms and is also one of opening words of our daily regular prayers. But in the Tanach, joy is talked about much more.

Joy and happiness are two different things. A person could be happy alone. But in the Torah, joy is never something with which to stay alone; it’s always shared

with another.

For example, the Torah tells us that in the first year of marriage, a groom must not be drafted into the army for war. Why? “He shall be clean for his home for one year, and he shall gladden his wife whom he has taken” (Devarim 24:5). Or, for example, a person bringing Bikurim (the first fruits) to the Beis Hamikdash is commanded: “And you shall rejoice in all the good that the L-rd your G-d has given you and your household; you and the Levite and the stranger in your midst” (Devarim 26:11). That means that in order to express joy, one needs to share that joy with the Levite and the convert.

As the Rebbe says (Sichah, 11 Shvat 5731), the reason that we invite guests for the holiday is because we are commanded to be joyful on the holiday—and having a guest triggers joy. And the Rebbe adds that we see clearly that when a person is enjoying himself, the other will not interfere—and on the contrary, joy is only complete in the company of others.

Indeed, one of the most amazing verses in the Torah is the one that states that if curses should befall the Jewish Nation, it can only be for one unique reason: “Because you did not serve your G-d with joy and goodness of heart out of an abundance of all” (Devarim 28:47). And a reduction in joy is the first sign of spiritual atrophy.

But there are other differences between joy and happiness. Happiness is something that can

(and should) carry on throughout life. But joy is of the moment. Happiness leans towards being on the cold side of emotions, but joy makes you dance and sing. In a moment of uncertainty, it's hard to feel happiness—but at the same moment, it's still possible to feel joy.

So Shvii Shel Pesach is a day of song. We read the Song of the Sea from the Torah—how the Jewish Nation sang and thanked G-d for the great miracle of the Splitting of the Reed Sea. The men sang and the women danced with tambourines and circle-dances because it was only then, when they saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea, that they felt truly liberated and were able to truly feel joy. And so we, too, rejoice today.

The holidays are the stations throughout the years at which we fill our joy tanks.

But the goal here is to not to just stock up on joy, but to carry that joy forward into our daily lives, all the way to the next holiday. So today, it's incumbent upon us to fill our reserves with joy energies—at least enough to last us until the next holiday, which is upon us in six weeks, the holiday of Shavuos.

And so I'd like to invite you all now to the Moshiach's Seudah which we will be having tomorrow. The letters of the word "Moshiach" also spell "samayach" (joyful), with the addition of the letter yud (Sichah, Shabbos Parshas Teitzei, 5748). And just talking about Moshiach brings joy—because when Moshiach comes, there will be no depression in the world—and we will see the fulfillment of the ancient promise, "Then our mouths will be filled with joy."

Good Yom Tov!