

SUKKOT - When the Sages Became Entertainers

by **Rabbi Ephraim Sprecher**
Dean of Students, Diaspora Yeshiva

All the festivals are times of rejoicing, but only Sukkot is called ZMAN SIMCHA- TEINU (season of our joy). While today we immediately think of Simchat Torah when it comes to joy, the Mishna (Sukka 5:1) tells us about a ceremony held on Sukkot that "he who has not seen the rejoicing at the place of the water- drawing has never in his life seen true rejoicing in his life."

Something about this ancient Temple ritual made it the essence of happiness.

A golden flask was filled with water from the Silwan stream and brought to the water gate at the Beit HaMikdash, where the shofar was sounded and a Kohen on duty poured this water and some wine on the following morning on the corner of the Mizbei'ach, as libations. This ceremony was accompanied by sounding the shofar (Sukka 4:9-10).

The RAMBAM (Hilchot Shofar 8:14) tells us that the greatest of Israel's wise men would dance, clap their hands, sing and rejoice in the Temple while the entire people would come to see and hear. The Talmud (Sukka 53a) tells us that Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel used to juggle 8 burning torches and throw them into the air; as he threw

one, he caught another, and not one torch touched another. What is the reason for this great celebration?

What can this strange and colorful ceremony teach us about joy? Here are four suggestions:

1) Water is the simplest of beverages. There is no recipe for it, but one finds it and uses it. Wine, on the other hand, is the most complicated of drinks, and great skill and experience are needed to make it.

On Simchat Beit Hasho'eva, the water libation ceremony held during the intermediate days of Sukkot, both wine and water were offered on the Altar. They were poured into holes on the side of the Alter in such a way that both the wine and the water would reach the altar depth at exactly the same time. This ceremony is teaching us that both liquids are equally valuable even though we often value wine above water.

In life, too, we tend to value the expensive, the unusual and the complicated. By making such a fuss of water, we learn to appreciate what is simple and every day, and not take any of G-d's wonderful gifts for granted.

2) The singing and antics of the Kohanim and Rabbis are very hierarchical. Only the VIPs were involved, while most people were onlookers. However, at the same time, the hierarchy was being broken down. We see people behaving in ways that

are unusual and even demeaning.

So much so that the RAMBAM reminds us that "whoever holds himself proud, giving himself honor, and acts haughtily in such situations (of expressing love for G-d), is a sinner and a fool... In contrast, anyone who lowers himself and thinks lightly of his person in these situations is truly a great person, worthy of honor."

The dual nature of the proceedings - hierarchical while breaking down the hierarchy - teach us to appreciate our place in the world, but also reminds us that these hierarchies are flexible. There are times when Great Sages behave like entertainers on the Ed Sullivan Show. We are not bound to our positions in the world, but neither need we be unhappy or frustrated by them.

3) The Mishna in Sukka 5:2-3 tells us that lamps were set up so people could see the ceremony and "the wicks, used to kindle the lamps, were made of the Kohanim's worn out garments." They did this because priestly clothing was bought with public funds, and when one uses public funds, one needs to be especially careful not to be wasteful. In other words - integrity was maintained.

4) Finally we have Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel literally playing with fire. He is aware of how fragile life is. He knows that he can be burnt at any moment, and yet he is joyful. The Book of

Kohelet expresses the same idea. While life is fragile, there can still be joy.

We read Kohelet on the Shabbat of Sukkot when we rejoice even though we are in a rickety hut that can collapse at any moment. We celebrate and rejoice because our fragile little Sukka, according to the Zohar is the Honeymoon Hut of G-d and Israel.

Appreciating all the world offers - simple or complicated, joy or sadness, being happy with one's place in the world but knowing that this place is only temporary like a Sukka. Joy, despite the fragility of life; these are the basic elements of living a happy and fulfilled life. 🌈