

THE SIMCHA OF SUKKOS



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - SUKKOS
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If you were to pick a paradigm of simcha, one example or mitzvah from the Torah that exemplifies the concept, what would you pick? When searching for a paradigmatic mitzvah that produces simcha, the twelfth century Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Zerachiah ha-levi of Girona, often referred to as the Baal HaMaor, picks ... lulav!

I have observed the faces of many people shaking a lulav, and I would never guess they are experiencing happiness. Yet, in Parshas Emor the Torah explicitly associates the taking of the arba minim with simcha;

וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן, פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר כַּפֹּת תְּמָרִים, וְעֵנַף עֵץ-עָבֹת, וְעַרְבֵי-נַחַל; וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם
לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם--שִׁבְעַת יָמִים.

And you should take you on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm-trees, and branches of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and you should rejoice before Hashem your God seven days. (Vayikra 23:30)

What is it about the lulav, esrog, hadasim, and aravos that generates simcha?

There are varying understandings of simcha in the Jewish sources as well as different conceptualizations of happiness in the psychological literature. Broadly speaking, the two main approaches to happiness in the secular literature are referred to as hedonism and eudemonia. Hedonism argues that happiness comes from satisfying momentary pleasures and eudemonia views happiness as the general sense of well-being that flows from living a virtuous, goal-directed and purposeful life.

The ideal simcha, as exemplified with the arba minim, consists of combining these two approaches. The arba minim incorporates sense pleasure. We have to physically touch the four species and bundle them together. There is a special emphasis on having an esrog that is hadar – beautiful and pleasant to the eyes. The esrog and the hadasim also have an enjoyable scent. We even wave the four species together, making a pleasant sound of branches rustling in the wind. Integrated with the sense pleasure, the arba minim also represents celebrating the attainment of goals accomplished through hard work and effort. We gather together the arba minim “On the fifteenth day of the seventh month - בְּאַסְפְּכֶם אֶת-תְּבוּאַת הָאָרֶץ - when you have gathered in the fruits of the land (Vayikra 23:9). After working hard for months to plant, cultivate, and harvest the food, we bring together the bounty in celebration of our hard work and accomplishments.

But there is one more element to simcha that the arba minim models for us. We don't merely enjoy the physical sensations, nor do we just relish in our own accomplishments - we add spiritual and religious significance by expressing our gratitude to G-d for the year's harvest. The sense pleasure and the joy of goal attainment must come לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם - before Hashem your G-d - in order for it to be complete simcha.

As we enter Sukkos, may we be able to enjoy the sense pleasure inherent in the holiday in a holy and spiritual way, and combine it with a life filled with virtue and accomplishment, all the while expressing gratitude to Hashem for all he has provided.

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