

HAPPINESS & WHOLENESS



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT EMOR
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

Toward the end of *Parshat Emor* we are presented with a description of the various holidays spanning the Jewish calendar. The seventh month—what we now call *Tishrei*—is jam-packed with holidays, starting with *Rosh Hashana*, continuing with *Yom Kippur*, and culminating in *Sukkot* and *Shemini Atzeret*. After describing the holidays of *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur* in great detail, Rabbi Shmshon Raphael Hirsch summarizes their essence as a buildup and counterpoint to the holiday of *Sukkot*. Both *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur* are days of seriousness and somberness, permeated by negative emotions. *Rosh Hashana* is a “a day of *Teruah*, a day of shatteringly shaking us up out of ways of life displeasing to God” and *Yom Kippur* makes us “appear before God, ‘poor’ in every justification for further living and working” (Judaica Press translation). In stark contrast, on *Sukkot* we celebrate by “taking of the produce of the earth to gain the joy of living and working in happiness before God.”

Rabbi Hirsch then adds one simple, yet powerful, observation. Both *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur* are one day each, yet *Sukkot* is comprised of seven days. The lesson he gleans from this straightforward calculation is that the Torah is prescribing what our baseline mood should be throughout the year. It shouldn't be the “bowed down broken feeling” associated with *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*, but the “happy joy of life” experienced while living “a life faithfully devoted to duty,” symbolized by the seven days of *Sukkot*.

If our status quo mood should be one of happiness, the challenge becomes, how do we work on getting to such a state? There is an entire field called positive psychology dedicated to the study of happiness and well-being. One important observation that several psychologists have made is that relentlessly pursuing happiness usually does not lead to happiness. Moreover, unless we learn how to understand and accept our negative emotions, we will also not likely find lasting happiness. Healthy negative emotions such as sadness, frustration, concern, guilt, and embarrassment serve functional value. If we try and suppress these negative emotions because they make us feel uncomfortable and we want to be happy, the less likely it is that we will actually be happy.

Perhaps this idea is subtly hinted at within Rabbi Hirsch's comments as well. While our operating status quo to strive for is to serve God through happiness, we must also make time and psychological space for those more negative emotions. There is an important place for the "bowed down broken feeling" symbolized by *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur* and that must be experienced, if we want to build toward the happiness of *Sukkot*. Our pursuit of serving God with joy needs to incorporate a healthy expression of negative emotions, as well.

This may also be reflected in another aspect of the Jewish calendar mentioned in *Parshat Emor*, one that we are in the midst of currently, namely, the counting of the *Omer*. The counting is supposed to be "*temimiot*," meaning whole or complete. While wholeness in this context has a serial connotation to it, in the sense that we shouldn't miss a day, wholeness here can also hint at the concept of wholeness of personality. On the one hand, the counting of the *Omer* represents an exciting build up and progression, whether agriculturally or as a preparation for the giving of the Torah. On the other hand, it is a time (on a rabbinic level) of mourning and solemnness. Perhaps the "wholeness" of this time requires us to validate and experience both the positive and negative emotions simultaneously. With this, we serve God with our whole selves and it is within this wholeness we can truly experience psychological and spiritual flourishing.

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