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***Bein Adam Le-chavero*: Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct**

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

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**FESTIVAL OF FREEDOM: ESSAYS ON PESAH AND THE HAGGADAH**

**by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik**

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**Shiur #20: The Jewish Imperative of *Simcha***

One of the most important facets of a religious existence is the element of *simcha*. Although, for lack of a better expression, we will translate this term as referring to happiness and joy, its true meaning, as we shall see, is much deeper.

A number of relatively familiar sources reflect the necessity of *simcha* in one’s religious existence. The verse recited in the weekday prayers declares:

Serve God with happiness; come before him with joyous song. (*Tehillim* 100:2)

A statement of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov has been immortalized in the popular song “*Mitzva gedola lihyot be-simcha tamid,”* “It is a great mitzva to be happy always”:

It is a great mitzva to be happy always and to make every effort to determinedly keep depression and gloom at bay. (*Likkutei Moharan* II, 24)

While we must understand why *simcha* is so necessary and why it is a mitzva, an additional question must be asked: how does the element of *simcha* relate to the interpersonal realm? Is joy in spiritual endeavors a part of each individual’s unique responsibility, or does the Torah expect each individual to seek out the joy of others as well?

Our investigation of this issue will reveal that the Torah explicitly places a responsibility upon each Jew to bring joy to others, especially in situations in which happiness is necessary. This is equally true for unfortunate individuals who find happiness hard to come by. However, the real novelty of the Torah’s requirement of *simcha* is that the role of bringing joy to others is not only for the practical purposes of creating an atmosphere of joy. Clearly, laughter is contagious and one who tries to enthuse others is liable to get enthused himself, but the Jewish imperative to make others happy is based on a clear distinction. There are two types of joy: frivolity (*holeilut*), which one should shy away from, and holy *simcha*, which is an indispensable part of one’s religious existence.

One's personal *simcha* is judged and determined by the level of one’s involvement in bringing joy to others. Clearly there is a practical benefit to extending *simcha*, in that one who is involved in bringing joy to others has to be, at least outwardly, acting in a joyous manner. As we shall see, gladdening others is not a merely practical, utilitarian measure; it is the true yardstick for achieving an honest expression of *simcha*, which the Torah so heartily encourages us to achieve.

**“For you did not serve Lord your God amidst happiness…”**

Beyond the above-cited sources directing one to live a life of *simcha*, the importance of *simcha* in one’s religious life is expressed by a verse in the middle of the lengthy *Tokhacha* (Rebuke) that describes the terrible calamities that will befall the Jewish people if they fail to heed the word of God in *Devarim* 28. While the passage begins by saying (v. 15), “And if you will not listen to the voice of Lord your God,” indicating that the reason for the destruction is disobedience, the continuation of the *Tokhacha* seems to present a very different and even startling reason (v. 47):

For you did not serve Lord your God amidst happiness and goodness of the heart, when everything was abundant.

The simple meaning of the verse is that the Jewish people earn destruction not due to their refusal to fulfill God’s laws, but due to their failure to do so with *simcha*.

The Rambam, towards the end of *Hilkhot Teshuva* (9:1), expands on this verse, explaining how serving God with *simcha* is a prerequisite for benefitting from the blessings God wishes to bestow upon His people; sadly, the opposite is also true: service of God which lacks *simcha* calls for the calamitous curses of the *Tokhacha*.

There are certainly practical benefits of being happy. These utilitarian aspects of *simcha* enable joy to be a major tool for one’s spiritual service of God. In fact, Rabbi Nachman’s source for the “great mitzva” is the requirement to care for one’s health, based on the verse (*Devarim* 4:9) “Take care of yourself and guard your soul diligently.” (See also *Yad Rama, Sanhedrin* 17b.)

Eminent physicians, too, have spoken at length about this, that all illness is the product of gloom and depression. And joy is a great healer… In the future, all sickness will be remedied through joy…

The rule is that a person has to be very determined and to put all of his strength into being nothing but happy at all times. Human nature makes one draw oneself into gloom on account of life’s vicissitudes and misfortunes, and every human being is filled with suffering. Therefore, a person has to exercise great effort in forcing himself to be happy at all times and to bring himself to joy in any way he can — even with silliness. (*Likkutei Moharan* II, 24)

However, the tremendous punishments of the *Tokhacha* would be rather extreme if the only purpose of *simcha* were its practical, utilitarian results. The requirement of *simcha* seems to express a religious ideal, an ideal for which one may be held liable if one abandons it.

**Religious Joy**

Elsewhere, the Rambam describes the demeanor that one should have constantly, reflecting his advice to follow the Golden Mean:

One should not be overly elated and laugh, nor be sad and depressed in spirit; rather one should be *same’ach* (happy) at all times, with a friendly countenance. The same applies with regard to his other traits… (*Hilkhot Deot* 1:4)

The Rambam essentially tells us that not only is there a difference between sadness and *simcha*, but also between excessive lightheadedness and *simcha*. For the Jew to succeed in achieving the desired state of *simcha,* he must harness the happiness in a controlled, riveting manner.

With this in mind we can understand the Talmud’s description of a unique type of joy known as *simcha* *shel mitzva* (the joy associated with a mitzva).

One should not rise to pray amidst a state of sorrow, nor amidst slothfulness, nor amidst laughter, nor amidst chatter, nor amidst lightheadedness, nor amidst idle words — but rather amidst *simcha shel mitzva.* (*Berakhot* 31a)

It is this element of *simcha shel mitzva* which is indispensable for a Jew who wants to rise in his spiritual awareness. The Gemara (*Pesachim* 117a) uses almost the exact same phrases to define the necessary state of mind for one to achieve prophecy.

The Divine Presence does not rest amidst a state of sorrow… but rather through *simcha shel mitzva*…

The Rambam (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 7:3) indicates that a prophet who desired to have a vision would play music in order to reach a level of joy upon which the *Shekhina* could rest.

What is unique about this *simcha* *shel mitzva*? What distinguishes it from the characteristic happiness that we are so familiar with? The Rambam explains that *simcha shel mitzva* may only be attained through constant work.

The *simcha* with which a person should rejoice in the fulfillment of the *mitzvot* and the love of God Who commanded them is a great service. Whoever holds himself back from this rejoicing is worthy of retribution, as it is stated (*Devarim* 28:47), “For you did not serve Lord your God amidst happiness and goodness of the heart.”

Whoever holds himself proud, giving himself honor and acting haughtily in such situations, is a sinner and a fool. Concerning this, Shelomo warned (*Mishlei* 28:10): “Do not seek glory before the king.”

In contrast, anyone who lowers himself and thinks lightly of his person in these situations is truly a great person, one worthy of honor, who serves God out of love. Thus, David, Ling of Israel declared (II Shemuel 6:22): "I will hold myself even more lightly esteemed than this and be humble in my eyes," because there is no greatness or honor other than being happy before God, as it says (*ibid*. v. 16), "King David was dancing wildly and whistling before God." (Rambam, *Hilkhot Lulav* 8:15)

Part of this *simcha,* according to the Rambam, is the realization of being connected to and in the presence of God. It is this expression of joy which is holy, as well as a religious expression. It is both a tool for attaining closeness with God and distinct from mere merriment and elatedness.

In *Mesillat Yesharim* (ch. 19), the Ramchal describes this *simcha* as well.

The second main branch of love is happiness, a fundamental principle in divine service, in relation to which David exhorted us (*Tehillim* 100:2), "Serve God with happiness; come before him with joyous song…”

Moreover, our Sages of blessed memory have said (*Shabbat* 30a), "The Divine Presence comes to rest upon one only amidst *simcha shel mitzva*." In relation to the aforementioned verse, "Serve God with happiness," they said (*Midrash Shocher Tov, ad loc*.), “R. Aibu said, ‘When you stand before him in prayer, let your heart rejoice that you are praying to a God without parallel.’”

This is true happiness, rejoicing that one has been privileged to serve the Blessed Master, Who has no equal, and to occupy oneself with His Torah and His *mitzvot*, which embody true perfection and eternal preciousness. Shelomo, in his wisdom, expressed the idea thus (*Shir Ha-shirim* 1:4): "Draw me on; we will run after you. The King has brought me to his chambers; we will rejoice and be happy in you." The further a person is privileged to enter into the chambers of the knowledge of the greatness of the Blessed One, the greater is his happiness, and his heart rejoices within him. …

We find that the Holy One, Blessed be He, stormed against the Jews because they omitted this element in their Divine service, as it is said (*Devarim* 28:47): " For you did not serve Lord your God amidst happiness and goodness of the heart, when everything was abundant.”

David saw how the Jews donated towards the building of the Temple; he observed that they had already attained this trait, so he prayed that it would remain with them and not depart, as it is said (*I Divrei Ha-yamim* 29:17-18): "And now, Your people that are found here I have seen offering to You with joy. O Lord, God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yisrael, our fathers, preserve this eternally for the inclination of the thoughts of the heart of Your people, and set their hearts aright with You."

Similarly, the Kuzari expresses that *simcha* for the Jew is as indispensable and precious as the other essential aspects of emotional connection to God, fear and love.

Our Torah, as a whole, is divided between fear, love, and happiness, by each of which one can approach God. Your contrition on a fast day brings you no closer to God than your joy on the Sabbath and holy days, if it is the outcome of a devout heart. Just as prayers demand devotion, so also is a pious mind necessary to find pleasure in God's command and law; you should be pleased with the law itself from love of the Lawgiver. You see how much He has distinguished you, as if you had been His guest invited to His festive board. You thank Him in mind and word, and if your joy leads you so far as to sing and dance, it becomes worship and a bond of union between you and the Divine Influence. Our Torah does not consider these matters optional; it lays down decisive injunctions concerning them… (*Kuzari* II, 50)

**Bringing *Simcha* to Others**

Understandably, if *simcha* is a religious ideal, as we have seen, the expression of its obligation in the interpersonal realm takes on new importance. The prominence of *simcha* as an interpersonal responsibility is reflected in a number of explicit obligations to bring joy to others in specific circumstances. Some of these obligations are so important that one is discharged from all other obligations while involved in gladdening these specific individuals. The explicit requirement is expressed in the Torah within a man’s obligations to his wife at the beginning of their marriage. In the Talmud, we find the directive for others to bring joy to a newly married couple. In addition, God demands that we show concern for the unfortunate and bring some joy into their lives.

When a man marries a new wife, he shall not go out to the army, nor shall it obligate him for any matter; he shall be free for his home for one year, and he shall make happy (*ve-simach*) his wife, whom he has married. (*Devarim* 24:5)

The Talmud speaks of the requirement of bringing *simcha* to a groom in the context of partaking of his wedding feast.

And Rav Chelbo said in the name of Rav Huna: “Anyone who benefits from the banquet of the bridegroom and does not make him happy violates the spirit of the five “sounds” that are mentioned in the following verse, as it is stated (*Yirmiyahu* 33:11), “The sound of joy and the sound of happiness, the sound of the bridegroom and the sound of the bride, the sound of them that say, ‘Give thanks to the Lord of Hosts.’”

And if he does gladden the bridegroom, what is his reward?

Rav Yehoshua Ben Levi said: He merits the Torah, which was given with five “sounds”… (*Berakhot* 6b)

The requirement to bring joy to the young couple is unique in that one stops his learning of Torah in order to bring joy to the bridegroom. However, through his adding joy to the wedding, the scholar is awarded with the blessing of the Torah itself. Bringing joy to those who are beginning a life of happiness together is amply rewarded by God.

Beyond the specific requirements of gladdening others at specific times in their lives, the Torah prescribes various *mitzvot* requiring one to care for and love the convert, the widow, and the orphan, individuals who often lack joy. However, most unique to the requirement to bring joy to others is the redefining of the individual’s imperative of *simcha*: one does not suffice with one’s own joy; one seeks to actively extend it to others. This is a reflection of the uniquely Jewish idea of *simcha*, as we shall see.

**Interpersonal *Simcha***

Certainly, there is an element of following God’s ways in bringing *simcha* toothers. God actively seeks to bestow goodness upon his creations (*Derekh Hashem,* ch. 2) and the Torah itself is described as a bringer of joy.

God’s directives are right, they gladden the heart. (*Tehillim* 19:9)

In *Avot*, the Mishna takes the element of *simcha* in Torah one step further by declaring that one who studies Torah in its ideal form, *lishmah*, for its own sake, not only brings enjoyment to himself, but to others as well.

Rabbi Meir stated: “Whoever engages in Torah study *lishmah* merits many things: furthermore, the creation of the entire world is worthwhile for his sake alone… He loves God and he loves mankind; he makes God happy and he makes mankind happy.” (*Avot* 6:1)

It is here that the religious devotion directly translates into a gladdening experience, for the student of Torah and for mankind as a whole. However, the religious element of *simcha* takes the interpersonal obligation one step beyond.

***Mattanot La-evyonim* and the Joy of Being Kind like God**

After understanding a number of the basic sources discussing the concept of *simcha* and its imperatives, one must envision the Torah’s definition of *simcha* as not limited to personal enjoyment; quite the contrary, one lacks *simcha* unless one brings it to others as well. When commanding each Jew to rejoice during the festivals, The Torah (*Devarim* 16:14) states:

You shall be happy on your festival together with your son and your daughter, your male and your female servants, the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow in your gates.

The Torah links the happiness one shares with members of one’s household to one’s generosity in inviting the unfortunate. The Rambam records this as the defining factor of whether one’s happiness reflects *simcha shel mitzva* or the rejoicing of his stomach.

The rejoicing mentioned in the verse refers to sacrificial peace offerings… nevertheless, included in this charge to rejoice is that he and the members of his household should rejoice, each in a manner appropriate for him….

When a person eats and drinks (in celebration of the festivals), he should also feed strangers, orphans, and widows, as well as other poor unfortunates. When a person locks the gates of his courtyard … and does not provide food or drink to the poor and miserable, his happiness is not the happiness associated with a mitzva, but the happiness of his gut… Such happiness is a disgrace, as it is stated (*Malakhi* 2:3) “I will spread dung on your faces, the dung of your feasts.” (*Hilkhot Yom Tov* 6:17-18)

Similarly, in *Hilkhot Chagiga* (2:14) the Rambam states:

If one partakes of sacrifices and does not bring joy to the together with him, to him are applied the words of censure (*Hoshea* 9:4) “For them, their sacrifices will be like the bread of those aggrieved; all who partake of it become impure…”

Whoever forsakes a Levite, refrains from bringing him joy, or delays giving him the tithes during the festivals violates a negative commandment, as it is stated (*Devarim* 12:19): “Beware lest you abandon the Levite.”

Joy is essential for the Jew, but not the mere utilitarian state of happiness; rather, it is the religious ideal which is central, and this requires providing for others. The Rambam expresses practical ramifications of this. When faced with the dilemma of whether to focus one’s energy for the Purim holiday on the elaborate festive meal, on the *mishloach manot* (portions of food for friends) or on the unique obligation of *mattanot la-evyonim* (gifts for the indigent), the Rambam issues a surprising ruling:

It is preferable for a person to be more liberal with his donations to the poor than to be lavish in his feast or in sending portions to his friends. Indeed, there is no greater and more splendid happiness than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows and the strangers.

One who brings happiness to the hearts of these unfortunate individuals resembles the Divine Presence, of which it is stated (*Yeshayahu* 57:15): “To revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive those with broken hearts.” (*Hilkhot Megilla* 2:17)

The Rambam’s reasoning is clear. With all the importance of the other *mitzvot* of Purim (which clearly are not to be neglected), the acts which should bring one the most joy are not the acts of drinking or dining or even sharing food with one’s friends, but rather the act of bringing joy to the unfortunate. That is what makes man like God! It requires reframing our understanding, but the message is truly powerful. This is *simcha shel mitzva*, the uniquely Jewish imperative of holy joy.

**Grabbing the Gloomy and Bringing Them to the Circle of Joy**

One of the most influential advocates of the importance of *simcha* is Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. Throughout his works, he extols the importance of *simcha* and the many virtues that it has to offer. Near the end of his masterwork, *Likkutei Moharan,* he explains:

Here is an analogy: sometimes, when people are happy and dance, they grab someone outside the circle who is depressed and gloomy. Against his will, they bring him into the circle of dancers; against his will, they force him to be happy along with them.

Rabbi Nachman continues that this is the essential power of *simcha*. Happiness has the ability to wipe away one’s gloom and sadness and immediately elevate an individual to a much cheerier dimension. He explains that the ultimate act of serving God through *simcha* is to actually embrace that transformation.

Yet greater still is to gather courage to actually pursue gloom and to introduce it into the joy, such that the gloom itself turns into joy… It is like a person who comes to a celebration where the abundant joy and happiness there transforms all his worries, depression and gloom into joy. Thus, he grabs the gloom and introduces it against its will into the celebration, as in the aforementioned analogy.

This is the meaning of “They will attain happiness and joy, as sadness and sighing flee” (*Yeshayahu* 35:10). The sadness and sighing run from joy… Happiness and joy will catch up with and seize sadness and sighing as they flee and run from celebration, in order to introduce them, against their will, into jubilation.

While Rabbi Nachman speaks of introducing the sad individual to the circle of joy only as an analogy for his beautiful idea of transforming gloom to elation, one might take the idea one step further (and there are certainly ample reasons to assume that this was Rabbi Nachman’s intention). One who seeks real joy cannot only focus on his own gloom; he must actively seek out those who are destitute and unfortunate, who cannot find a reason to be joyous and are therefore wallowing in feelings of depression. The one who really wants to be *same’ach* must bring these individuals into the circle, supply their needs and help fill their joy. If one focuses not only on his individual needs of joy but on the happiness of others, he grasps *simcha shel mitzva.* This is the heart of the mitzva of being joyous.

It is truly difficult to maintain a feeling of *simcha* constantly, and understandably one may feel sadness at different times. However, striving to attain the Jewish concept of *simcha* may simultaneously help one achieve that joy. By learning to enjoy giving to others, by helping the unfortunate — inviting them to our meals, caring for them and providing for their needs — we will hopefully begin to appreciate that which we have. Simultaneously, learning that our joy is linked to the gladness of others allows us to take a step towards embracing the unique experience of *simcha shel mitzva*.