

All You Need is Love

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Judaism is very meticulous about the manner in which it celebrates Festivals. Thus we eat *Matzah* on Passover because it recalls the suddenness the liberation which happened so quickly there was no time for the dough to rise.

On Sukkot we leave our homes and establish residence in the *Sukkah* to remember that “In *Sukkot* did I house the children of Israel when I took them out of Egypt.” Hashem protected us and provided for all our needs in the wilderness. Our dwelling in a fragile hut facilitates our concentration of on these significant ideas.

A question can be raised with regard to Simchat Torah—the Holiday of rejoicing with the Torah. The purpose of the day is to give expression to the profound feelings of joy in the study and observance of Torah.

However, the timing of this holiday seems strange. We observe it on Shemini Atzeret, which is the eighth day of Sukkot. It would seem that Simchat Torah ought to be connected to Shavuot, for the theme of this Holiday is the giving of the Torah.

The purpose of the Exodus was to fashion a unique nation which would govern its private and public affairs according to the commandments and philosophy of the Torah. Our love of Torah is so great that we anticipate the day of Revelation by counting the forty nine days from Pesach to Shavuot. Why then don't we sing and dance and rejoice with the Torah on Shavuot? This would, at first glance, seem like a more appropriate time than Shmini Atzeret.

Judaism insists on honesty and truthfulness and frowns upon displays of shallow emotionalism. Profound sentiments of joy do not come easily. How often do we feel so happy that we just want to burst out in song and dance? We need something powerful and personal like a major family *Simcha* to arouse powerful feelings of joy. Is it reasonable to expect us to get so excited over a Book containing commandments, prohibitions and exhortations to act with justice and compassion in every area of life that we want to sing and dance around for hours and hours?

Indeed it is—but these emotions must be cultivated over a long period of time. The goal of Torah observance is not mere obedience but joyful exuberance with the lifestyle of *Kedusha* (Holiness). Joy in the service of Hashem is the highest ideal. The Rambam says (Laws of Lulav 8:18),

The rejoicing one experiences in the performance of Mitzvot and love of G-d who commanded them, is a great service. Whoever holds himself back from this Simcha is fit to be punished as the Torah says: “because they failed to serve Hashem with joy and a good heart...”

The joy of which the Rambam speaks does not come quickly or easily. It requires effort, devotion and the ability to withdraw from superficial distractions. You must put some heart and soul into the study of Torah. Then you will appreciate its great beauty and fall in love with it.

Shavuot marks the beginning of our relationship with Torah. This is the time when our ancestors demonstrated their faithfulness by saying “we will do and we will listen.” The Creator had made us an offer we could not refuse.

We knew that Torah is the greatest treasure. However, the Torah does not magically transform us. It takes a great deal of dedicated effort to achieve the emotional joy and satisfaction that the Torah promises. On Shavuot we renew the commitment. Many observe the beautiful custom of learning through the night to demonstrate our willingness to part with the pleasure of sleep in order to gain more Torah knowledge.

We now understand why Simchat Torah could not be observed on Shavuot. The relationship has just begun and there is so much work to do. Singing and dancing will come later. We rejoice on Shmini Atzeret because that is when we complete the annual Torah reading cycle. We thereby affirm that one who is faithful and constant in his studies will uncover the beauty of Torah.

Our relationship to Torah is framed by profound commitment to Torah study and a realization that the ultimate goal of our service to Hashem, is a feeling of sublime joy. May we merit to attain it.

Chag Shavuot Sameach.