

Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer

## SIMCHAS BEIS HASHO'EIVA The Art of Celebration

*A Succos  
Message for the  
Entire Year*



### The Art of Celebration

*"He who failed to witness the celebration of Simchas Beis Hasho'eiva never witnessed true joy in all his days." (Mishna Succah 5:2)*

The festival of *Succos* is generally described as "the time of our rejoicing," and within the holiday a ceremony occurs that expresses joy of the greatest intensity—*Simchas Beis Hasho'eiva*—the ultimate celebration.

Sparkling waters of the Shilo'ach Stream were drawn in golden buckets and brought up to the altar of the *Beis Hamikdash*, where they were poured into a silver basin. Open at the bottom, the basin let the water spill into a cavity within the altar walls, which led into the

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deep underground foundations of the Temple. This ritual took place to the accompaniment of music and celebration of unprecedented proportions.

*Why the poured-out water? Why the unbridled joy?*

True joy is rarely experienced. Most people are involved in the pursuit of happiness, yet happiness seems to elude them. For happiness results from the realization of ambitions and aspirations, and O, how often do these remain woefully unfulfilled! The sweet dreams men savor and the harsh reality they encounter are locked in a terrible struggle, and the dreams usually lose out.

Man fancies himself a sculptor—carving for himself a self-image of personal success. Man attempts to be a designer—fashioning an elaborate blueprint for achievement and satisfaction.

But the drama of life seldom follows the man-made script. More often frustration and grief are man's lot, simply because the divine fate ordained for every in-

dividual does not necessarily coincide with the destiny man has chosen for himself.

King David—dogged by tragedy, yet one of the happiest of men—provided a formula for maintaining a mood of unabated joy in spite of adversity. He taught that to *achieve* happiness, man must *abandon* its pursuit. Let man humbly submit himself to the hands of



G-d and declare "My L-rd, You choose what is best for me. Please take my hand and lead me!"

*G-d is my allotted portion  
and my share,  
You guided my destiny.  
Portions have fallen to me  
in pleasant places,  
indeed my estate  
was lovely to me.  
I will bless G-d  
who has advised me. (Tehillim, 16:5-7)*

David's master, the prophet Samuel, taught the Jewish nation the true meaning of submission. In an effort to inspire a spiritual renewal, Samuel gathered together all the people in Mizpah, and at his command:

*They drew up water and  
poured it out before G-d (I Samuel 7:6).*

*They poured their hearts out  
like water in order  
to repent before G-d (Targum).*

*They humbly submitted themselves to  
G-d and proclaimed:  
"We stand in Your presence  
like uncontained water—  
spilled out!" (Rashi).*

Water is the epitome of liquidity, for it conforms immediately to the shape of any vessel into which it is poured, for liquid is best described as "a substance with no form of its own; rather it conforms to the shape of its container."

Submission. Melt down your masterpiece. Dissolve your personal design. Pour out your heart in an



amorphous, shapeless mass and plead with the Almighty: "Please give my existence a shape and a purpose! My identity is lost in Your presence . . . then my true self may be found. I drown myself in Your being . . . then my essence can emerge."

*Pour out your heart like water  
in the presence of the L-rd. (Eicha 2:19)*

## The Sweat of the Soul

Never underestimate the power of the tiny teardrop—it is one of the mightiest forces in the universe. What could be stronger than man's stubborn arrogance?—yet a tear can shatter human pride. In a moment of truth, man realizes the futility of his own designs, and the self-image of his own creation crumbles. He "breaks-down" in tears and surrenders himself to a Higher Will. Rabbi S. R. Hirsch calls tears "the sweat of the soul"—the product of a distressed spirit in the throes of upheaval.

Rabbeinu Yona writes in the classic *Shaarei Avoda* (Section II): He who prays with tears is assured that his prayers will be heard. For, although all the heavenly gates are locked, the gate of tears is not sealed (*Babba Metzia* 59a).

How is the heart poured out like water? Through tears. Thus, one might well see in the waters poured onto the Temple altar at the *Simchas Beis Hasho'eiva* a symbolic outpouring of human tears.

The Midrash (*Bereishis Rabba* 78) teaches: All the years that Jacob was in Beis El he poured out water-libations before G-d. Rabbi Yochanan said, "He who can count all the water libations that our forefather Jacob poured can count the drops of water in the Sea of Tiberias." That is, just as the waters of the sea are beyond number, so too were the tears of Jacob too many to count. No one knew of these tears except the Holy One, Blessed be He, who *did* count them and cherish them and store them in His treasure (cf. *Shabbos* 105a).

... From that well they watered the flocks, and the stone covering the well's mouth was very large ... and Jacob rolled the stone from the well's mouth (*Bereishis* 29:2,10).

The word "be'er"—well—is mentioned seven times in this episode—an allusion to the seven days of Succos when the well waters are poured on the altar (*Baal Haturim* *ibid*).

The Torah related this incident to teach that those who put all their trust in G-d are suffused with divine strength. Jacob arrived at the well utterly exhausted from his journey, but the holy spirit invigorated him with the strength of all the shepherds combined—and he lifted the huge rock single-handed. This incident is a prophetic allusion to the time when flocks of Jewish pilgrims made their way to the Beis Hamikdash where they drew forth a new wave of strength and holy spirit at *Simchas Beis Hasho'eiva* (*Ramban* *ibid*).

"And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He (G-d) spoke to him, a monument of stone and he poured out a libation thereon" (*Bereishis* 35:14).

He poured out a libation of water before G-d just as his descendants would do in the Temple on the Festival of Succos (*Targum Yonason* *ibid*).

Following the lead of their forefather, the seed of

Jacob melt their hearts with tears on Yom Kippur. And on Succos, these tears were gathered in golden buckets and poured in His presence. Each and every Jew found himself enveloped by a power which embraced him, and reinforced every fatigued fibre of his being with unflinching strength.

Small wonder, then, that the entire nation displayed phenomenal stamina throughout the entire week of these festivities. Indeed, the Talmud relates (*Succa* 53a) that for the week's duration, no one slept! By day, all were totally absorbed in the spectacular celebrations. At best, a man could snatch a quick cat-nap on his neighbor's shoulder.



Men enraptured by the holy spirit have tapped the source of all strength. Infinite energy flows through their veins, their bones cannot grow weary.

Why was this ritual called *Simchas Beis Hasho'eiva*—"the celebration of the drawing"? Because it was from there that Israel drew forth a wave of holy spirit! (*Yerushalmi: Succa* 5).

### Abandon Your Self

In analyzing the word *simcha*—joy—one might find at its root *macha*—to erase (מָחָה-מַחָה). If one truly wishes to rejoice, he must forget about himself.

*An extremely pious man was asked, "What was the happiest moment in your entire life?" He replied, "I was once traveling on a ship and because of my poverty I was assigned the worst quarters imaginable—in the lowest hold, together with the cargo. A group of rich and arrogant merchants were also on board. Once, as I lay in my berth, one of the merchants who had come*



*down to the hold, dumped some refuse on me. I appeared so despicable in his eyes that he simply pretended that I wasn't there. I was shocked by this man's audacity; nevertheless, I assure you that I was not offended in the least. When I realized how indifferent I was to my own prestige, I was truly overcome with joy because I had achieved a level of genuine humility and self-effacement. (Rambam comm. to Mishna Avos 4:4)*

As long as a person concerns himself with the figure he cuts as he dances, and thinks about the image he

projects as he sings—he is worrying, not rejoicing. Erase yourself. Only then will you relax—relieved of that terrible burden of self-concern that you drag around with yourself. Unshackled, released—your feet will dance lightly, your voice will soar free.

Rambam (*Hilchos Lulav* 8:14, 15) teaches that celebration is a fine art that demands no less talent and genius than other creative pursuits. Therefore, the unlearned people could not actively participate in *Simchas Beis Hasho'eiva*—they could only observe and marvel. The foremost scholars and saints—the Heads of the Sanhedrin and the *Roshei Yeshiva*—only they were permitted to perform—and how they performed!

*Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, the Prince of Israel, would juggle eight flaming torches simultaneously—and one torch never touched another. Then he would balance his body on his thumbs and lower his head and kiss the floor . . .*

*Levi juggled eight knives . . .*

*Shmuel juggled eight full cups of wine . . .*

*Abaye juggled eight eggs. (Succa 53a)*

Dancing, leaping, tumbling, twirling—normal decorum was forsaken, traditional dignity was cast to the winds. The sages put aside their status and positions and titles—the external trappings of society—and plunged themselves into sacred revelry. Ramban explains:

*The celebration of a mitzva and the joy one expressed as a result of his love of G-d—such celebration is an extraordinary form of divine service! Whoever holds himself aloof from this festivity deserves to suffer punishment. . . . And, he who does participate but becomes filled with pride and seeks to attract attention and admiration—this man is indeed both a sinner and a fool. Concerning this Solomon warned, "Do not make a spectacle of yourself in the presence of the King" (Proverbs 25:6).*

But, whoever belittles himself on this occasion and takes himself lightly, it is he who is a truly great and dignified personage and it is he who demonstrates that he serves G-d out of a sense of deep adoration.

So said King David (as he danced with uninhibited abandon in honor of the *Aron HaKodesh*—the holy ark), "I would be yet more lightly esteemed than this, holding myself lowly in my eyes" (II *Samuel* 6:22).

True majesty and glory is to rejoice in the presence of G-d, as it is written, "And King David was leaping and twirling in the presence of G-d" (*ibid*, 6:16)

Children of Israel! Brothers! Dance! Battered, beaten, bruised—we are nevertheless a work of art. Tossed about by the raging storms of history, we still remain firm in our position as G-d's masterpiece. What is a Jew? No more than clay in the hands of the potter, stone in the grip of the sculptor. Every blow is artistry—a step closer to assuming the divine form.

For this we sing. For this we pour our souls like waters of joy. 17