

-- AND SOME GOOD FOOD, TOO!

by Rabbi Label Lam

Why is this time of the year titled "The Time of Our Happiness"? What's so happy about braving the chilly elements while sitting in a flimsy booth for 7 plus days? If it would be advertised in some travel magazine as a family vacation package of a lifetime, with pictures of a crowded Sukkah, I'm afraid not too many people would nibble. Most people would be more enticed by luxurious settings, Jacuzzis, tennis, and tons of fun for kids of all ages. Yet, we are told to go into the Sukkah and be happy.

The Mishne in Pirke' Avos (6:4) seems to make a strange statement, "This is the way of Torah: Bread with salt you will eat with a measure of water. On the ground you will sleep. A life of austerity you will live. And in the Torah you will toil. If you will do so, happy you will be and it will be good for you. Happy will you be in this world and it will be good for you in the next world!"

Questions! 1) When was a vow of poverty instituted as prior requirement to learning Torah? Since when have we been an ascetic cult? 2) Why does the Mishne promise happiness in this world? We can imagine that somehow through self-denial a person can achieve a degree of good for himself in the next world but how does that match up with a promise of happiness here and now?

Reb Simcha Zissel, the Alter from Kelm highlighted a key phrase that may just open this statement to its true intent. The words, "if you do so." are critical. The Torah is not advocating poverty as a way of life. The Mishne is saying that the Torah has the ability to promote the most exalted happiness even under the most severe circumstances of life. This can only be appreciated "if you are the one doing so"! A portrait of the inner life does not lend itself to the superficial gaze of the casual onlooker.

Early in the morning I remarked to a study partner my amazement that the Vilna Gaon slept only two hours in a twenty-four period. How could he do it? My friend corrected me and my misrepresentation of the facts, "It's not that he slept only two hours. He wasn't into sleep deprivation. He was involved with learning Torah twenty-two hours in a day! The joy of Mitzvos filled up his waking hours."

If one is tired while driving there is good piece of advice to eat or drink something. Very rarely do people fall asleep while eating ice cream. The Vilna Gaon was as if eating ice cream all day, and this delight displaced the desire for sleep. Now go and explain that to someone that never had that level of experience in learning. That's the challenge of the Mishne!

There is a profound difference between "happiness" and "fun". When we are screaming with the crowd at a ball game or sailing down the steep section of a roller coaster it can be said at that moment, "we are having fun", but are we "happy"? When crammed into the back of a plane pressed up against a window for a long 10 ½ hour ride only to find out that no kosher meal was reserved, we are not likely having "fun". However, in that sardine scene if we are ever conscious that in a number of hours we will be in the "Holy Land" and shortly thereafter at the Western Wall even though we are not having fun, as we inch closer to the goal, we may still be experiencing happiness. Importantly, nobody said that a Sukkah, like a plane-ride, can't have a little leg-room and some good food too!

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