

# THE JOY OF MITZVAH OBSERVANCE

*by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene*

Simcha is an overused but less understood concept.

It expresses feelings of "joy", sentiments of "great pleasure", of "happiness", or even "elation".

Highlighting how central this emotion is to the fabric of Jewish life are the Torah's terrifying comments concerning the curses delineated in the admonition. Persecution and suffering of the Jewish people is attributed *"because you did not serve Hashem Your G-d with joy and fullness of heart"* (Devarim 28:47).

This is, to be sure, a truly frightening indictment.

Where there is loyal commitment and mitzvah observance, there is still a gapping gap in our divine service if the element of "simcha" is not there.

Tragically, the absence of simcha undermines the ethos of religious practice. Without the joy of fulfilling a mitzvah, one has almost missed the whole point of what Jewish living is all about.

Judaism, for a Jew, is about life itself.

The "joy of mitzvah performance" is termed "simcha shel mitzvah". It is the joie de vivre.

On a simple level, this "cheerful enjoyment of life" refers to the attitude that a Jew confers upon his religious activity. His demeanor is shaped by the joyous awareness that life has meaning and purpose. That living itself is the greatest blessing. That life - with all its hurdles and obstacles - can never be allowed to undermine man's *raison d'être*: how his infinitesimal being is able to perform the Will of the Master of the Universe. It may not always be enjoyed; but its continual existence is enjoyed because it is meaningful.

The source of this rejoicing, explains the famous Chasidic Rebbe Rabbi Levi of Berditchev, is such that a Jew "delights" because he knows that G- d "delights" in his good deeds.

The magical relationship where a faithful servant lovingly submits himself before his benevolent Master is eternal.

Indeed, it is a rarefied pleasure that a Jew is granted the opportunity of serving the King of all kings! Will he pass off such a chance? Never.

The sentiments pulsating through the Jewish heart is how "There is no joy as the joy of a mitzvah" - in

the words of the Rokeach. He readily exchanges the transient, half-baked happiness of this world for a timeless spiritual existence in the world to come.

Should he consider observance as restrictive or cumbersome means him tragically casting it in a negative light! A mitzvah performed half-heartedly, or with fearful concern of divine retribution, is far off the mark. Is it possible for this to be anything other than dry, perfunctory, burdensome or emotionless rote enacted without embellishments and seen as a burden?

This is not the "simcha shel mitzvah".

*"Serve G-d with joy, come before Him with song"* proclaimed the Psalmist (Tehillim 100:2). Man exists to serve G-d "with joyfulness and gladness of heart for the great abundance" (Devarim 29:47). The Midrash exhorts how "one should observe a mitzvah with a joyous heart" (Vayikra Rabbah 32:9). The impact of joyous mitzvah is timeless: "Those precepts originally accepted with joy (such as circumcision) have continually been performed with joy throughout the generations to this day (Shabbos 130a).

It is the infectious enthusiasm that is perpetuated from father to son, from generation to generation, inculcating to the youth of how precious and simcha-inducing religious observance is. Whatever the costs and pain involved. Its preciousness is a joy to behold.

Indeed, the Orchos Tzaddikim (Gate of Simcha) memorably promises that "a mitzvah performed with simcha merits a thousand-fold reward more than a mitzvah enabled as a burden".

As we approach the Days of Awe, our commitment to invest mitzvah actions with "simcha" is essential.

This is the true "joy" of living. Of "mitzvah living" The course material is presented by Osher Chaim Levene, author of "Set in Stone: The Meaning of Mitzvah Observance" (Targum/Feldheim), a writer and educator in London.