

SUKKOT - PART 2

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

The gemara in Sukkah (48b) tells us of a discussion between two minim concerning the difference between sasson and simcha and Rabbi Abahu who placed that discussion in its correct perspective. 'There were once two Minnim, one named Sasson and the other Simcha. Sasson said to Simcha, 'I am more important than you are, even as it is written, ' They will obtain joy [sasson] and gladness [simcha] and sorrow and sighing will depart' (Isaiah, 35:10). So Simcha answered, 'No, I am the more important since it is written, (Esther, 8:17) ' There was light and simcha for the Jews, gladness [sasson] and honour'. Then Sasson said to Simcha, 'The day will come on which they will desert you and send you forth as a messenger, as it is written, ' For you shall go out in simcha and be led forth with peace' (Isaiah, 55:12); there is simcha when the messenger goes out and leads the people'. 'One day they will desert you', said Simcha to Sasson, 'and then they will fill you with water, since it is written, ' Therefore, you shall draw water in joy [sasson]' (Isaiah, 12:3). [Furthermore, the Gemara continues to tell us] that Sasson said to Rabbi Abahu, 'In the future, you are destined to draw water for me, in the World to Come since it is written, 'Therefore, you shall draw water 'be sasson'. Rabbi Abahu answered him, 'You would have been correct had that verse read, le sasson, however the text says, be sasson. This means that your skin will be flayed and made into a water-flask and they will fill it with water' '.

This whole discussion is a strange one. It is true that the Marshah explains that it was all in jest. However, that makes it all the more strange. The purpose of our holy Torah is not to record the jests of unbelievers but rather to teach us words of wisdom and holiness. So, the Avnei Nezer explained that the Min held that the whole purpose of Mankind was to be in a state of joy and gladness, whereas Rabbi Abahu taught that these were only a means to achieve proper avodah, and not an end in themselves. This will help us to better understand this whole discussion. First, let us show the spiritual difference between simcha and sasson.

Simcha is the spiritual experience that comes with deliberation and after much thought. Sasson, however, comes upon a person as an experience without preparing for it, but rather as an outpouring of sudden ecstasy and awe. This may be seen from the verse, ' I rejoiced at Your word, as one who happens, 'sas', on great spoil' (Tehillim, 119:162). Sas, joy at finding a lost article is something sudden, unplanned and unexpected; it has the same root as sasson. We know that the philosophers denied the need for and the value of practical mitzvot and instead they taught that the whole purpose of Mankind is the acquiring of good traits and ethical habits. The Minnim of our

discussion followed their teachings. They only differed between them-selves as to which form of spiritual experience was to be preferred. Simcha maintained that preference should be given to that which comes as a result of deliberation, thought and preparation, so that the spiritual experience will be the stronger and the effect on soul will be lasting. However, Sasson held that that spirituality which comes upon us in ecstasy, suddenly and without forethought and preparation, is deeper, more significant and more moving. They both relied on the verses to justify their approach. In Isaiah (35:10) ' They shall receive joy [sassion is placed before] and simcha, gladness', so that by means of that which comes in ecstasy and wonderment it is possible to grow and reach the experience through thought and preparation. In contrast, the verse in Esther (8:16) speaks first of simcha, 'and the Jews had gladness', then of joy and honor, since that which is brought through preparation and forethought can grow into the sudden ecstasy of wonder and astonishment, even at a simple and unexpected experience. When the strengths of the nefesh become accustomed through training, thought and preparation to expressions of love, avodah and service, then the slightest experience becomes one of spirituality and ecstasy, just as a lighted wick that reaches the fire.

Both of these, simcha and sasson are essential since all that is present in the one is absent in the other. That which is gained through preparation and forethought, is stronger and lasting, however it lacks spiritual spontaneity and ecstasy. However, the experiences that are sasson, come suddenly and without the labor of thought and consideration, so there is a danger that they maybe transitory, disappearing as swiftly as they came on us, like the gourd of Jonah, ' that came up in a night and perished in a night'.

Because of the importance of sasson and simcha to our avodah, our Sages brought their discussion in the Gemarah, but the primary message is in the words of Rabbi Abahu to Sasson.

They were of the opinion that they were the purpose of human existence. Rabbi Abahu, however, taught that if a person has a water- flask but does not fill it with water, but only keeps the flask next to them, then that person will surely die of thirst. The same is true when simcha and sasson are the whole purpose in life and the nefesh remains without any other purpose, empty and barren. Then no amount of simcha and sasson will prevent that nefesh from withering and dieing. As Shlomo Hamelekh wrote, ' Fear G-d and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of Mankind' (Kohelet, 12:13).

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D r. Tamari is a renowned economist, Jewish scholar, and founder of the Center For Business Ethics

(www.besr.org) in Jerusalem.