

THE FESTIVAL OF SUKKOS

The Secret of Perfect Joy

The solemn majesty of Rosh Hashanah has come and gone. The white-clad awe of Yom Kippur has cleansed our hearts and souls and passed into the treasure house of our memories. We are now prepared for our annual outburst of . . . joy! Sukkos, the Time of Our Rejoicing! The Torah tells us to be "only joyous" for seven full days.

This joy was realized to its fullest when the Beis Hamikdash in Jerusalem was still standing. The streets bursting with throngs of excited people from near and far. The air perfumed by the aroma of the sacrificial offerings and the burning incense. The sounds of music, singing and dancing reverberating through every window and doorway. The spectacle of an exalted people united in a common outpouring of love and gratitude to the Creator of the Universe.

At the center of these splendid festivities was the Simchas Beis Hasho'evah, the celebration of the drawing of the water for the *nisuch hamayim*, the water libation on the altar in the Beis Hamikdash. The Talmud draws a vivid picture of the exultant singing and dancing that accompanied this ritual. It even tells of great and venerable sages juggling and leaping about like young acrobats. Indeed, the Talmud assures us that "whoever did not witness the Simchas Beis Hasho'evah has never seen true joy in his life."

But what was so remarkable about the ritual of the drawing of the water? What made it the most powerful stimulus to joy imaginable?

The commentators explain that the Hebrew word for joy, *simchah*, is related to the word for erasing, *machah*. Joy is not something that must be generated. It is our natural state. Nevertheless, the pain, sorrows and disappointments of life overlay and obscure our natural joyousness. When we erase these impediments to our happiness, we achieve true joy by default.

Still, why indeed is joy our natural state? Because joy is an expression of a perfect existence, of fulfillment to the highest degree possible. The essence of a person is the immortal soul, the *neshamah*, our spark of the divine. When our souls cleave completely to their Source and Creator, we are in a state of perfect existence, and we experience joy. However, when our sins and misdeeds come between our souls and their Divine Source, we feel the anguish of estrangement, and our joy is extinguished. Consequently, all the commonplace vexations of life become magnified far out of proportion to their true

significance in the greater scheme of things. Therefore, in order to achieve true and perfect joy, we must erase the taint from our sublime souls so that they can again cleave perfectly to the Creator. Only then can we achieve fulfillment and the joy that results from it.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we cleansed and purified our souls. On Sukkos, we are finally capable of cleaving to the Creator and achieving true joy. The water libation symbolized this concept. Water has the property of absolute adaptability. It can attach itself to any shape or form so perfectly that no gaps or crevices are left unfilled. The ritual of pouring the water over the altar in the Beis Hamikdash, therefore, symbolizes the perfect and absolute attachment which the Jewish people have achieved to the Creator through their prayers and repentance during the High Holidays. And perfect attachment leads to perfect joy.

If we aspire to that perfect attachment, we can all achieve it, no matter what walk of life we pursue. If we only allow ourselves to be like water, gladly adapting to Hashem's will, we can find the key to true contentment. We must only seek it. And the reward for finding it is a joy unlike any other we have ever known.