

# ***Torah Table Talk – The Observant Life***

## **Do Jews Celebrate or Observe Their Holidays?**

### **A Response to Lenny Bruce**

Holy Days and Holidays, by Rabbi Alan B. Lucas, Page 137

*Parshat Emor, Leviticus 21:1 - 24:23*

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#### **I. Introduction**

*Celebrate is a goyish word. Observe is a Jewish word. Mr. and Mrs. Walsh are celebrating Christmas with Major Thomas Moreland, USAF (ret.), while Mr. and Mrs. Bromberg observed Hanukkah with Goldie and Arthur Schindler from Kiamesha, New York. **Lenny Bruce***

Is 'celebrate' a 'goyish' word? In his now-classic routine, Lenny Bruce divides the world into two categories, 'Jewish' and 'goyish,' which had nothing to do with religious or ethnic identity. "If you live in New York or any big city, you're Jewish," Bruce says, "It doesn't matter if you're Catholic... But If you live in Butte, Montana, you're goyish even if you're Jewish." With all due respect, I'm not comfortable about using the word goyish to describe others, even if they are from Butte. I'm equally uncomfortable suggesting that Jews don't know how to 'celebrate.' It's true that we tend to use "observe" more frequently than "celebrate." And certainly there is a celebratory element in the way non-Jewish Americans mark their holidays that one doesn't see in the Jewish community. We just can't compete with the outdoor decorations for Christmas, Halloween, St Patrick's Day, and Easter. But there is a celebratory element in the way we 'observe' our sacred days which shouldn't be overlooked. **Joy** is at the heart of our holiday. Ironically, the farther we grow from our traditions the more they become 'observances' rather than 'celebrations.' Had Mr. Bruce spent Simchat *Torah* in my synagogue, he might have known this. In reading Rabbi Lucas' description of the holiday cycle, we ought to keep in mind the celebratory and observant aspects of our calendar.

**Leviticus 23:4** These are the set times of the Lord, the sacred occasions, which you shall **celebrate**, each at its appointed time...

**Leviticus 23:40** On the first day you shall take the product of *hadar* tree, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, the willows of the brook and **you shall rejoice** before the Lord your God seven days.

**Deuteronomy 16:14-15** **You shall rejoice** in your festival, with your son, your daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless and the widow in your communities...you shall have **nothing but joy**.

#### **II. Sources and Resources**

- a) **You shall rejoice before the Lord:** (Lev. 23:40) This is the only festival prescribed in chapter 23 on which rejoicing is explicitly commanded. In the festival calendar of Deuteronomy 16, rejoicing is also mentioned in connection with the Feast of Weeks. Elsewhere we read that sacrificial worship in the Temple is an occasion for rejoicing. It is not clear just why the Sukkot festival is singled out here, although it may be because Sukkot was the most prominent of the ancient pilgrimage festivals.
- b) **Our Rabbis taught:** A man is duty bound to make his children and his household rejoice on a Festival, for it is said, "You shall rejoice in your festival, *you and your son, and thy daughter...*" (Deut. 16:14) How does he make them rejoice? With wine. Rabbi Judah said: Men with what is suitable for them, and women with what is suitable for them. "Men with what is suitable for them," means with wine. And women with what? Rabbi Joseph recited: in Babylonia, with colored garments; in Eretz Yisrael, with ironed lined garments. It was taught, Rabbi Judah ben Batyra said: When the Temple was in existence there could be no rejoicing except with meat, as it is said, "You shall sacrifice peace-offerings, and eat there; and you shall rejoice before the Lord thy God."

(Deut. 27:7) But now that the Temple is no longer in existence, there is no rejoicing save with wine, as it is said, Wine that makes glad the heart of man." (Ps.104:15) (*BT Pesachim 109a*)

- c) It is forbidden to fast or recite eulogies on the seven days of Pesach, the eight days of Sukkot, and the other holidays. On these days, a person is obligated to be happy and in good spirits; he, his children, his wife, the members of his household, and all those who depend on him, as (Deut. 16:14) states: "And you shall rejoice in your festival." The "rejoicing" mentioned in the verse refers to sacrificing peace offerings, as will be explained in *Hilchot Chaggigah*. Nevertheless, included in this charge to rejoice is that he, his children, and the members of his household should rejoice, each one in a manner appropriate for him.

How does one rejoice? One should give children roasted seeds, nuts, and sweets. For women, one should buy attractive clothes and jewelry according to one's financial capacity. Men should eat meat and drink wine, for there is no happiness without partaking of meat, nor is there happiness without partaking of wine. When a person eats and drinks in celebration of a holiday, he is obligated to feed converts, orphans, widows, and others who are destitute and poor. In contrast, a person who locks the gates of his courtyard and eats and drinks with his children and his wife, without feeding the poor and the embittered, is not indulging in rejoicing associated with a *mitzvah*, but rather the rejoicing of his gut. And with regard to such a person it is written (Hosea 9:4): "Their sacrifices will be like the bread of mourners; all that partake thereof shall become impure, for they kept their bread for themselves alone." This happiness is a disgrace, as in (Mal 2:3): "I will spread dung on your faces, the dung of your festival celebrations." (*Maimonides, Mishnah Torah Shivtat Yom Tov 16:17-18*)

- d) It seems to me that since the *mitzvah* of *simchah* which we were commanded to fulfill on the festival isn't a specific *mitzvah*, but rather a general *mitzvah* that one is obligated to be happy on *Yom Tov* in all ways that he is able to rejoice, it is not similar to other *mitzvot*, regarding which all people are equal, i.e. the rich person should not increase and the poor person should not reduce. For this *simchah*, each and every person is obligated to rejoice according to his means. (*Rabbi Aryeh Leib Gunzberg -b.1695, Sha'agat Aryeh 65*)

### III. Reflections

*Simchah*, rejoicing, is central to the celebration of the biblical festivals. It is mentioned in connection with the festival of Sukkot in Leviticus 23 and with the festivals of Sukkot and Shavuot in Deuteronomy 16. Both of these holidays were harvest festivals which might explain why celebration was associated with them and not Passover. Because Passover occurred at the beginning of the growing season, a farmer could not be certain about what the year ahead would hold, so rejoicing and gratitude was premature. In any case the sages understood *simchah* as a *mitzvah* that applied to all the holy days in the Biblical calendar. Even though Deuteronomy 16:14 refers specifically to Sukkot, the sages interpreted the generic expression, "You shall rejoice **on your festival** (*bihagekha*)," as a reference to all three pilgrimage festivals since they were technically *hagim*, festivals, as well as *Rosh Hashanah*.

The Talmud goes on to define *simchah* not as a state of mind but as a behavioral expectation. Originally, *simchah* was expressed through sacrifices, specifically the *shelamim* (peace offerings), which were shared by the supplicant who brought the sacrifice, the priests who offered it, and God who accepted it. In other words, the holidays were a time to come to the Temple and participate in a sacred meal of sacrificial meat in shared joy. But the *Torah* tells us something else; not only to rejoice but to make sure that one's household rejoices as well: "With your son, your daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless and the widow." Not only were the things that made men and women rejoice different from one another, but we see from the Talmud that there were cultural and social differences in taste as well. Apparently, Babylonian women found pleasure in colored garments while women in the land of Israel took pleasure in linen. Maimonides goes on to codify this concept of celebration by including not only men and women but children as well. Sensitive to the language of the *Torah* he adds the needs of those who are less fortunate in society: "the stranger, the fatherless and the widow." In other words, one cannot rejoice unless everyone has the opportunity to do so.

Rabbi Gunzberg takes the concept of *simchah* a step farther: *simchah* cannot be defined in terms objectively because different things make different people happy. Besides, he argues, *simchah* is also an inner state of being, and is different for each person based on their social and economic standing. What we see from the sources is that the Jewish tradition is quite serious about *simchah*. We tend to define words like 'happiness' and 'celebrate' based

on expectations and perceptions. A beautiful sukkah and a set table for Passover are no less celebratory than a Christmas tree or an Easter ham. As with so many experiences, Judaism defines these terms based on family and social responsibility. *Simchah* should be *shared* with others; one's family, one's neighbors and those who are less fortunate in society. It also focuses on the needs of the individual and making sure that the pleasure of the occasion is shared.

#### IV. **Halakhah L'Ma'aseh** (*Practical implications for Jewish living*)

**Quotes from “The Observant Life,” Holy Days and Holidays:** (*Only a few quotes will be included here since we continue to refer back to this chapter throughout the year as we celebrate the Jewish holidays.*)

- For Jews, time is a gift to be accepted in gratitude and sanctified through human endeavor. Writing in one of his most famous books, *The Sabbath*, Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us: 'Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time.'
- Time is sanctified when we join in **observances** commanded by god and sanctified by Jews for thousands of years. While it is surely true that every day can be made holy and every moment sacred, it is through our observances of the Jewish holidays that our year takes on character, profundity and meaning.
- (Writing of the pilgrimage festivals-) While each of these holidays has a specific historical framework, a unique spiritual theme, and an individual agricultural aspect, they **all celebrate** the bounty of the land.

#### **Questions to Ponder**

1. How do you feel about observances vs. celebrations? Is one better than the other? How are they different from one another?
2. The *Torah* never commands us 'to rejoice' on Passover. What other reasons might there be for the absence of *simchah* as a prerequisite in the celebration of this holiday?
3. What do the four species mentioned in Leviticus 23:40 have to do with celebration and rejoicing on the holiday of *Sukkot*?
4. Deuteronomy 16 speaks of the three pilgrimage festivals but never mentions *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. Why is this? Why was pilgrimage such a significant aspect of the holidays in Deuteronomy?
5. Cooking is allowed on the festivals but not on Shabbat. How does permission to cook enhance the celebratory aspect of the festivals?
6. How might the expectations in contemporary society be different in terms of promoting a sense of wellbeing and rejoicing on the Jewish holy days?
7. What is the connection between sanctification and celebration?

*Don't depend on the quotes from The Observant Life in Torah Table Talk. Get a copy and read the whole chapter! It is also available on Kindle and Nook. Would you consider becoming a sponsor for TTT for a week, a month, for a whole book of the Torah or for an entire year? Weekly sponsorships are \$54. Dedications can be made in memory of loved ones or in honor of special occasions on the week of your choice. All donations will be used to support the Oceanside Jewish Center, my congregational sponsor. For more information or if to subscribe to or unsubscribe from Torah Table Talk, write to [haravmark@optonline.net](mailto:haravmark@optonline.net). Rabbi Mark Greenspan*

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