

Happy Judaism: Thoughts for Parashat Emor

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Emor

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In this week's Torah portion, we read of the festive days that mark the Jewish religious calendar. Maimonides, in his Guide for the Perplexed (III: 43), makes a significant comment about religion and happiness: "The festivals are all for rejoicings and pleasurable gatherings, which in most cases are indispensable for man; they are also useful in the establishment of friendship, which must exist among people living in political societies." Happy occasions are essential. Pleasurable gatherings enlarge our lives by linking us with family and friends, by enabling us to meet new people and interact with them in a positive environment.

Indeed, we not only have the festival days; we have the joy of Shabbat each week. We have the happiness of so many mitzvot each day. Judaism promotes a positive, optimistic worldview and lifestyle. The hallmark of Jewish religious life is happiness!

The Talmud (Ta'anit 22a) relates a story that Elijah the Prophet pointed out two people who had a place in the world-to-come. Who were these outstanding individuals? They were street comedians! They told jokes. When asked why they

devoted their time to making people laugh, they answered: we try to relieve people's sufferings; we offer them a moment of laughter to free them from their woes; we use humor to bring peace among those who are arguing with each other.

The 18th century sage, Rabbi Eliyahu ha-Cohen of Izmir, elaborated on the virtues of these street comedians. "Anyone who is happy all his days thereby indicates the greatness of his trust in God. This is why they [the street comedians] were always happy...This quality [of accepting life with happiness] is enough to give a person merit to have a place in the world-to-come; for great is trust [in the Lord], even if a person is not perfect in all other moral perfections" (Midrash Talpiot).

Especially during difficult times, celebrating Shabbat and holidays with family and friends is uplifting. These occasions provide a needed and healthful respite from the problems of our world. By bolstering our spirits in a religious context, we gain strength, courage and optimism to confront the challenges ahead.