Gladness and Joy: Thoughts for Purim

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By

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With the victory of the Jews over their enemies, the Megillah informs us that "the Jews had light and gladness (simha) and joy (sasson) and honor." What is the difference between simha and sasson, and how does this impact on our understanding of this verse's message?

Simha: This refers to physical contentment. When the Torah commands us to have simha on the Festivals, the Talmud interprets this to mean that we should eat meat and drink wine. Simha is enjoyed when we have a good meal. The 7 wedding blessings refer to how God provided gladness (simha) to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This, too, can be understood to refer to physical contentment and wellbeing. Adam and Eve were provided with the wonderful climate and foods of paradise.

Sasson: This refers to emotional, spiritual joy. The prophet Isaiah likens God's joy in Israel to the joy of a bride and groom. The joy (mesos/sasson) of bride and groom entails a profound sense of feeling complete, of having found a beloved partner with whom to face the adventure of life. Whereas simha is "me-oriented", sasson is "other oriented." Whereas simha is a feeling of contentment, sasson is a feeling that life has meaning.

So the verse in the Megillah might be understood as follows. Upon winning their freedom from oppression, the Jews felt "light"; the darkness and gloom was removed from their lives. Then they felt gladness, simha. They were pleased that they were physically safe. Then they felt joy, sasson. They attained a higher spiritual satisfaction; they understood that their salvation had divine meaning, that their lives had greater purpose. Once they attained that level of understanding, then they experienced "honor"--honor in the form of self-respect as well as honor from others who recognized the transformation which had occurred to the Jews.

A recent edition of ABC National News had a piece on happiness in America. Drawing on the results of Gallup Polls, the report described various factors which Americans described as conducing to happiness. The polls found that the ethnic

groups that are the "happiest" are Jews and Asian-Americans!

I won't offer explanations relating to Asian-Americans, but I will venture a suggestion about why Jews consider themselves so happy.

On the simha level, Jews are among the most educated, hardest working, and most affluent groups of Americans. While this might explain contentment, it doesn't explain real happiness. For the sasson factor, the Jews have an important asset: the cultural tradition of striving, of trying to change the world for the better, of social justice and responsibility. Sasson--real joy--comes by being concerned with the lives of others. American Jews--whether religiously observant or not--share this tradition of helping others, giving charity, volunteering for social causes etc. I think this is a major factor in the American Jews' happiness. It is a combination of simha and sasson. Once we have attained both of these aspects, we then move on to "honor", where we can take pride in our achievements, and where we can be recognized by others for the important values we represent.

The Megillah tells us that the Purim holiday was established as a celebration for Jews of all generations. Mordecai and Esther called on Jews to give each other gifts of food, and to give charity to the needy. What an impressive way to establish a holiday of victory! It wasn't just about eating and drinking and having a good celebratory party. Rather, Jews were instructed to share with others, to support the poor--to remember that true happiness involves concern and involvement in the lives of others.

The message of Purim, then, may be seen as a progressive development in our perspective on life. First, we need to clear the darkness of hatred and violence from our midst; then we need to care for the material wellbeing of our families and communities; then we need to recognize the true spiritual joy that comes with a sense of purpose and meaning in life; then we achieve the level of self-respect, and respect in the eyes of others for the values and traditions we represent.

Happy Purim. May this Purim be a beginning to an ever higher level of light, gladness, joy and honor.

Angel for Shabbat