The Pursuit of Happiness: Thoughts for Succoth

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Hol HaMoed Succoth

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Dr. John Abernathy was a famed physician in 19th century England. One day, a patient came in complaining that he was not feeling well. Dr. Abernathy gave the man a complete check-up, and then said: "There's nothing physically wrong with you. You're just depressed. I suggest that you go to a performance of the great comedian, Grimaldi. He is wonderful. He will cheer you up and make you laugh. Go see Grimaldi and you will feel much better."

The patient replied: "I am Grimaldi!"

This anecdote reminds us that there are two aspects (at least) to every person. There is the exterior persona that people see, the outward appearance of who we are; and there is the inner person that people do not readily see, the concealed essence of who we are. In the ideal, these two aspects should be in harmony. Our inner life and outer life should reflect a unified personality. In the case of Grimaldi, his external humor and cheerfulness actually concealed an inner sadness and malaise.

When the two aspects are not in harmony, we need to work on ourselves. When we realize there is a dissonance, we can begin to address the situation and work to make ourselves "whole". If we deny or refuse to recognize the dissonance, we live life on a superficial, even hypocritical level. We pretend to be what we are not; we may try to convince ourselves that everything is just fine.

The past holy days of Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur focused on our need to unify ourselves, and to overcome any dissonance between our external and internal lives. The mood was solemn and sincere, as befits an honest self-evaluation.

But on Succoth, Zeman Simhateinu, (the time of our happiness) the Torah commands us to be happy. Yet, how can we be commanded to be happy, if our

interior mood is not happy? The answer is: We have the power to direct our inner thoughts in the direction of happiness. We have the capacity to overcome feelings of distress, by channeling our emotions in constructive ways.

Happiness isn't an end in itself but is the result of positive thinking and action. Succoth reminds us: we've just been through a very serious holiday period where we've discovered areas of strength and weakness within ourselves. Now it is time to take our insights from Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur and turn them into positive thinking and action. Let us now rejoice in the festival. Let us re-connect with family and friends. Let us be grateful to the Almighty for the abundance of the harvest, for the beauties of nature. Let us harmonize our inner lives and our outer lives so that we reflect a genuine faith and confidence inside and out.

When we greet each other on Succoth (as on other Festival days), some say: Moadim leSimha--may the festivals be for happiness; and some say, Hag Sameah--enjoy a happy Festival. The message is clear: we foster a mood of happiness so that we can carry this spirit of optimism and happiness throughout the year and throughout our lives.

Moadim leSimha.

Angel for Shabbat