

The Essence of Succos

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(Adapted transcript of a talk given at Aish HaTorah)

I wanted to start with the concept of *Succos*, specifically, with the davening. How do we epitomize *Succos*? זמן שמחתנו – the season of our joy. Happiness, joy - now let's take a look and see what that means.

Does that mean that it is during this season that we enjoy ourselves? Is that what it means?

Is that what זמן חירותנו (the time of our freedom) means? That in this season, we are free? Or is it, that it's in this season that we acquired our freedom? And having achieved it in the season of our freedom, it becomes an acquisition that we use through the entirety of our lives, all year. Reinforced, reinvigorated, recreated in the season of *Pesach*, but something that we take and live with all year round.

Does זמן מתן תורתנו mean that this is the day that we have *Torah*? Or this is the day that we acquired the *Torah* with its effect - and to keep, use, and apply all the rest of the year?

Is יום הזכרון הזה for the present Day of Judgment alone? Or this is the internalization of the concept of judgment, and what we derive from it for the rest of the year.

In every one of these cases, of course, we aren't talking about what we were doing *just for today*. We are talking about the significance of that day in terms of the kinds of *acquisitions we have to make in our נשמה*, - in our soul for the rest of the year. זמן שמחתנו can't mean the season when *we are* joyous and happy. It means the season where we *acquire* the trait of joyousness. The ability to be happy, and accept it as a way of life.

Succos is not saying to us: be happy *today*. *Succos* is saying that joyousness and happiness is an essential ingredient of our lives as Jews.

זמן שמחתנו also means the season which we *acquire* that power, that commitment, that can enable us to use the concept of joyousness as an essential ingredient of our lives as Jews, as the revealers of G-d's reality, in G-d's own world.

We pointed out that a holiday to the Jew is never a specific memorization, but rather a reaction to an event which changed the essence of our character. Like *Yitziyas Mitzrayim* which changed us and made us a whole different type of being. A being who is now a nation of G-d, who is prepared for a covenant. The acceptance of *Torah*, obviously, changed our whole concept and view of reality in what existence is about. We are capable of different things. We are driven to different things. All that we are has been essentially affected in the deepest and most intense way by the reality of what took place on that day! As we pointed out, *Purim* made a change on the very nature and soul of the Jew, and his potential, and how he saw himself. What he demands of himself, and what he is capable of.

Therefore, *Succos* also is a change in the very essence of the Jew. It makes him capable and aware, and enables him to do things that he is otherwise not capable of doing. It gives him

insights that didn't exist before. It increases his potential. It increases the reach of his soul. It increases the talents that he possesses. The direction that he drives it.

What is this event? “בסוכות הושבתי אתכם” - “I have set you in *succos*.” What is that supposed to mean? It certainly says *you are sitting in my dwellings*. It's not the *nes* (miracle) of being in a *Succah*. We don't make a *Yom-Tov* for the *mann* (heavenly dew). We don't make a *Yom Tov* for the *mayim* (water). Why are we making a *Yom Tov* for the *succos* that we sat in?

The answer is that the *succos* are my (G-d's) dwelling. It's living with G-d. Living with G-d, in his presence, has totally changed our very being! You can't live in G-d's actual presence without being a different kind of person. With a different potential. A different drive. A different direction of existence, and the ability to achieve. This is self-apparent. That's what *succos* is about.

How does this express itself? Our sages say that this idea is expressed through *simchah* (joy). They say it because the *chumash* says it:

“ושמחת לפני ה' אלוהיך” (You shall *rejoice* before *Hashem* your G-d). The *chumash* identifies that this character, that has so changed us, is expressed in joyousness.

But the first implication is that joyousness is a character trait. It's not a thing that happens to us. So then how do you do that? You say “I've got to have joy. I'd love it. But how do I achieve joyousness?”

It says here that it is a character trait. I can *achieve* it. A person will say, I can be joyous, and rejoice *if* G-d sends me wonderful things, and I *have* a good event. If he sends me another grandchild - fantastic! - I am full of joy. Suppose I hear the news that one of my children is in financial difficulties and they are having trouble, am I going to be joyous? What am I joyous about? Nobody *sent* me anything to be joyful about?! We are being told, that's not true, you *create* joy. It is a trait. It's for us to use, to deal with, to increase.

Now, how does one bring joyousness into life? I think that having phrased the question, it has become immediately clear that this is perhaps the most crucial of the *Yomin-tovim*! And certainly in terms of understanding, and having insight into the nature of Man, it would be difficult to point to something more essential. We are being told that joyousness is something we can deal with. It is not a reaction to the events in the outside world, and how they affect us. Rather, it is *how we deal with ourselves* in the outside world.

This fact, all of us know. Sometimes we know it in an articulate way, and sometimes deep down without bringing it out. For instance, we all know the two people in the same room, let's say in a convalescent home. You have this lady in bed **A** and you have that lady in bed **B**. Lady in bed **A** says to the lady in bed **B**, “Oh, am I a fortunate woman! Thank G-d, I have, with the help of G-d, a son and a daughter, devoted and caring. A week doesn't go by in which one of them doesn't visit me. And whenever they come, they bring something - an apple, a candy - something. There is no way that they lose an opportunity to tell me how much they care; how much I mean to them. It is such a joy, *boruch Hashem* that the *Ribono shel olam*, blessed me in such a way. The lady in bed **B** says “Oy, you shouldn't know from such *tzaros* (pain) as I have. Have

I got children? I got a son and a daughter. More than once a week they can't come? Never more than once a week. The most they can tear themselves away is once a week. And what do they bring me, an apple? A candy? This is what you call devotion to a mother - after all the years I sacrificed for them? That's all they can find themselves able to do? Once a week, I should have a visitor? What a curse it is to have such children!"

They are describing the same thing! Literally the same thing. The same children. The same event. This one is thanking G-d, and blessing Him for the blessing, and this one is cursing her unfortunate fate.

There is an approach that gives joy, and there is an approach that is destructive. But you think this is only in this case? It's in everything!! You know that there are two people who became *r"l*, blind. One, "how unfortunate I am. My life is over, finished. There is nothing that I can do. I am useless." And becomes a shriveled up old nothing. The other - "ok, I don't have my sight, so I am going to have to learn how to use my fingers for brail, I am going to learn how to get along, to walk." He does, and he lives a full, useful, and meaningful life. These two, exactly the same!

Two people are dying of cancer one - "a curse!" The other "well *b"h* I still see, I am still aware, my children can come, I can know them, every minute has so much to offer, I can learn, I can think, I can relate, I can see grandchildren being born, I can kiss them, I can know them." They are both *r"l* suffering. You hear the difference, and you know that this difference exists. You know that there are these two types.

Does this mean or not - that the essential ingredient of our joyousness is not *what happens*, but *what we are*? What I have, I'd love to have more, but thank G-d I enjoy the food that I eat. He has a steak? I can't afford a steak, but I least I have chicken, and chicken - isn't it delicious? To enjoy it, and have use of it? A piece of bread, sometimes with butter or margarine, and you can throw in an onion, with its smell and delight. And you have an apple, you know what you do with an apple? Smell it, touch it, feel it. It's a magnificent experience.

There is a magnificent story called the *Marantz* - The orange. It's a story of an orange that was received as *mesh'loach manos* for *Purim*. Everybody came to look at this incredible fruit, as they had never seen an incredible exotic fruit! The first day, people came to *look* at it. The second day, they *feel* it and *smell* the incredible aroma of the orange! Then they *peel* it. And in the peel, each little piece is taken with such care to make marmalade. And then they take it apart into the separate little sections, and crush it in the mouth, and feel the juices running in the mouth. And the *taste*. It becomes an incredible experience, for a month. And then the marmalade that they can lick on a piece of bread for another couple of months. A memory for a lifetime: The orange!!

Why don't we appreciate that magnificent joy, that an orange is? Because we have it more than once?! So you can't appreciate it more than once? Think of what's involved in a firm bite of an apple. The different tangs that it can have. The juices that come out. Think for a minute! It's an experience! *If you don't take it for granted* it's a magnificent experience!

What is the difference between the person who sees the joy and the person who sees the loss? This mother who thanked G-d for the blessing of such wonderful children, and the other

mother who cursed her fate that left her with such ungrateful ingrates for children? What's the difference?

It is clear that the difference is *self-centeredness* or *outward going-ness*. If my drives, my wishes and hopes, are all about myself, I am constantly measuring what I've got and what I have not got. There is no joy! There is a constant finding fault.

If there is a sense of otherness, a sense of outside myself instead of measuring everything by me, but the otherness of things, then you can enjoy everything because you see the positive that it is.

So the first of all the methods by which we attain joy is to *become involved outside of ourselves*. That's the first release. The more self-centered – the more involved with one's self, the more difficult it is to find *simchah* – joy.

Over here, I have to say something to you that you very well may be mistaken in.

What I just said about not being self-centered does *not* mean not being *selfish*. Selfish people are not self-centered necessarily. Their purpose is to serve themselves, but their thoughts and their drives are outward bound. You have extremely selfish people who express their selfishness in their relationships to others. In creating involvements with others. In finding what to do. In finding undertakings and initiatives. They will use it in the end for themselves, but their thoughts and their approaches are not inwardly directed. They are outwardly directed. They can achieve actual *simchah*!

They don't cripple themselves with self-analysis - where am I? What have I got? What good is it? What am I going to do with it? I need so much more. I'm lacking this and I'm lacking that.

All unhappiness derives from self-awareness, self-analysis, self-judgments, and self-measurements. All, including pain. The difference between whether the pain will cripple me or not is whether it becomes the *center* – “oy there's another twinge there.” “Which one is this?” “This one is a throb.” “That one is a pulse.” There is a constant measuring. “Is it worse today?” “Is it a little better today?” “How much?” “Can I move?” “Can I not move?” A whole day centered on where am I? He's had a heart attack – “oy, should I walk?” “Should I not walk?” “How much should I walk?” “Is this a proper amount of exercise?” “Did the heart respond?” “Did I just get a twinge?” You're finished!

Do what you have to do, you get your general directions, and you carry them out. You don't sit and analyze, measure, and weigh. Then you can live like a normal person. This is the difference between the two.

This is, in essence, the difference that we pointed out regarding *Yom Kippur*. The difference between the one whose reaction is guilt and despair, and the one whose reaction can be with full joyousness. Are you inward looking, measuring everything in terms of me, in terms of its effect? If that's the case, then it's never going to be a joy. Nothing will give you joy.

However, if you look at things outside, your intentions and thoughts are not centered on self, even if your desires and motivations are self, even then, you will be a person who will use life, and react to life, and enjoy life.

Therefore, the major ingredient in joyousness is a sense of *there is more than me*.

'משכן ה' (dwelling place of Hashem) has got to be that awareness. It has got to be an awareness that it isn't כוחי ועוצם ידי ("the strength of my hands... has brought me my success etc.") I live in that which G-d provides for me.

If it's the time of harvest, it's the harvest with which the Ribono shel olam (G-d) graced me. It is the harvest which comes from Him to me. There is no עשה כוחי ועוצם ידי - my talents, my abilities - לי את החיל הזה - brought me my results. It isn't that I create my own future. Hashem creates it. And all that I have is given to me.

If there is this perspective, your thoughts cannot be centered in self! The thoughts have to be in terms of *what have I been blessed with, not in terms of what have I got*.

Am I a success, am I a failure? You are not a success; you are not a failure. Everything you do is from Hashem. You are a mishtadel (one who put's in effort). So do the best you can. That's all that's involved. G-d does it all anyway. Do the best you can. **You have to make the room for his brochos (blessings) to be able to be chal - to apply.** The one who sees life in these terms is the one full of joy. The one who lives in G-d's dwelling is the one full of joy. It is to take this awareness and realization, that you are in G-d's dwelling. "כי בסוכות הושבת..."- for in huts I have placed you.

Let's take the concept of the Mishnah in *pirkei avos*, "איזהו עשיר השמה בחלקו" - Who is considered rich? It is frequently incorrectly and seriously mistranslated as one who is *satisfied* with his lot. But that's not true! A man who is *satisfied* with his lot is not an *ashir* (rich) - he is *dead!*

What שמחה בחלקו means is *happy* or *joyful* with his lot. He takes pleasure and enjoys his lot. That means as follows: He likes it, and loves it, and feels that life is full of many blessings, and therefore he'd like a little bit more. A little bit more would be even better. And certainly, if I can have a bathroom in the house, that would increase my pleasure in life. *But I don't suffer because I don't have it.*

It's not that I'm aware of what I am lacking. I am aware of what I possess. But you can certainly want more. This is the distress of most people. Most people are: "So what if I have a television set, but it's a 19 inch, I don't have a 25 inch." "How can I live with it? I can't see as clearly as I would like to see." Or: - "I don't have a 25-foot swimming pool, I only have a 20 foot." [I don't know maybe swimming pools come bigger, I don't know if this is realistic, but the idea is the same.]

Do you look at what you don't have and what you're missing? Or do you look at what you do have? You don't have to be satisfied with it. You can say I will work very hard trying to get a little more. I wouldn't mind having the bigger swimming pool. But not having a swimming pool isn't going to blight my life. As long as I have teeth to eat with, I have got a lot to be

thankful for. I have got a hand to pick with. And G-d forbid if I don't have teeth, but at least I have other ways. He has good food to eat even though he doesn't have teeth. And if he doesn't have hands, but thank G-d he has learned how to use his feet to help him.

That's an *ashir* (rich). *שמח בהלקו* - is *happy* with his lot, not *satisfied*. Sure he would like more, but he doesn't suffer for it. Which almost everybody does. Almost everybody suffers because he doesn't have the *more*. You can see how true this is very simply:

If somebody in the middle of the Congo had a slum house - would it be a palace!? Indoor plumbing, hot and cold running water. Would it be a palace!? Would he be a king!? And everybody would come running and bow down to this incredibly rich man. This millionaire who has this brick little building with 5 bricks missing here, and a window pane missing there, and broken plumbing, *but an indoor toilet, and running water!!* Is he a king!? You put him in the middle of Harlem and he is a deprived, oppressed, suffering person. Is he deprived? Is he oppressed? He's deprived and oppressed because he isn't looking at what he's got. He is looking at what everybody else has. And because of that, what he has is depressing, and takes away all the joy of life. You take the same fella, with the same possessions, and you put him in the middle of the Congo and he is heavenly happy. Look what he's got! Everybody else is in a hovel, and he has brick. Everybody else has the outhouse with smells and unpleasantness, and he has an indoor toilet and running water. Everybody else has to pump, he turns on a faucet. Everybody else has to boil, he has hot water coming right out. It's fantastic! The joys and pleasure of his possessions!

The sense of joy means that even when we suffer pain - which can be fairly often in our lives - that we do *not* with the pain, lose sight of the blessings. Then the pain can be pain, and regret can be regret, and at the same time, there is an enormous joy.

If I can come back to the example that we gave. A man *r"l* is under intense pain, does that mean he shouldn't be able to enjoy his children and grandchildren because of the intense pain? Isn't it simultaneously possible that he is in pain, but also has the blessing of seeing them, their accomplishments, of seeing their growth, of seeing their well-being? That doesn't give him pleasure even though he's in pain? He has to concentrate on the pain?

What happens when he concentrates on the pain? *Veisz mir* (oh my!) it is intensified a million times! If he concentrates on the *simchah*, the joy, the pain is mitigated enormously. What's the difference between the two? If I'm self-centered, of course, I am concentrating on all my pain. If I am outward centered, I am not. I see this, and I see him, and I see the blessing, and my pain literally becomes less. Literally. It literally becomes less painful. Whatever it is, pain doesn't have to take away from joy.

But I have to know how to respond to pain. I can respond *גם זו לטובה* or I can respond it's a shame. I can respond to pain with *כל מה דעביד רחמנא לטב עביד*, whatever G-d does is for the good. There are different responses to the pain. But the primary response from *Succos* should be that the pain doesn't interfere with my appreciation of all the wonderful things of my life. That the pain doesn't take over. The pain doesn't become the all and all, the center. Life then becomes unbearable, intolerable. Every minute of life is in misery. This woman that we talked about lying in that bed. Every minute she's involved in the assessment of her terrible

predicament, of her cursed existence. It's destructive. And this is the overwhelming majority of our suffering. The overwhelming majority of our sufferings are self-inflicted. It would disappear!

There is real suffering G-d forbid. There is a broken bone, and that is real suffering, but it's only a small part of the suffering for the person who thinks that "*everything happens to me.*" Now I broke my bone, I won't be able to go, and I won't be able to do, and I can't go to the parties, and people will forget about me. The broken bone is a minor part of my suffering. The way I'm dealing with it, and how I look at it, intensifies the suffering a hundred-fold. The other person, "it's painful, but thank G-d, in another couple of days, it will be gone. And *boruch Hashem the Ribono shel olam* provided aspirin and things to ease it." I don't suffer, there's pain, and the pain hurts, but it's over, it's bearable, and he isn't miserable, even when there is real suffering. And there is real suffering. There is disease. There is G-d forbid death. There is loss of fortune. There is breakage. There is bodily loss. There are all kinds of real pains. But joy is not necessarily gone because pain comes. *It's what I do with the pain.*

But I still have to deal with the pain. And there are a variety of ways of dealing with the pain without letting it interfere with my joy. Do I consider the pain a punishment? Do I consider the pain an atonement? How do I look at the pain as pain? That's still a response.

So you follow that there are two separate things we're dealing with. (1) One is joy which is an *approach* to the realities of life. (2) And the other is *responding* to the fact that pain does exist. This *middah* is what *Succos* is to give us.

And by going out of our homes and into the *succah*, we remove ourselves from the consciousness of our particular settings, as being responsible and necessary for the comforts of our lives. It isn't so. I'm out there, and I live, and it's fine - and it's wonderful. I don't need all this to be happy.

That's one area already that you "hear" from *Succos*. The other is that I'm prepared to give it all up to *Hashem Yisborach*. Which says that to achieve this, one has to have a perspective of who he is, and what he is. And a realization of his relationship to the *Ribono shel olam*. When that's the perspective with which you put things, then, of course, you recognize the blessings and the *to'vah* (the good), and the rest.

If it's *chance*, then you feel like what is there? It's just there, it's nothing for me, and it's for everybody. But if you know that it's the *Ribono shel olam*, then you recognize that it's for me! I'm given the ability to appreciate, and to see, and to know, and to react to all this that he brought into the world for me. The appreciation is fantastic!! Think for a minute - someone who is aware of this. The sense of closeness to *Hashem*, and the sense of appreciation. Look what a world he made for me! He made light, and enough rain, and enough snow, and the difference of seasons, and the enjoyment of it, and the beauty that he planted, the smells, the taste, the fragrances, the relationships, the contrasts, the things to catch my eye, the ability to compose, the ability to find ways of producing the most beautiful fascinating sounds, the ability to hear them, appreciate them and react to them. The change that this perspective creates! The awareness that we are *Hashem's* creatures changes our whole outlook. I'm not saying "*what is He doing for me?*" I know that all this is *His to give me!!* You've got to live a different life if you think that!

Think for a minute, if you become aware that you're in G-d's presence, and He maintains you and gives you all. Then you take a look at the world that He made - do you not see how you begin to recognize what joy is!? To recognize all the wonderful incredible things He's giving me!

And even better, when you ask for more. You know a child, the mother gives him a delicious meal and he enjoys it. And not only that but is sung a song and told a story. And now the child says, "Give me a candy. I want a candy too." You're comfortable. You know that you have a mother that cares and is feeding you and giving you. Ok, I can ask for a candy. I can enjoy that too. You see it's a different kind of asking. It's with a confidence. It's with a looking forward to. It's an extension of all the goodness that I've been getting. And an extension of it is, ok, so let's have the candy, the *gliddah* (ice-cream), to polish off this wonderful meal. *Boruch Hashem*, by us it's fantastic! We even have *pareve glidah* (*pareve* ice-cream).

Chazal see in the *dalid minim* (four species) a sense of *avdus* (subordination) to *Hashem*. The *dalid minim* are a proclamation of seeing a oneness in diversity, isn't it? A unifying factor. That's the *dalid minim*. All the differences, and yet by the togetherness of them all, there is a total wholeness.

This is an awareness that my completeness is not going to be found in me alone, but in my sharing and accepting relationships with others as well. Is this not an essential ingredient of what we've been discussing? And a sense of an approach out of which I can hope to achieve joyfulness!? So the *dalid minim* is in a very real sense a part of this.

But more, it's "בפני" (before me, *Hashem*) - 'ד' מינים ושמחת לפני ה' -

"ולקחתם לכם ביום הראשון פרי עץ הדר כפת תמרים וענף עץ עבת וערבי נחל

ושמחתם לפני יהוה אלהיכם שבעת ימים."

[ויקרא, כג, מ]

There's a sense of surrendering to the *Ribono shel olam* that the *dalid minim* creates. Whichever way it does it, but that's what it creates. It's "בפני" (before me, *Hashem*). A sense of being in his presence. Just as the *succah* is, the *dalid minim* is. If we take the unification approach, then it's telling you that it's *only* by realizing your wholeness with all the others that you can be in the presence of *Hashem*. But whatever it is, the *chumash* makes it clear that the *dalid minim* brings a sense of being in G-d's presence. So it is really a culmination of the sense of the *succah*. This is clearly stated in the *Torah*. The only thing is *how you see it?* And *why the dalid minim is that?*

So we are suggesting that perhaps the sense of unity which is the sense of *one*, coming out of a diversity. The sense of seeing all the different potentials, and yet each has its role to play. And each is meaningful. That's really what you're saying! The *aravah* doesn't have smell or taste, but it has meaning and significance. There are those with taste and smell, you have both, and they all contribute, and don't say "*what's the use of it?*" It has a use. It's there, and without it, you're missing.

This is also certainly a direction to see the positive rather than the negative. And that's a *middah* (a trait). And to sum it up, this is the *middah* of not speaking *lashon harah*. *Lashon harah* is the opposite of this *middah*. *Lashon harah* is the *middah* of seeing the evil. Of seeing the lack.

It goes further. It's *wanting* to see the lack, the weakness. Wanting to see the bad points. And that's what you tell over. You don't really tell over the good points. You want to see the bad points. If you didn't have that tendency to *see* weaknesses, there would be no *lashon harah*. The looking for weaknesses is the basis of *lashon harah*. How else do you understand what the *aveirah* (sin) of the *meraglim* (spies) is? What's "הוצא דיבת הארץ"? - They spoke *lashon harah* about *Eretz Yisroel*. What do you mean you speak *lashon harah* on a land? The land doesn't suffer? The land has no sensitivities? The answer is, *it's you!!* You wanted to see the weaknesses. You didn't want to see the good things. How do you talk **דיבה** on an **ארץ**? Look at all the wonderful things there. You wanted to see weaknesses. And you take the strength and you make it into weakness. That's what happened. "ארץ קוברת את יושביה", - A land that buries its inhabitants. *Hashem* did it so they should be busy with their burials and that you shouldn't be touched. You have these magnificent foods that you are bringing back. To you, its "abnormal" - seeing it as a weakness. Seeing this not as the most wonderful things you ever saw, but rather the worst? Looking for weakness. Look for the positive, and see **חסדי ה'**. Look what's happening for us!! Look at these fruits. With *one* grape we can satisfy our whole needs of the day! We don't have to worry about nourishment. It depends on how you talk. What do you want? That's really what *lashon harah* is all about. You can really come to control *lashon harah*.