



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SUKKOT 5772 • 2011

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 14, 2011
Sukkot Day 2

The Greatest Dance



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart 5772 Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

There are many reasons why we dance and celebrate. Some dance to remember. Some dance to forget. Some dance because they are happy. Some dance when they drink wine. Some dance at their children's weddings.

Today you will learn a new reason to dance: To dance for no reason at all! Or more accurately: To dance for no reason except for the fact that you exist!

This is the Simchat Beit Hashoavah dance on Sukkot. Otherwise known as the "water dance" - when we commemorate the great joy that went along with the ceremony of water libations in the Temple.

We know that wine causes us to be happy and break out in dance and song. But water? How can tasteless water cause us to dance?

This sermon also explains an enigmatic story in the Talmud about the Sadducee who spilled the water on his feet, and the entire people pelted him with their *etrogim*.

The Greatest Dance

1. Time of Our Rejoicing

As we celebrate this holiday of Sukkot, which is the “time of our rejoicing” (*zman simchoseinu*), let us speak about joy (*simcha*) – its nature and how we can generate more of it in our lives.

We all could use more joy in our lives. Especially in these shaky times. With all the upheavals around us, every one of us here would welcome happy news this year.

I particularly want to address myself to those among us here that have suffered losses over the past year, or have faced setbacks and other challenges, whether they be family related, health related, finance related or otherwise.

To all of us – to those who need a special lift this time of year (and who does not need one?) – allow me to open with a special blessing: that we all should be blessed with a very joyous year, one in which we celebrate many happy occasions.

Sukkot, the time of our rejoicing, is the source for joy all year round. May we draw *simcha* all year round from this joyous *yom tov*. May we celebrate these days to the fullest, so that they then serve as a generator of *simcha* in all our activities, in all the days of the year, and beyond. And I mean that in a very literal way – revealed joy in every part of our lives.

2. To Generate Joy

That brings us to the question of the moment:

How do we generate joy in our lives? Especially when we may not be feeling particularly happy?

Most people would immediately answer that the way to get your joy buds going is to drink a good cup of wine. Say *L'chaim!* And if that doesn't work, have a second *l'chaim!*

Which reminds me ...

At the United Nations bar, a crowd of delegates demanded to be served:

The Italian said, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have wine."
The Frenchman said, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have cognac."
The Russian said, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have vodka."
The German said, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have beer."
The Mexican said, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have tequila."
The Israeli said, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have diabetes."

That's just a joke, because Jews drink all of the above.

Indeed, the obligation to rejoice on Sukkot (and all holidays) – as per the command: "you shall rejoice on your festival"¹ – is specifically through wine.²

We make *kiddush* on wine, because wine gladdens the heart,³ and there is no joy without wine.⁴

But what would you say if someone suggested that the path to joy is through ... ahm ... water?

Water?! Yes, I said water.

You'd be incredulous. How can water bring any joy? Wine has a natural property that gladdens the person who sips it. But water? Water can quench thirst. But it never has been known to intoxicate anyone or lift anyone's spirits?

As the saying goes: "In wine there is wisdom, in beer there is freedom, in water there is bacteria."

And yet...

On Sukkot we have special joy and celebration that is connected explicitly with water.

¹ Deuteronomy 16:14.

² Talmud, *Pesachim* 109a.

³ Psalms 104:15.

⁴ Talmud, *Pesachim* 109a.

3. Simchat Beit HaShoeva

This special water celebration is called Simchat Beit HaShoeva (literally, “Happiness of the House of Water Drawing”) – the great joy and celebration that accompanied the ceremony of water libations during Sukkot in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. We commemorate this celebration today through joyous dancing and singing throughout Sukkot.

Throughout the year, the daily offerings in the Temple were accompanied by the pouring of wine on the altar, but on Sukkot, water was poured in addition to the wine.

The drawing of water for this purpose was preceded by all-night celebrations in the Temple courtyard. As it says “Draw water with joy, from the wellsprings of salvation.”⁵

The singing and dancing went on until daybreak,⁶ when the merry-makers would make their way to the nearby Shiloach Spring (in the City of David) to draw the water, which they then brought to the Temple.

Declares the Talmud, “One who did not see the joy of the water-drawing celebrations has not seen joy in his life.”⁷

4. The Man who Spilled the Water

But the Talmud shares with us an enigmatic episode that took place one year at the celebration of Simchat Beit HaShoeva:⁸

“Once there was a Sadducee who spilled the water on his feet, and the entire people pelted him with their *etrogim*...”

⁵ Isaiah 12:3.

⁶ “For all the days of the water drawing,” recalled Rabbi Joshua ben Chanania, “our eyes saw no sleep” (Talmud Sukkah 53a).

⁷ Sukkah 51b.

⁸ Sukkah 48b.

The Sadducees were a Jewish sect who denied the oral tradition (*Torah she'baal peh*) received by Moses at Sinai and handed down through the generations, arguing that they had the right to interpret the Torah according to their own understanding.

Unlike the pouring of the wine, which is explicitly commanded by the Torah,⁹ the pouring of the water on Sukkot is alluded to by three extra letters in the Torah verses¹⁰ which speak of the libations accompanying the Sukkot offerings. According to the traditional oral interpretation of the Torah, these letters are combined to form the word *mayim* (meaning "water"). The Sadducees, who rejected this tradition, were of the opinion that only wine was to be poured on the altar on Sukkot, just like every day of the year.

During the Second Temple period, there was a time when the Sadducees amassed political power and gained the High Priesthood, the highest spiritual office in Israel. Thus it came to pass that one Sukkot, the honor of pouring the water on the altar was given to a Sadducee priest who, instead of pouring the water into its prescribed bowl in the southwest corner of the altar, spilled it on his feet to demonstrate his opposition to the practice. The assembled crowd expressed its outrage by pelting him with the *etrogim* which they held in their hands, this being Sukkot.

Why did the Sadducees oppose the water pouring? And why did this Sadducee priest feel the need to demonstrate his protest in public – by spilling the water so callously on his feet – knowing that his act would surely incite the crowd?

And why does the Talmud feel the need to tell us this story? What relevance does it have for us? And what is the significance of the fact that the people pelted him with their *etrogim*, no less?

In fact, this strange story carries a profound lesson to all of us about the nature of joy – and explains how water can sometimes be stronger than wine.

⁹Numbers 15:1-12.

¹⁰Numbers 29:19, 29 and 33.

5. Water as Agent of Joy

But first:

The great celebration of water – of Simchat Beit HaShoeva – raises a most obvious question: How can water be seen as an agent of joy?

Wine is the natural drink that gladdens the heart and brings on joy. So while it is nice to hear about the celebration of water drawing, how can this act have brought on such great joy to the point that “one who did not see the joy of the water-drawing celebrations has not seen joy in his life”?

Furthermore, the joy came not even through the drinking of water but only through drawing it and pouring it!

And this is what bothered the Sadducees – for they understood how wine elicits joy, but not water.

What were they missing?

As intellectuals, they were lacking the appreciation of the beauty and depth of the simple act of faith. They could appreciate the Divine as it manifests in the powerful taste of wine, but not the joy that comes from the tasteless taste of water, which represents “acceptance of the burden of heaven” (*kabolat ol malchut shomayim*).

6. The Taste of Water

Wine and water represent the two elements of our service of God.

Wine – which is pleasing to the eye, nose and palate, intoxicating to the brain and exhilarating to the heart – is the sensually gratifying aspect of our divine service. It symbolizes our understanding of the inner significance of the Torah’s commandments and their fulfillment ... and the joy we experience in our relationship with God.

Water – which is tasteless, scentless and colorless, yet a basic necessity of life – symbolizes the intellectually and emotionally bland, yet fundamentally crucial, “acceptance of the burden of heaven” (*kabolat ol malchut shomayim*).

But, if water represents the flavorless, emotionally devoid aspect of our service of God, why did the drawing and pouring of water upon the altar on Sukkot yield such joy?

7. Thirst Quencher

To a thirsty person, a cup of water is tastier than the most delectable wine.

A father sends his kid to bed. Five minutes later, the boy yells downstairs, "Dad! Can you get me a glass of water?" The dad says, "No. You had your chance." After a minute the boy screams again, "Dad! Can you get me a glass of water?" The dad says, "No. I told you, you had your chance. If you ask one more time, I'll come up there and spank you." After a short silence, the father hears, "Dad! When you come up to spank me, can you bring me a glass or water?"

In the spiritual sense, this means that when a soul experiences a thirst for God - when it recognizes how vital its connection to God is - it undergoes an exhilarating experience, which is like a feast for its senses. To such a soul, the water it draws from its deepest self to pour onto its altar of service to God is a greater source of joy than any intoxicating wine could ever be.

Sukkot is the time when we are most open to experiencing this pleasure.

8. Reasons to Dance and Celebrate

There are many reasons why we dance and celebrate. Some dance to remember. Some dance to forget. Some dance because they are happy. Some dance when they drink wine. Some dance at their children's weddings.

On Sukkot we learn a new reason to dance: To dance for no reason at all! Or, more accurately - to dance for no reason except for the fact that God exists and put us here on earth!

There are times when we need an outside substance – wine – to stimulate our joy. But then comes the *Simchat Beit Hashoava* dance on Sukkot, which teaches us how to generate joy from within – to discover extraordinary joy even in the ordinary, to celebrate and find joy and pleasure even in a plain cup of water.

This is the greatest way we can serve God. And, therefore, no joy is greater than this, and, as the Talmud says, “One who did not see the joy of the water-drawing celebrations has not seen joy in his life.”

9. Baal Shem Tov Story (Optional)

A powerful story about the Baal Shem Tov illustrates this point.

The Baal Shem Tov was once sitting with his students when suddenly he closed his eyes, as though he was listening to some inner voice, and began to smile.

His face became flushed with joy and he suddenly opened his eyes, pushed back his chair, rose to his feet and began to sing and dance ecstatically, spinning around and lifting his arms and legs like a young boy.

It wasn't long before all those present were dancing around him in a big circle not even knowing why.

Later, they learned what this was all about.

It turned out that a day before this, a couple came crying to the Baal Shem Tov. “God has blessed us with wealth,” they said, “and we want for nothing material. But we have been married for many years and have failed to conceive a child. The doctors had informed us that our case was hopeless. Rabbi, we see that you are a righteous and holy man. Surely your prayers can open the gates of heaven. Please, bless us with a child.”

“I assure you,” said the Baal Shem Tov, “that before the year is out, you will be holding your child in your arms.”

No sooner had these words left his mouth than there was a great commotion in the heavens, for this man and his wife had been born without the capacity to bear children. Yet even the heavens must abide by the law that “[God] does the will of those who fear Him.”¹¹ The promise of the Baal Shem Tov would have to be fulfilled.

A proclamation was issued which resounded throughout the supernal worlds: “This man and his wife will indeed bear a child. But because Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov has forced the hand of heaven to overturn the laws of nature, he has forfeited his portion in the World to Come.”

Upon hearing this proclamation, the Baal Shem Tov’s face lit up with joy. “How fortunate I am!” he cried. “I just learned that I have forfeited all heavenly reward for my good deeds. All my life I have been troubled by the thought that perhaps my service of the Almighty was tainted by the expectation of reward. Now, however, my service of God will be pure, for His sake alone, free of the possibility of any ulterior motive! That is a reason to rejoice!”

That is when the Baal Shem Tov smiled, stood up and began singing and dancing.

[Some say, that when the Baal Shem Tov’s jubilation reached heaven, a voice was heard declaring decree: “Return to the Baal Shem Tov his portion in the World to Come....”].

10. The Taste of Water

Wine represents the joy in divine service that has a taste and a benefit to man.

Water captures the pure joy of divine service that has no taste and ulterior motive.

The joy of the water drawing teaches us a fundamental lesson in life – beauty is not always in the things that stimulate our senses, for sometimes the greatest beauty of all lies in the simplest things.

¹¹ Psalms 145:19.

And this is the point that the Sadducees missed. As intellectuals they could only appreciate joy that comes from wine – a joy that has a taste and a power that is obvious and visible. They could not appreciate the power of joy within simplicity – the dance and joy that comes from water, from connecting with the divine essence.

Therefore, the Sadducees opposed the *Simchat Beit Hashoavah* ceremony. They refused to accept the oral interpretation of Torah transmitted to Moses at Sinai and handed down through the generations. While recognizing the divine origin of Torah, they regarded it as a series of laws open to personal interpretation, an interpretation subject only to the interpreter's understanding and feelings. In other words, in their observance, there was no true commitment, no true submission ... and no true joy which only comes with the water of total commitment.

For the Sadducees did not *thirst* for this water – to them, the Torah was not the essence of life, but a spiritual luxury, a tasty meal for the mind and heart. Obedience to its written laws enabled them to savor their intellectual flavor and emotional aroma. So, for them, only wine could flow on the altar.

Thus, the Sadducee priest poured the water on his *feet*. He was not condemning the use of water in serving God, but he was relegating it to the feet, to the lower extremities of the human form. Water might be necessary, perhaps even laudable, for certain individuals and in certain circumstances, but it was hardly the fluid to grace the altar in the year's most joyous celebration of the human relationship with the Divine.

11. Etrog Attack

To this, the people responded by pelting him with their *etrogim*.

Why *etrogim*?

The Midrash¹² tells us that the "Four Species" taken up on Sukkot – the *etrog* (citron), the *lulav* (palm frond), the *hadas* (myrtle branch) and *aravah* (willow branch) – represent four types of Jews:

¹²Midrash Rabbah, *Vayikra* 30:11.

- The *etrog*, which has both a taste and a fragrant smell, represents the perfect individual who is both knowledgeable in Torah and proficient in the observance of mitzvahs.
- The *lulav*, the branch of the date palm, whose fruit has a taste but no smell, representing those accomplished in Torah though less so in regard to the mitzvahs.
- The *hadas* – the tasteless but aromatic myrtle – represents the type who, though lacking in Torah knowledge, has many mitzvahs to his credit.
- Finally, the tasteless, scentless willow branch, the *aravah*, represents the individual who lacks both Torah and mitzvahs.

12. On a Deeper Level (Optional)

On a deeper level, the “Four Species” represent four “characters” within every individual, each with its own domain in his/her psyche and its appropriate place in his/her life.

In this sense, “Torah” is the intellectual appreciation of the divine wisdom, and “mitzvahs” are the love and awe of God experienced in the observance of the commandments.

To take this further:

- the *lulav* is the “intellectual” in man who does not allow feeling to cloud the purity of knowledge and comprehension;
- the *hadas* is the emotional self, who sets experience as the highest ideal, even at the expense of the intellect;
- the *etrog* is the force that strives for perfection, for the ultimate harmony between mind and heart; and
- the *aravah* is the capacity for acceptance and commitment, for setting aside intellect and feeling to commit oneself absolutely to a higher ideal.

When the Sadducee priest spilled the water on his feet, the “entire people pelted him with their *etrogim*.” In effect, they were saying: “We reject what you represent, not only with the odorless and tasteless *arava* in us, not only with our intellectual or emotional personas, but also with the synthesis of wisdom and feeling that defines what is highest and most perfect in man. For also – and especially – the *etrog* within us recognizes the water of life, that “mindless” and “unfeeling” commitment to our Creator, as our ultimate source of joy.

The intellectuals might argue that wine is greater than water. They might accept that we need to submit, but to them submission is never pleasurable. Thus, they can never find pleasure in a simple cup of water.

But Judaism teaches us that they are wrong. That, indeed, we can find the deepest pleasure in the simplest things – even in a drop of water.

13. Let Us Celebrate

Tonight officially begins *Simchat Beit Hashoeva*, commemorating the celebration connected with the pouring of the water on the Temple altar.

Jews are known to be a smart people. But their smartest act is perhaps their ability to transcend even their intellects. Jews have mastered the art of transcendence – to transcend their minds and hearts and dance the dance of innocence, the water dance.

Let us celebrate and dance not because we necessarily feel a sensation, but because this is the greatest dance of them all ... because God created us and gave us life and purpose.

Let us dance because we are here. Because we have been blessed to be here and now and to have the opportunity to serve.

Wed don't always need a stimulant or a reason to celebrate. Sometimes – actually at all times, when you apply yourself – the greatest joy is in the simplest things. Is there a greater reason in life to dance than when you gaze at a newborn child peacefully asleep in your arms? Or when you look into the eyes of your beloved? Or when you walk outside and take a breath of fresh air? Or when you look up at the stars and just contemplate the sublime?

The water dance is celebrating the unusual within the usual – dancing simply because of the miracle of existence.

We certainly should be blessed with many reasons to celebrate. But above all, we ought to know and teach our children that the mere fact that we are here is cause for celebration.

Even when we don't see or feel a reason to dance, we still dance knowing that we were sent to earth on a singular indispensable mission.

May we always be infused with that spirit of seeing joy in every part of our lives, even – and especially – in the simple areas of our lives that may seem tasteless like water. Amen.