

## Abundance, Altruism, and Joy are Intimately Connected

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Erev Sukkot 5784 / September 29, 2023

As we were scrambling to get our sukkah up in time for Sukkot one year, Karen remarked to me: “The Torah was clearly written by a man, because a woman would have known better than to plan another holiday just *five days* after Yom Kippur—especially one that takes so much work to get ready for!”

It’s true: not only do we have to build a sukkah—something that doesn’t come so easily to a lot of us Jewish guys—but we are also commanded to get a *lulav*, which is a bouquet of branches from three trees—the palm, the willow, and the myrtle—*plus* the *etrog*.

If it seems like more than enough for just *one* holiday, that’s because it *is*.

Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, a prominent Israeli rabbi and scholar, argues that Sukkot as we know it is actually a composite of *two different* holidays that fall at the very same time.<sup>1</sup>

One is called “*Chag ha-Sukkot*—the festival of the temporary structures.” Rabbi Bin-Nun explains that this holiday is *historical* in character, and its symbol is the *sukkah*: Since our ancestors lived in *sukkot* on their journey to the Promised Land, we do the same for a week in order to remember and reenact our *history*.

The other holiday is called “*Chag he-Assif*—the festival of the ingathering.” This one is rooted in nature and the agricultural cycle, as it celebrates the abundance of the fall harvest. So, it makes sense that the ritual symbols of *Chag he-Assif* are the *lulav* and *etrog*, which are taken from nature.

For *Chag ha-Sukkot*, the *historical* holiday, the prescribed observance is to rest from doing work on the first day, much like Shabbat. For *Chag he-Assif*, the *agricultural* holiday, the observance is to take up the *lulav* and *etrog* and rejoice with them before God.

All this begs the question: Why is the *historical* holiday marked by *rest* and the *agricultural* holiday marked by *joy*?

I’d like to set aside the first part of that question for another time and focus tonight on why, for the agricultural holiday of *Chag he-Assif specifically*, we are commanded to rejoice.

\*\*\*\*\*

Through a rigorous halakhic analysis, Rabbi Bin-Nun demonstrates that the symbols connected with *Chag he-Assif*—the *lulav* and *etrog*—are items that, in ancient times, were used *specifically* in the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, the Holy Temple that stood in the center of Jerusalem.

In this way, the *lulav* and *etrog* are kind of like the animal sacrifices, in that the Jews of antiquity were commanded to bring them for a particular ceremony held *in the Temple*. But once the Temple was destroyed, this practice came to an end.

But, while animal sacrifice stopped altogether with the demise of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, the sages retained the practice of rejoicing with the *lulav* and *etrog* as a *remembrance* of what they *used* to do in the Temple. (In halakhah, this is called “*zekher l’mikdash*.”)

But why keep it at all?

The reason is because this is the time of year when an agricultural society reaps the produce of the land and the benefits from their own labor. The Torah commands us to bring the choicest portion of our crops to the Temple as a gift to God, in recognition of the fact that without God no harvest would have been possible at all.

We rejoice because God has blessed us with abundance. And what better way to show gratitude than by coming to God's house with a beautiful bouquet in hand?

So, the command to take up the *lulav*, even when the Temple is no longer standing, is good advice in etiquette.

\*\*\*\*\*

But I think the sages also had another reason for preserving the ritual of *lulav* as a *zekher l'mikdash*, a remembrance of the Temple and the offerings our ancestors brought there from their harvest.

The Mishnah says that these offerings are one of those things that are "without measure"<sup>2</sup>—meaning that, while a farmer was required to give a *minimum* amount of his produce to God, there was no *maximum* limit to how much he could bring. If he was feeling especially grateful or generous, the farmer could donate his entire crop to the Temple if he wanted to.

Another segment of that same Mishnah made its way into our daily prayer book. You may recognize it; it says:

"These are things that are limitless, of which a person enjoys the fruit of this world, while the principal remains in the World to Come.

"They are: honoring one's father and mother; doing acts of kindness; arriving early for study, morning and evening; dealing graciously with guests; visiting the sick; providing for the wedding couple; accompanying the dead for burial; and being devoted in prayer. But the study of Torah encompasses them all."<sup>3</sup>

Maimonides explains that the *mitzvot* on this list fall into a category he calls "*g'milut chasadim b'gufo*"—meaning: "acts of kindness we do with our *person*."<sup>4</sup>

He contrasts this kind of deeds with another category he calls "*g'milut chasadim b'mammono*"—acts of kindness one does with one's *money*."

Both are important, of course, but Maimonides points out that while our ability to do things that require money—like giving *tzedakah*—is limited, since any one individual has only a finite amount of money, our ability to do acts of kindness with our *person* is infinite because all they require are things like compassion, generosity, presence, empathy, and love.

And unlike money, all those are renewable resources.

\*\*\*\*\*

The *mitzvot* on that list have something else in common, too. We can learn it by looking closely at one of them in particular: the *mitzvah* of *l'viat ha-met*—accompanying the dead for burial.

This *mitzvah* includes washing the body and preparing it for burial; sitting *sh'mirah*—which is staying with the body all the way until it's buried so that the sacred vessel that housed a human soul is never left alone; attending the funeral; and participating in the burial—which we generally do by shoveling some earth into the grave.

What's important to note about this *mitzvah* is that the object of it—meaning the person it's done for—is *dead*. Which means, of course, that they can never repay the kindness being done for them.

So, one who does the *mitzvah* of *l'viat ha-met*, at any stage along the way, necessarily does it without any expectation of receiving something in return. Meaning: It's an act of pure *altruism*.

By grouping this *mitzvah* with the other ones—honoring your parents, visiting the sick, welcoming guests, comforting mourners<sup>5</sup>—the tradition is telling us that all of them are similarly meant to be done *altruistically*—that is: out of compassion, generosity, and love for another person, and *not* with the expectation of receiving something in return.

That may seem unrealistic. You might say, it's pretty normal to think: "I'll have so-and-so to my home for dinner, and then hopefully they'll do the same for me"; or: "I'll visit my friend in the hospital because I might be in the hospital someday, and I want her to come see me."

My guess is that one will naturally follow the other, but if that's your motivation for doing it in the first place, you're not in the right mindset.

Still, when the Mishnah says a person who does these *mitzvot* "enjoys the fruit of this world, while the principal remains in the World to Come," it suggests that we *do* benefit from doing these supposedly selfless *mitzvot*.

So, what does it mean?

\*\*\*\*\*

Utilitarian economic theory is based on the belief that self-interest is the prime motivator of all human behavior—meaning that we only do what we do because we perceive we have something to gain from doing it.

But the philosopher Susan Wolf argues against this view. She says that, ultimately, human beings are motivated by the desire for *meaning* in life, more so than by self-interest.

In her view, meaning is not experienced in quid pro quo transactions, and it is something more than just personal fulfillment.

(After all, she points out that even if the Greek mythological figure Sisyphus found sublime personal bliss in pushing that rock up the hill for eternity, we still could not reasonably say that his life was meaningful.<sup>6</sup>)

Wolf defines a meaningful life as “a life that a) the subject finds fulfilling, and b) contributes to or connects positively with something the value of which has its source outside the subject”<sup>7</sup>—something that can be considered meaningful from “a God’s-eye point of view.”<sup>8</sup>

From the Jewish perspective, the *mitzvot* on that list that can be done without limit because they require only renewable resources like compassion, generosity, presence, and love, fit that bill.

That’s why the Mishnah says, it is *we*, the ones doing the *mitzvah*, rather than *they*, the recipients of the *mitzvah*, who “enjoy the fruit of this world”:

Because while our guests feel welcomed, and the sick feel cared about, and our grieving friends feel comforted—and they might even reciprocate sometime in the future—the point is that we benefit even *more* than they do.

We benefit by experiencing *meaning* in our life—a condition of being that flows from doing something worthy in the eyes of God.

Psychologist Abigail Marsh<sup>9</sup> explains that the reason we enjoy giving altruistically is because it triggers a shot of dopamine in our brains. For that reason, some have argued that giving is actually a self-interested behavior.

But Marsh disagrees. She notes that there are many ways to get a dopamine high that are much easier to do—and don’t require showing care and love for another human being.

Altruism, she explains, grows out of our evolutionary need to cooperate with other human beings and feel a sense of connection to them.

Generosity and altruism are hallmarks of being fully human and of living a meaningful life.

To tie it all back to *Chag he-Assif* and the holiday that begins tonight: When we bring the best of what we have to give, and offer it to others selflessly and without measure, we will enjoy the fruit of this world in abundance.

Our ability to give our kindness, our caring, our compassion, our empathy, and our presence is not about *history*; it’s about the meaning of our lives right *now*, in *this* moment and in *every* moment.

Abundance, altruism, and joy are intimately connected.

*That’s* why we pick up the *lulav* and present it as a bouquet of gratitude to the Source of our blessings and rejoice in the presence of God.

1 See Yoel Bin-Nun, *Zakhor v'Shamor*, Chapter V

2 M. Peah 1:1

3 *Mishkan T'filah*, 44

4 Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishnah*, Peah 1:1

5 For some reason unknown to me, "comforting mourners" is not included in the "Eilu Devarim" list of mitzvot, but I cite it here because Maimonides identifies it explicitly in his *Commentary to the Mishnah* as an example of *g'milut chasadim b'gufo*.

6 See Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, 17. Wolf cites a thought experiment by the philosopher Richard Taylor, in which he imagines that the gods gave Sisyphus some magic potion that transformed him into someone who loves pushing rocks up hills more than anything else in the world, and then asks how we might evaluate Sisyphus' life.

7 *Ibid.*, 20

8 *Ibid.*, 28

9 See Abigail Marsh, ["Does Taking Pleasure in Giving to Others Make Us Selfish?" | Psychology Today](#)