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שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ

*“Sameah uMesameah”:
Festal Rejoicing as a
Rabbinic Account of
Motivation*

by Miriam Udel

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Dedicated Anonymously.

“Sameah uMesameah”: Festal Rejoicing as a Rabbinic Account of Motivation

By Miriam Udel¹

Are the *mo'adim*, the festival days on which we cease from labor, intended for God's benefit — or for that of the Jews who observe them? With respect to Passover, the first such day in the biblical liturgical year, the directive of the Torah seems clear: “You shall eat unleavened bread for six days, and on the seventh, there will be a solemn assembly (*atzeret*) for the Lord your God; you shall do no labor” (Deut. 16:8; my emphasis). Similarly God-centered language attends the paschal offering itself; the phrase *pesakh (hu) lashem* occurs nine times in the Pentateuch, and the specific designation to God accompanies nearly every mention of the paschal sacrifice.

However, with respect to Shavuot as well as the autumnal holidays that occur during the month of Tishre, the Torah's language is more centered on the human experience, repeating the phrase *mikra kodesh yihyeh lakhem* (“It shall be a holy gathering for you,” Num. 29; Lev. 23:21), and echoing the idea of cessation of labor. These festal days seem to culminate in the otherwise anticlimactic Shemini Atzeret, a day on which “you shall have a solemn assembly,” or in a more tendentious translation that underpins the rabbinic interpretation of the verse: “...you shall have for yourselves a solemn assembly (*atzeret tihye lakhem*)” Num. 29:35.

In light of the varying biblical formulations, the rabbis might have sought to split the difference and argue for a distinction between the

theocentric Passover offering and the other more anthropocentric festivals. Instead of setting up such a dichotomy, however, the corpus of rabbinic midrash cultivates a sense of dual consciousness wherein the enjoyment of all the holidays advances both human and divine aims, which are seen as complementary and even mutually dependent.

Let us first consider texts that emphasize the *mo'adim* as occasions for human pleasure and benefit. For example, here is Midrash Tanhuma:

לא ניתנו המועדות לישראל אלא להנאת עצמם. אמר הקב"ה אתם ההנייתם-תהיו שונים לשנה הבאה, שנאמר, ושמרת את-החוקה הזאת למועדה מימים ימימה — תהיו שונים מימים ימימה.

The appointed seasons were given to Israel for no other purpose other than for their own enjoyment. The Holy One said: If you enjoy yourselves [during the holiday], you will repeat the experience the following year, as is said, “When you keep this ordinance in its season [i.e., on the appointed festal day], then from year to year” (Exod. 13:10) — you will be repeat it from year to year.”²

Opening with the bold idea that the holidays are given exclusively for human enjoyment, this midrash quickly establishes that God is aware and respectful of the power of habituation. If people enjoy celebrating the holy days, they will do so perpetually. Of course, the midrash seems to belie its own logic, positing that human pleasure in the holy days is *not only* an end in itself but rather also a means to bring about a virtuous cycle of observance—a practice that is presumably pleasing to God. Thus, from the divine perspective, the holidays are given for the sake of both parties.

Yalkut Shimoni similarly imagines a fortuitous convergence between human enjoyment and the divine satisfaction:

השמחה נאה לכם, המועדים נאים לכם, ימים טובים נאים לכם.

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² Tanhuma Bereshit. English translations of the midrashic passages are by William Braude in *The Jewish Book of Legends*, or they are altered by the author on the basis of Braude's English rendering.

Rejoicing becomes you, the festival days become you, the holidays become you.³

This midrash turns on the meaning of “*na’eh*,” which is twofold: to suit — i.e., to be in keeping with, and to be pleasant. Implicitly, the holidays are a gift intended by their Giver to please the Jewish people (hence the repetition of *lakhem*); at the same time, God avers that the recipients are uniquely suited to benefit from the kind of pleasure being offered. Justifying the conferral of the “extra” holy day of Shemini Atzeret at the end of a week-long festival, the text continues with the rabbinic explanation,

When You multiply festal days for the nations of the world, they eat, drink, and carouse; attend their theaters and circuses; and provoke You with their utterances and deeds. But [the people of] Israel are not like that. When You increase festal days for them, they eat, drink, and rejoice, but then attend synagogues and houses of study, and augment the number of their prayers.

The essential point for us is not the “superior” holiday observance of the Jews (a claim that reads today as somewhat chauvinistic⁴), but rather the virtuous loop wherein sensory pleasure and spiritual elevation become mutually reinforcing and form equal parts of a whole experience that God seeks to foster and even extend.

But what about when the Jews misapprehend the directive to pleasure and observe the holidays selfishly, hedonistically? A non-Jew, possibly a heretic, poses precisely this question to Rabbi Akiva⁵: Why do you still keep the festivals when God has said⁶: “Your new moons and festivals my soul hateth?” Rabbi Akiva explains that selfish holiday observances (*your* new moons and *your* festivals) are no better than those of the wicked Jeroboam. The rather lavish sensory pleasures

associated with the holidays (rich food! languorous naps! days off without end!) are justified solely by our dedication of that time and its enjoyments to God. A talmudic discussion⁷ further explores the division of holy days between the pursuit of creature comforts and attention to spiritual matters. Rabbi Eliezer maintains that everyone must commit fully to either one or the other, whereas Rabbi Joshua sagely counsels, “Divide the day — half for eating and drinking, and half for spending in the house of study.” We can — and should — do both.

Finally, I wish to introduce an elegant rabbinic formulation that harmonizes human enjoyment with divine service. Interpreting the somewhat cryptic verse Ecclesiastes 7:14 (ביום טובה היה בטוב), Rabbi Levi discerns a reference to the *mo’adim*:

ר' לוי פתר קרייא בימים טובים שנתתי לך תהא שמח ומשמח להקדוש ברוך הוא בקרבנות.

“On a festal day be joyful” (Eccles. 7:14). R. Levi interpreted the verse to mean: On the festal days which I have given you, *be joyful and cause the Holy One to rejoice* with sacrifices.⁸

The mandated holidays constitute a gift from God to the Jewish people, and the enjoyment of those days constitutes a reciprocal gift from the people back to God. Why should we observe and prioritize the *hagim*? Because they bring joy — and flourishing — to us and to our Creator alike.

This midrashic discourse about holiday observance and pleasure opens a window onto the complex rabbinic notion of the motivational structure for religious behavior. As an observant feminist, I cannot help noticing how we might apply the dual consciousness that the Sages articulate in relation to the *mo’adim* to questions of women’s expanding and intensifying roles in Jewish ritual life. For too long, I have seen women’s

3 Yalkut Shimoni, Numbers 29, Siman 782.

4 This concern surfaces with respect to the religious holidays of other faith communities, but the rabbinic formulation certainly has a ring of truth when one contemplates the American phenomenon of Black Friday or the devolution of Memorial Day, Labor Day, etc. into occasions for so many appliance sales.

5 See Tanhuma 1:41, Yalkut Shimoni Isaiah 1.

6 Isa. 1:14.

7 Appearing in the Bavli both on Pesahim 68b and Betzah 15b. The contexts differ meaningfully, but this is beyond the ken of the current discussion.

8 (*Kohelet Rabba* 7:14; my emphasis).

aspirations dissuaded on the grounds that we harbor insufficiently pure motivations for wanting to learn more and do more in the ritual sphere. “Are you undertaking that mitzvah or enhanced commitment because it’s good for you, or because it is God’s command?” skeptics are quick to ask. As this cluster of *midrashim* helps us to recognize, overlapping motivations do not invalidate the actions that they prompt. Observances that feel wonderfully fulfilling can also comport with the divine will; in fact, they can be the very highest expression of that will. Although there might be local and isolated instances of tension between the two, I would like to suggest that these texts point to an overarching harmony between what’s good for Judaism and what’s good for the Jews — including Jewish women.



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