

March, 2016

Make Happiness Happen

Hamantaschen make me happy. The flaky, buttery dough filled with sweet, savory fruit lets me know that it's time to put the finishing touches on my costume and time to get out the megillah. With masks, graggers (noisemakers), stories, and (for adults) wine, there are enough Purim customs to keep us in good spirits.

Being happy on Purim is no coincidence! Our tradition teaches: "Mi she-nichnas Adar marbim b'simcha" – one who enters the month of Adar increases in happiness. We are actually *supposed* to be happy, not only on the holiday of Purim itself but all through the Hebrew month of Adar!

It's not always easy to be happy. Our days are filled with images of merciless violence in our world and news of political tension throughout our country. Inside our own homes, our family members are not always filled with joy. Our kids have rough days at school, and we have rough days at work or at home. Even inside our own hearts, we are not always blissful and carefree. Some suffer from depression or other mental illness. Many struggle with physical challenges. And it just doesn't seem realistic or even productive to be happy all the time. So how is it that we are commanded to be happy during Adar, and how can we possibly be expected to comply?

The holiday of Purim offers us a solution.

The four mitzvot (commandments) of Purim are:

- (1) Megillat Esther - to listen to the megillah (the story of Esther);
- (2) Se'udat Purim - to share in a festive holiday meal;
- (3) Shalach manot - to give baskets of fruit and sweets to family and friends; and
- (4) Matanot la-evyonim - to give gifts to the poor

It's interesting that the first two of these mitzvot benefit the do-er, and the second two benefit someone else. I can listen to the megillah, and the more noise I can make with my gragger, the happier I become! I can share in a festive holiday meal and feel quite satisfied enjoying holiday foods. But giving baskets to friends and family, and giving gifts or money to those who have little, benefit the receivers of the baskets, the gifts, and the money.

Rabbi Shai Held is founder and dean of Mechon Hadar, an educational institution in New York devoted to prayer, service and Torah study. Rabbi Held says that caring for other people can bring a profound sense of joy. Furthermore, showing compassion and caring for those who are less fortunate than we are can give our lives purpose and at the same time bring us happiness. It seems happiness comes in many and often unexpected forms! We listen to the megillah and we are happy. We share in a festive meal and we are happy. And then by giving to others, we find another, maybe even more fulfilling kind of happiness.

If I dig a little deeper, I realize that even the first two mitzvot cannot be done alone and have the power to benefit others. When I listen to the megillah, I do it in a community. Each person who listens to that megillah makes it possible for others to hear it, too. Without all those people listening, there is no community! And of course a festive meal must be shared with others as well. Eating alone is fine for nourishment. But eating to celebrate a holiday requires a group of people and a festive atmosphere. So all four of the Purim mitzvot actually have the potential to make us happy. By observing the holiday for ourselves *and* by giving to others, we promote happiness for all.

So I will smile as I hear the megillah, making plenty of noise to drown out the name of Haman. I will enjoy a few hamantaschen (my favorites are the prune-filled kind, but many people enjoy those filled with other fruit, poppy seeds, chocolate, or Nutella). I will savor those hamantaschen and will let them take me to my happy place. Then I will try to do something for someone else – give a gift, and donate to the needy. The month of Adar is the perfect time to make it happen!

This year, we will celebrate Purim as a community on Sunday, March 20 at 1:30 PM. This is an event for all ages! Adults and children are encouraged to come in costume. We'll listen to the megillah, eat hamantaschen, enjoy some entertainment, make baskets to give away, and donate gifts to those in need. In spite of whatever *plagues* us (note the foreshadowing – it's almost Pesach) in our world and in our country, in our homes and in our hearts, we will celebrate and we will be happy!

So be happy – it's Adar!