

Does G-d Want Us to Enjoy Ourselves?

By: Yanki Tauber

One thing I haven't figured out yet: Does G-d want us to enjoy ourselves, or not?

I've looked at the classical sources, and the message is mixed. Here's a sampling of what I found:

The biblical command, "You shall be holy" (Leviticus 19:2), is understood by the sages of the Talmud as an injunction to "sanctify yourself by abstaining also from that which is permitted to you" (Yevamot 20a); Nachmanides goes so far as to count this as one of the 613 mitzvot.

On the other hand, the Torah calls the Nazirite (a person who takes a vow to abstain from wine) a "sinner". What's his sin? The fact that he renounced one of the pleasures of G-d's world. "Is what the Torah has forbidden you not enough," explains the Talmud, "that you assume further prohibitions upon yourself?" If a person is a "sinner" because he abstains from wine, the Talmud goes on to deduce, imagine what the Torah would say about those ascetic-types who are constantly fasting and otherwise depriving themselves.

On the other hand, the Torah also calls the Nazirite "holy", prompting another Talmudic sage to apply the reasoning of his colleagues in reverse: if the Torah calls a person "holy" just for abstaining from wine, imagine the praises it would bestow on one who abstains from all worldly pleasures... (Both opinions are cited in Nedarim 10a.)

How about this one, from *Ethics of the Fathers* 6:4: "This is the way of Torah: Eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure, sleep on the ground, and live a life of hardship." Contrast that with Rav Nachman's assertion that a point of Torah law can be properly understood after enjoying a juicy beefsteak (Bava Kama 72a), or Rabbi Chizkiah's declaration, "A person will have to answer for everything that his eye beheld and he did not consume" (Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 4:12).

So which is it? Is it conquering the animal self, transcending the mundane, revealing the supremacy of spirit over matter? Or is it goodness and virtue to be found in every part of G-d's world and every aspect of G-d-given life?

I think there may be a hint of a solution in the Torah's laws of vows (Numbers 30), and the way that their deeper significance is understood in Chassidic teaching. The Torah speaks about a young woman, on the threshold of maturity, who vows to abstain from a certain indulgence (e.g., "I swear, no chocolate for week!"), and her father's legal right to annul her vow.

The idea is that there are circumstances and stages in our lives in which we are still in our spiritual adolescence. In this state "vows" are necessary, because a full exploration of our material nature is more than we can safely handle. But in a more advanced state of spiritual maturity (represented by the "father" in the Torah's account) these vows are annulled. Indeed, even as the "daughter" in us is struggling with our physical self, the "father" in us embraces it.

That's the concept. How it's to be applied is another matter--like I said, I haven't figured it out yet.

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Matot

Shabbat Begins: 8:49 pm

Shabbat Ends: 10:01 pm