

Wine and Water

by Rabbi Benjamin J. Weinbach

אמררו כל מי שלא ראה שמחת בית השואבה לא ראה שמחה בימיו (סוכה פרק
ה' משנה ב')

Omroo kol mee sheloh roo simchas bais hahshoeyvo loh roo simcho m'yomov (Sukkah-perek hay Mishnah II). The simcha of Sukkos elicited this startling remark of the חז"ל. There were joys, great joys, greater joys and then there was the שמחת בית השואבה. This sweeping declaration of unparalleled ecstasy, needs to be fortified by facts, seeing that experiences of elation, are relatively different to people. What was the exclusivity of שמחת בית השואבה that stirred the hearts of the onlookers and set it apart in a league of its own, in divine rapture. For our answer we must zero in on the goings on, the frenzied dancing, the raucous singing, the heightened bliss of the בית השואבה participants, in contrast to our modern civilization.

Americans have been striving for the good life in the last half century. The new deal, the fair deal and the great society held forth a promise of sharing with all citizens the rich and blessed bounty of America. However, a specter has hovered over the complete enjoyment of our government in granting to the minorities and underprivileged their newly gained status. It is the sins of the youth of the United States, returning to plague her, in her old age. America cannot enjoy her golden years of success and maturity because of the petulant and bigoted, prejudicial and exploitative skeletons in her closet. At every patriotic celebration wine, champagne, brandy and hard liquor must drown the sordid memories of a nation half slave half free that presided over intolerance, physical and spiritual anguish and economic misery of the weak and powerless, for nearly two centuries.

The uniqueness of the שמחת בית השואבה was the total absence of wine and hard drinks. It was purely dry except for the

pouring of water. The participants were those who shouted אשרי זקנותנו שכפרה ילדותנו praised is our old age that has forgiven the mishaps of our youth. They invited reminders of their wayward youth, when they wallowed in baseness and splashed in the putrid waters of depravity. Now they have repented for their past and are no longer haunted. The שמחת בית השואבה was a celebration for בעלי תשובה. For men who had tasted bitter waters, languished in immorality, and rolled in the mud and grime of Sin to remember their past and rejoice in its conquest. There is no joy comparable to old age unashamed of its youth.

Our age has been weaned on stimulants and additives. The drug culture has advanced into the most sophisticated stratum of society. It is inconceivable for modern men to complete a days work without a battery of sedatives, palliatives and downers. Harried housewives and career women stock their bags with a hearty supply of pills, poppers and relievers. Collegiates and teenagers while their leisure hours away on marijuana, hashish and a variety of grass. Past misdeeds have become so horrifying that only an ever increasing dosage can relieve their pain. If the world could only comprehend the שמחת בית השואבה, the delirious joy of the acrobats, the stunt men, the torch throwers, with water as the only beverage, fully conscious of their errant past which they have erased, it could dismantle its alcoholics anonymous drug clinics and rehabilitation centers. It will have suffered its last hangover.

A rebbe once told his students to beware of the wiles of the יצר הרע because he is a bare faced liar. This morning when I woke up he told me not to go to the cold mikveh because it is warmer and safer in bed. When I broke the ice of the mikveh, there he was lying in the cold water.

The יצר הרע and the evil which he sows trail mortal man constantly even into his happiest moments in life. We cannot all rise to the level of מעשה ואנשי חסידים, untouched and unscathed by temptation, who could boast אשרי ילדותנו שלא ביישה זקנותנו praised is our youth that has not embarrassed our old age, but we

can smash its lair, frustrated its design and wipe out its agonizing past, awake, conscious and sober. Not the bourbon and gin of amnesia but the pure clear water of memory is the thrill of life.

Perhaps this is the thought of the haftorah of Sukkos
זאת תהיה חטאת מצרים וחטאת כל הגויים אשר לא יעלו לחוג את חג
הסוכות The world fails to learn from the Jew the meaning of true
joy.