



Amist his presentation of the laws of *simchat Yom Tov* (rejoicing on the festivals), Maimonides issues the following exhortation:

When a person eats, drinks and rejoices on the festival, he should not be drawn after wine, frivolity and levity and think that the more he engages in this the more he fulfills the *mitzva* to rejoice. For drunkenness, excessive frivolity and levity is not rejoicing, but rather foolishness and silliness, and we were not commanded with regard to foolishness and silliness, but rather rejoicing with involves the service of the Creator of everything... And it is not possible to serve God with frivolity, levity and drunkenness. (Hilkhot Yom Tov 6:20)

Maimonides here clarifies that the *mitzva* to rejoice on Yom Tov requires that one rejoice in the spirit of *avodat Hashem*, the service of God, and not that one engage in silly, playful behavior under the pretense of *simchat Yom Tov*. Pranks, intoxication, and childish merrymaking, all of which have, unfortunately, become part of the *Simchat Torah* celebration in many communities, undermine, rather than fulfill, the proper observance of Yom Tov. As Maimonides emphasizes, "it is not possible to serve God with frivolity, levity and drunkenness." And since the focus of *simchat Yom Tov* is the joyful service of God, any form of conduct that does not accommodate *avodat Hashem* by definition disrupts the observance of the festival.

Maimonides' remarks here echo an idea conveyed in the Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabba (chapter 1), which comments on a verse from Tehillim (118:24), in the section read as part of the *Hallel* service: "*Zeh ha-yom asa Hashem, nagila ve-nismecha vo*" ("This is the day that the Lord has made – we shall exult and rejoice in it"). The Midrash notes the seeming ambiguity in this verse's final word, *vo*, which can be read to mean either "in it," in which case it would modify the noun "day," or "in Him" (or "with Him"), in which case it would refer to the Almighty. The Midrash resolves this ambiguity on the basis of a parallel verse in Shir Ha'shirim (1:4), where the maiden, symbolic of *Am Yisrael*, exclaims to her beloved – representing the Almighty – "we shall exult and rejoice with you." Clearly, we are to rejoice "with Him," and not simply "in it," in the day, celebrating purely for the purpose of merrymaking. The definition of *simchat Yom Tov* is rejoicing "with God," and therefore any kind of festivity that does not involve *avodat Hashem* does not fulfill this *mitzva*.

Earlier in this chapter (Hilkhot Yom Tov 6:18), Maimonides mentions yet another, important aspect of the obligation of *simchat Yom Tov*:

And when a person eats and drinks, he is obligated to feed and give drink to the foreigner, orphans, widows and other despondent, poor people. But one who locks the doors of his yard and eats and drinks with his children and wife, without feeding and giving drink to the poor and the downtrodden – this is not the joy of a *mitzva*, but rather the joy of his belly...

Rabbi Avraham Sofer (Hungary, 1815-1871), in his work of responsa *Ketav Sofer* (O.C. 39), explains this to mean that one who eats purely for "the joy of his belly," rather than for the purpose of the *mitzva*, does not fulfill the obligation of *simchat Yom Tov*. If a person feeds only himself and his family, without sharing with those in need, as this *mitzva* requires, then he has clearly eaten and drunk for personal gratification, and not for the sake of *avodat Hashem*. And since, as mentioned, the *mitzva* of *simchat Yom Tov* defined as "rejoicing with involves the service of the Creator of everything," celebration that does not include the needy and downtrodden falls short of proper fulfillment of this obligation.