

Meat, Wine and Divine Intentions (Emor)

*Joy in Judaism is not hedonic; it is redemptive, cathartic, and spiritual. – Rabbi
Joseph B. Soloveitchik*

The Talmud (Pesachim 109a) teaches that there is no true celebration without meat and wine (apologies to my vegetarian friends). In Leviticus Chapter 23, the Torah outlines the various Festivals the Jewish people are commanded to observe. In Temple times, these celebrations centered around sacrificial offerings (a lot of meat), wine libations (which, no doubt, participants enjoyed as well), and massive gatherings in Jerusalem—a national social event that also served as a great opportunity for matchmaking.

Rabbi Ovadia Sforno asks why God refers to these occasions as “My Festivals,” using the first person, and why the Torah emphasizes repeatedly that they are “Holy.”

Sforno explains that while we are commanded to rejoice and are encouraged to enjoy ourselves, we must never lose sight of God and divine service in our celebrations. As the Talmud (Pesachim 68b) puts it:

“(The celebration of) Festivals should be half for you and half for God.”

If a festival becomes solely about personal pleasure and indulgence, it is in fact rejected by God, as the prophet Isaiah declares:

“Your Festivals My soul hates.” (Isaiah 1:14)

However, when our celebrations become true communal events—where we connect with one another, show kindness and generosity to those in need, express gratitude for God’s blessings, and commit ourselves to His will—then God embraces our joy and calls it “My Festival.” In turn, He blesses us even more.

May we always be fortunate to celebrate—and may we remember how to do it right.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the release of Edan Alexandar from captivity. May all of our other hostages likewise be released quickly.