

Fun, Enjoyment & Biblical Life

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Delivered to Ohev Yisrael May 7, 2011

I was privileged to give a message at La Cena del Señor the Sunday just before this past *Pesach*. Of course, I attended the entire service. The first part of the service was musical, much like ours, except that their dancing was mainly individual – not coordinated as ours typically is. There was one exception though. When their instrumentalists played a song called “I am free,” most of the congregants came up front, and when the words of the song said:

“I am free to run, I am free to run
I am free to dance, I am free to live for You,
I am free, yes, I am free, I am free.”

They ran to the left, then they ran to the right, and back and forth, and back and forth. There were people of every age doing this – squealing, laughing, and obviously enjoying the physical abandon of it all.

I could not participate, but I would probably not have anyway because I’m not used to those kinds of exuberant expressions. So I found myself sitting back and pondering what I thought of it all. Everyone was clearly having fun, and I even imagined the possibility that some had come to the service just for that! So the question I found myself wrestling with was whether, what seemed like a controlled melee, was a legitimate form of praise and worship, or was it just fun recreation?

But then I surprised myself by thinking, “So what?” Does everything in a service have to be justified as either praise or worship? Indeed, what if a few of the youths found this particular time so appealing that it was the one thing that got them out of bed to come to the service that morning? Wouldn’t that be a good thing? After all, even if this rushing to and fro was not utilized by everyone as praise or worship, they were at least there for the other parts of the service. So I ended up giving it an A-plus – not that my opinion was ever asked.

Since then, I’ve been mulling over this idea of having fun in the Lord and how it might translate to our own Jewish expression. Right off, I got to thinking about how we use noisemakers and “boos” when Haman’s name is mentioned on *Purim* during our reading of Esther. And in that, we even go further than La Cena because what we do actually interrupts the reading of the Scriptures. I also thought of our *Chanukah* parties and how the games have nothing to do with the Festival’s meaning or history, but are just plain fun.

And then there is our way of dancing in the service that we consider a form of praise and worship. We explain it as being similar to David dancing before the Lord, but David’s dancing was probably more like La Cena’s than ours because David’s most certainly lacked choreographed steps and sequences. I’m assuming that our Dance Team knows how to keep its attention on the Lord during dancing, but what of the others of us who rush to join in the most lively dances with big smiles on our faces? What of the children who are barely coordinated but love to be dragged along? Is everyone’s attention on God when they’re dancing? I expect not, but it sure is fun, and we accept it

for what it is. I'm sure you're aware that most synagogues and a significant number of churches do not allow dancing during their services, but we do, and we love it. But does it always rise to the level of praise and worship? Probably not, but our enjoyment of it adds to the over-all service experience, and if we didn't have it, we would surely miss it.

I've said a lot about dancing, but what I really wanted to talk about today is a broader subject. It's about having fun as part of our life with God and our appreciating the lighter sides of life. Ohev is like a little United Nations in that we come from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, some of which eschew the idea that it's okay with God if we have fun. Don't dance! Don't shout! Don't lift your hands! Don't listen to fast music! Don't watch movies! Don't do sports! That's where some of us come from.

Of course, we at Ohev have our "don'ts" also: "Don't work on a Sabbath!" "Don't eat pork!" And there are a lot of others, but our "don'ts" are generally meant to uphold Scripture and not to diminish our having fun, pleasure, or enjoyment.

There are some interesting passages about enjoyment in Ecclesiastes that I want to call to your attention. I don't often quote Ecclesiastes because much of it is not meant to be taken literally, but I think these passages speak to what I am trying to get across. Keep in mind that when Solomon wrote these words, he was reflecting on his life of excess. First Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 that shows us the wrong way to pursue enjoyment:

I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure"; but surely, this also was vanity. I said of laughter-- "Madness!"; and of mirth, "What does it accomplish?" I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives. I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove. I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house. Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments¹ of all kinds. So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, For my heart rejoiced in all my labor; And this was my reward from all my labor. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.

Now let's jump ahead a bit, and glean from Solomon what God really means enjoyment to be:

Ecclesiastes 2:24: *Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God.*

Ecclesiastes 3:9-13: *What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything*

beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end. I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor-- it is the gift of God.

In my own life, like many of us, I partook of and enjoyed both the good and the bad. When I gave my life to God, I was convicted to give up what was bad, but not to give up having fun and enjoyment in life, which I always saw as good. Yet, around me, and especially in certain fundamentalist environments, people sometimes seemed to be so serious about their religious pursuits that having fun and enjoying other aspects of life were pushed to the side. Even in our own communities, some of us do little outside of work, family, and synagogue. No hobbies, no travels, no excitements to make the blood flow. Marie and I don't live like that. True, I cannot correlate shooting arrows, photographing nature, bass fishing, or camping with any biblical commandment, but things like these are clearly spices in our lives.

Now I want to confess something to you. It is that often, Marie and I do these activities and activities like them in the afternoon on after *Shabbat* services. I got called on it once by someone who quoted from Isaiah 58 and tried to persuade me that I was doing wrong by seeking pleasure on the Sabbath by engaging in activities other than prayer and study. Isaiah 58:13-14 says this:

If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy day of the LORD honorable, And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking your own words, Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father.

I read it, and I read it, and I read it again, and still I did not get from this Scripture what my well-meaning friend was trying to tell me it meant. This Scripture is not saying that on the Sabbath we have to abstain from what we like doing and from things that give us pleasure. It is merely urging us away from pursuing pleasures of which God disapproves – from engaging in ways that are not God's ways. A help in understanding this comes from a single word that is included in most English translations; it is the word "own" – a word that does not appear in the Hebrew. Nevertheless, most of the translators inserted it because, when you use that word, you are comparing yourself to someone else – in this case, to God. The phrase "*Not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure*" speaks not of all "ways" and "pleasures," but only of those that are not of God, including those that violate the Sabbath commandment to rest and from work. This same Scripture tells us that the Sabbath is to be a delight; how can it be a delight if delight can cause us to violate the Sabbath? Even though Yeshua was not talking about recreation, I think what He had to say about the Sabbath as recorded in Mark 2:27 is relevant; He said:

The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

Well, let me wind this up now because tomorrow is Mothers Day and we still have that to talk about. What I hope this little talk has accomplished is getting you to see that there is no contradiction between being a disciple of Yeshua and having fun – including on the Sabbath – if it is the right kind of fun.