

Is This Simcha Really a Simcha?

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You glance through your mail, and there it is – an invitation to a *simcha*. It could be a *chasuna* or a Bar Mitzvah. Your phone rings and you are invited to a *bris*, *sheva brochos* or a *pidyon haben*. No matter, these events are all *simchas* (*s'mochos*, technically) and the *baal simcha* wants you to attend. After all, we often hear people say, “We should meet only at simchas!” What greater joy than to participate in an event marking an important milestone in the life of a relative or friend?

However, for some, the idea of attending yet another *simcha* is not met with unqualified anticipation. After all, some of the things that have become “standard” of present day *simchas* do not add to the joy of the event. Indeed, there are those who come away from a *simcha* almost regretting that they attended. Why is this? Let us look at some of the negative aspects of our “joyous” events.

Time

Simchas are notorious for neither starting nor ending on time. There are, of course, a variety of reasons as to why people do not arrive on time to a *simcha*. Those with small children have to feed and put their children to bed; older children also require time in the evening; many men do not get home from work until relatively late; baby sitters sometimes show up late; one gets an important phone call that must be dealt with right away; and who knows what else can come up at the last minute. **However, the main reason for people coming late is that since they know that the *simcha* will start late, it makes no sense to get there on time. Of course, the *simcha* starts late, because the guests do not come on time. This has led to the vicious cycle that we now are living with.**

An acquaintance once related the following concerning his first encounter with Rav Avigdor Miller, ZT”L. In the 1950’s this fellow was told that he really should hear Rav Miller speak. Since Rav Miller was scheduled to speak at a Melava Malka, he decided to attend. Well, the evening dragged on and on with speech after speech. Finally, when it was time for Rav Miller to speak, he got up, looked at his watch and said, “Rabosai, it is late and time for us all to go home and sleep. A Gutta Voch!” and sat down.

Rav Miller spoke more than once against the practice of having *simchas* that require people to stay up late. He felt that this could be injurious to one's health, not to mention that eating at a late hour is not a good practice.

Sometimes an invitation states such and such a time "B'dyuk." Even this is often meaningless. Indeed, it was once pointed out to me, tongue in cheek, that "B'dyuk" stands for "Biz de Yidden Vellen Kummen!"

Pictures or a Chasuna

I know a *mashgiach* in the *bais medrash* of a Brooklyn yeshiva who attends many *chasunas*. He once told me, "People have a choice between pictures and a *chasuna*, and they invariably choose pictures!" He was referring to the common practice of the *chosson* and *kallah* and their families and relatives taking pictures after the *chupah* while their guests are kept waiting for an hour or more. The reason for this is because the *chosson* and *kallah* are supposedly not "allowed" to see each other for a week before the *chasuna*. The result is that when the *chosson* and *kallah* finally appear for the first dance, it is quite late. Many people who have to get up early the next day are anxiously waiting to be served their meal so they can leave. Those guests who find it necessary to leave without eating are unable to participate in the *mitzvah* of being *m'sameach* the *chosson* and *kallah*. Those who do stay go to sleep at an unreasonable hour and may not be able to properly function the next day.

My acquaintance, the *bais medrash mashgiach*, told me that when asked, his *rosh hayeshiva* has said that there is no problem with taking pictures of the *chosson* and *kallah* together before the *chupah*. However, there are authorities who advise otherwise, insisting that the custom of the *chosson* and *kallah* not seeing each other be maintained. This may indeed heighten the emotional dimension to the *chasuna* for the *chosson* and *kallah*. However, adherence to a custom and/or the feelings of two people must be balanced with the inconvenience of so many others. *Kovod habrios* must be a concern. Therefore, in cases where pictures are taken after the *chupah*, every effort should be made to limit the time spent on picture taking. Rav Yisroel Salanter is famous for his dictum that, "The other person's *gashmius* is your *ruchnius*." Doesn't keeping hundreds of guests waiting for an extensive amount of time fly in the face of this?

Music

I have been at *chasunas* where the music was so loud that I could not talk to the person sitting next to me without shouting. We simply could not hear each other over the music. Indeed, there are times when guests leave the hall to find peace and quiet. Why is louder considered better? Why can't the decibel level be such that one can hear the music and carry on a conversation? Why does one have to risk damaging one's eardrums to participate in some *chasunas*? Today it is the custom for young couples to bring infants to a *chasuna*. I can only wonder at the

irreparable damage that may be done to the hearing of these young children. Given this and other considerations, I simply do not understand why young couples think that it is appropriate to bring infants to *simchas*. Years ago this was almost never done. Has something changed that I am not aware of?

Where is the D'var Torah?

The “format” of our *chasunas* is also problematic. With rare exceptions there is no d'var Torah. Here we have a major religious event that is totally devoid of *divrei* Torah. I recall reading a story about how the Torah greatness of the *Chazon Ish* was “revealed.” While attending a *chasuna*, he sat at a table set aside for the poor. A famous and learned Rov began to speak and quoted a *Mishna*. He explained it in a certain way. The *Chazon Ish* stood up and pointed out that this was not the correct way to explain this *Mishna* and offered an alternative explanation. The Rov was so impressed with the explanation of the *Chazon Ish* that he asked the *Chazon Ish* to come and sit next to him at the head table. Given his great humility, the *Chazon Ish* did not want to do this, so the Rov went and sat next to him. The point here is that there was a d'var Torah at this *chasuna*. Why don't all of our *chasunas* feature at least one d'var Torah? Rav Dr. Yosef Breuer, ZT”L, wrote in the Aug./Sept. 1966 issue of the *Mitteilungen*, the congregational Bulletin of *K'hal Adath Jeshurun*, expressing his reservations about the “new” custom of Hasidic dancing: “While we are not used to the manner in which frequently also in our circles the joyous participation in weddings manifests itself, such ‘deviation,’ actually an imitation of other circles, is of no real significance. We are concerned with the custom that calls for vigorous ‘Mitzve dancing’ during the festive meal but does not provide an opportunity for a single D'var Torah (either under the Chuppa or during the meal). This practice directly contrasts with the admonition of our Sages which characterizes any meal, particularly a festive one, as a ‘meal of the dead’ that is not accompanied by words of Torah.”

Too Much of a Good Thing

Interesting enough, while *divrei* Torah are hardly ever given at *chasunas*, when it comes to *sheva brochos* and Bar Mitzvahs there is a plethora of speeches. Indeed, at some of these affairs one could come away with the idea that “The more speeches there are, and the longer each speech is, the better.” Even if the speakers are good, there is a point at which the audience loses interest and simply cannot absorb any more information, no matter how well presented. Furthermore, it seems that virtually everyone is considered to be a suitable speaker, despite the fact that it takes talent and training to speak well in front of a group. If a d'var Torah incorporates a considerable number of sophisticated Gemara concepts, then at least 50% of the audience (the women) will have no idea what the speaker is saying and be totally bored. This leads to talking during the d'var Torah, which leads to “shushing.” The net result is far from an edifying Torah experience.

The Bar Mitzvah *Drasha* should be a “golden” opportunity for a boy to learn how to make a verbal presentation before an audience. However, my experience has been that the presentation is made in a fashion that makes it either incomprehensible or unintelligible, or both. Sadly, this chance to teach a young person the skills needed to present material to others in a clear and logical manner is lost. While it may well be true that the average 13 year-old boy is not capable of delivering a polished talk, this does not mean that his Bar Mitzvah *Drasha* has to consist primarily of mumblings sprinkled with words like *Rambam*, *t’phillin*, *Gemara*, etc. A 13 year-old can be prepared to give a *Drasha* that is comprehensible, interesting, and understood by all present. However, the boy must be properly prepared for this. Indeed, the *baal simcha* has to make sure that all those who speak are capable of speaking well. Furthermore, the number of speeches and the length of each speech have to be carefully limited.

During the Fifties and Sixties, students in the Bais Medrash of Yeshiva Torah Vodaath had the opportunity to take a “course in homiletics” from none other than Rabbi Moshe Sherer, Z”L. The course met bi-weekly, and the assignment was to prepare a five-minute speech on a current event and tie it to the *parsha* of the week. Rabbi Sherer stressed what he called the “Three B’s of speaking:” Be prepared; be brief; be seated! This is surely good advice for anyone asked to speak at a simcha.

A Waste of Good Jewish Money

Last but not least is the lavishness of our present day *simchas*. At a talk given at the 55th National Convention of Agudath Israel entitled “Society’s Newest Pressures” and reprinted in **Selected Writings**, Rav Shimon Schwab, ZT”L, said, “The ostentation that one sees, the flaunting of wealth, the big rings, the large stones, the colossal weddings, the tremendous bar mitzvahs – what has happened? Millions of dollars are wasted! Money with which we could feed all the hungry Yidden of *Yerushalyem*, with which we could maintain all the Yeshivos – all of it is wasted. There was once an *inyin* of *t’memus*, of *pashtus*, of simplicity. Where has that gone? Did this also perish in the flames of Auschwitz? One goes to a *chasuna*. Almost all *chasunas* look alike – except for the *chosson* and *kallah*. Each one represents thousands of dollars which could be used to support the young couple for years. Many a *chosson* could sit and learn day and night for the money which we spend on one *chasuna*. What a waste of good Jewish money.”

Years ago *sheva brochos* were a simple affair made in the home of a relative or a close friend of the *chosson* or *kallah*. A *minyan* of men and their spouses and perhaps a few more people gathered for these *sheva brochos*. This is often not the case today. A restaurant or hall must be rented to accommodate all the invited guests. At the Shabbos *sheva brochos*, three lavish meals are served to 80 or 90 or more people. Some even take guests to a hotel for Shabbos! Is this really necessary? I recall when an invitation to participate in Shabbos *sheva*

brochos meant inviting people to come to one's home **after** the *seuda* for desert. For some reason or other this is not good enough today. As Rav Schwab pointed out, "What a waste of good Jewish money."

Conclusions

I am convinced that people can make *simchas* today that are truly joyous occasions for all who attend. It requires careful planning and the willingness (courage) to implement guidelines that avoid the pitfalls outlined above as well as others that I am sure the reader can think of. However, doing this is well worth the effort. Those who attend a *simcha* that is truly a joyous and meaningful experience will come away with a feeling of appreciation to the *ba'alei simcha* for his efforts and long remember the event with fondness and warmth.