

In This Issue

- **Covenant and Conversation** by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
- **The Guiding Light** by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen
- **Outlooks and Insights** by Rabbi Zev Leff
- **Between the Lines** by Rabbi Abba Wagensberg



The Pursuit of Joy

Happiness, said Aristotle, is the ultimate good at which all humans aim.¹ But in Judaism it is not necessarily so. Happiness is a high value. *Ashrei*, the closest Hebrew word to happiness, is the first word of the book of Psalms. We say the prayer known as *Ashrei* three times each day. We can surely endorse the phrase in the American Declaration of Independence that among the inalienable rights of humankind are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

But *Ashrei* is not the central value of the Hebrew Bible. Occurring almost ten times as frequently is the word *simcha*, joy. It is one of the fundamental themes of Deuteronomy as a book. The root *s-m-ch* appears only once in each of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, but no less than twelve times in Deuteronomy. It lies at the heart of the Mosaic vision of life in

the land of Israel. That is where we serve God with joy.

Joy plays a key role in two contexts in this week's parsha. One has to do with the bringing of first-fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem. After describing the ceremony that took place, the Torah concludes: "Then you will rejoice in all the good things that the Lord your God has given you and your family, along with the Levites and the stranger in your midst" (Deut. 26:11).

The other context is quite different and astonishing. It occurs in the context of the curses. There are two passages of curses in the Torah, one in Leviticus 26, the other here in Deuteronomy 28. The differences are notable. The curses in Leviticus end on a note of hope. Those in Deuteronomy end in bleak despair. The Leviticus curses speak of a total abandonment of Judaism by the people. The people walk *be-keri* with God, variously translated as 'with hostility,' 'rebelliously,' or 'contemptuously.' But the curses in Deuteronomy are provoked simply "because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and gladness of heart out of the abundance of all things" (Deut. 28:47).

Now, joylessness may not be the best way to live, but it is surely not even a sin, let alone one that warrants a litany of curses. What does the Torah mean when it attributes national disaster to a lack of joy? Why does joy seem to matter in Judaism more than happiness? To answer these questions we have first to understand the difference between happiness and joy. This is how the first Psalm describes the happy life:

Happy is the man who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor stood in the way of sinners or

sat where scoffers sit. But his desire is in the Torah of the Lord; on his Torah he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by streams of water, bearing its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in all that he does he prospers. (Ps. 1:1-3)

This is a serene and blessed life, granted to one who lives in accordance with the Torah. Like a tree, such a life has roots. It is not blown this way and that by every passing wind or whim. Such people bear fruit, stay firm, survive and thrive. Yet for all that, happiness is the state of mind of an individual.

Simcha in the Torah is never about individuals. It is always about something we share. A newly married man does not serve in the army for a year, says the Torah, so that he can stay at home "and bring joy to the wife he has married" (Deut. 24:5). You shall bring all your offerings to the central sanctuary, says Moses, so that "There, in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families shall eat and rejoice in all you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you." (Deut. 12:7). The festivals as described in Deuteronomy are days of joy, precisely because they are occasions of collective celebration: "you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the strangers, the fatherless and the widows living among you" (16:11). *Simcha* is joy shared. It is not something we experience in solitude.

Happiness is an attitude to life as a whole, while joy lives in the moment. J. D. Salinger once said: happiness is a solid, joy is a liquid. Happiness is something you pursue. But joy is not. It discovers you. It has to do with a sense of

connection to other people or to God. It comes from a different realm than happiness. It is a social emotion. It is the exhilaration we feel when we merge with others. It is the redemption of solitude.

Paradoxically, the biblical book most focused on joy is precisely the one often thought of as the unhappiest of all, *Kohelet*, a.k.a. Ecclesiastes. Kohelet is notoriously the man who had everything, yet describes it all as *hevel*, a word he uses almost forty times in the space of the book, and variously translated as 'meaningless, pointless, futile, empty,' or as the King James Bible famously rendered it, 'vanity.' In fact, though, Kohelet uses the word *simcha* seventeen times, that is, more than the whole of the Mosaic books together. After every one of his meditations on the pointlessness of life, Kohelet ends with an exhortation to joy:

I know that there is nothing better for people than to rejoice and do good while they live. (Ecc. 3:12)
So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to rejoice in his work, because that is his lot. (Ecc. 3:22)
So I commend rejoicing in life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and rejoice. (Ecc. 8:15)
However many years anyone may live, let him rejoice in them all. (Ecc. 11:8)

I argue in the forthcoming Sukkot machzor that Kohelet can only be understood if we realise that *hevel* does not mean 'pointless, empty, or futile.' It means 'a shallow breath.' Kohelet is a meditation on mortality. However long we live, we know we will one day die. Our lives are a mere microsecond in the history of the universe.

The cosmos lasts for ever while we, living, breathing mortals, are a mere fleeting breath.

Kohelet is obsessed by this because it threatens to rob life of any certainty. We will never live to see the long term results of our endeavours. Moses did not lead the people into the Promised Land. His sons did not follow him to greatness. Even he, the greatest of prophets, could not foresee that he would be remembered for all time as the greatest leader the Jewish people ever had. *Lehavdil*, Van Gogh sold only one painting in his lifetime. He could not have known that he would eventually be hailed as one of the greatest painters of modern times. We do not know what our heirs will do with what we leave them. We cannot know how, or if, we will be remembered. How then are we to find meaning in life?

Kohelet eventually finds it not in happiness but in joy - because joy lives not in thoughts of tomorrow, but in the grateful acceptance and celebration of today. We are here; we are alive; we are among others who share our sense of jubilation. We are living in God's land, enjoying his blessing, eating the produce of his earth, watered by his rain, brought to fruition under his sun, breathing the air he breathed into us, living the life he renews in us each day. And yes, we do not know what tomorrow may bring; and yes, we are surrounded by enemies; and yes, it was never the safe or easy option to be a Jew. But when we focus on the moment, allowing ourselves to dance, sing and give thanks, when we do things for their own sake not for any other reward, when we let go of our separateness and become a voice in the holy city's choir, then there is joy.

Kierkegaard once wrote: "It takes moral courage

to grieve; it takes religious courage to rejoice."² It is one of the most poignant facts about Judaism and the Jewish people that though our history has been shot through with tragedy, yet Jews never lost the capacity to rejoice, to celebrate in the heart of darkness, to sing the Lord's song even in a strange land. There are eastern faiths that promise peace of mind if we can train ourselves into habits of acceptance. Epicurus taught his disciples to avoid risks like marriage or a career in public life. Neither of these approaches is to be negated, yet Judaism is not a religion of acceptance, nor have Jews tended to seek the risk-free life. We can survive the failures and defeats if we never lose the capacity for joy. On Sukkot, we leave the security and comfort of our houses and live in a shack exposed to the wind, the cold and the rain. Yet we call it *zeman simchatenu*, our season of joy. That is no small part of what it is to be a Jew.

Hence Moses' insistence that the capacity for joy is what gives the Jewish people the strength to endure. Without it, we become vulnerable to the multiple disasters set out in the curses in our parsha. Celebrating together binds us as a people: that and the gratitude and humility that come from seeing our achievements not as self-made but as the blessings of God. The pursuit of happiness can lead, ultimately, to self-regard and indifference to the sufferings of others. It can lead to risk-averse behaviour and a failure to 'dare greatly.' Not so, joy. Joy connects us to others and to God. Joy is the ability to celebrate life as such, knowing that whatever tomorrow may bring, we are here today, under God's heaven, in the universe he made, to which he has invited us as his guests.

Toward the end of his life, having been deaf for

twenty years, Beethoven composed one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, his Ninth Symphony. Intuitively he sensed that this work needed the sound of human voices. It became the West's first choral symphony. The words he set to music were Schiller's *Ode to Joy*. I think of Judaism as an ode to joy. Like Beethoven, Jews have known suffering, isolation, hardship and rejection, yet they never lacked the religious courage to rejoice. A people that can know insecurity and still feel joy is one that can never be defeated, for its spirit can never be broken nor its hope destroyed.

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1.
2. Journals and Papers, vol. 2, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1967, p. 493.



The Curse of Two-Facedness

This week's Torah portion mentions a very unique ceremony: When the Jewish people came into the Land of Israel, there were two adjacent mountains—Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival. Six Tribes stood on one mountain and six Tribes stood on the second mountain. A series of Blessings and Curses were recited, to which everyone needed to respond Amen.

The Torah lists eleven curses which were to be part of this recitation for which a person who transgressed them should be cursed. This ceremony was a national acceptance of a binding oath not to be in violation of these

eleven transgressions.

The specific sins for which it was proclaimed “Accursed be he who...” include one who: Makes a graven image and places it in secret; degrades his father or mother; moves back the boundary of his fellow; causes a blind person to go astray on the road; perverts a judgment of a convert, orphan, or widow; lies with the wife of his father; lies with any animal; lies with his sister; lies with his mother-in-law; strikes his fellow in secret.

Rabbi Yissachar Frand asks the following, basic question on this list:

“Let me ask something: Are these eleven things the **worst** sins in the Torah? It does not say “Cursed be one who desecrates the Shabbos.” It does not say “Cursed be one who eats chametz on Pesach.” Some of the things mentioned do not involve the serious Kares (excision) penalty, nor even the less serious penalty of lashes. If we had to pick a list of “the worst eleven,” maybe we would have listed some of the eleven items, such as those involving Idol Worship or Immorality. But most of them do not seem to be “all that bad” that they should be worthy of this unique curse. So why were these eleven singled out?”

Rabbi Frand cites the answer of the Darash Mordechai. He suggests a common denominator to all eleven items. These sins are all done behind closed doors in which a person can act hypocritically. In Rabbi Frand's words, “A person can act as the biggest Tzadik (righteous person) out in public, and behind closed doors he can treat his parents with utter disrespect.

“Cursed be he who encroaches on the boundary of his fellow man.” A person can promote himself as one of the most honest businessmen there are, and yet in the stealth of night he will move the boundary demarcation a couple of inches, and no one will know the difference.”

Likewise, many of the other prohibitions listed here involved sins which could be hidden behind a veneer of righteousness. “Cursed is he who leads the blind man astray on the road,” according to the Rambam, refers to giving bad advice with one’s own personal interests in mind. For example, if a person gives business advice to his friend, when in truth it is harmful advice. Similarly, the curse about one who strikes his friend in private, refers to speaking lashon hara behind one’s back. The commentaries say that this is particularly pernicious because the ‘victim’ of the lashon hara is helpless to defend himself because he doesn’t even know that he is being attacked.

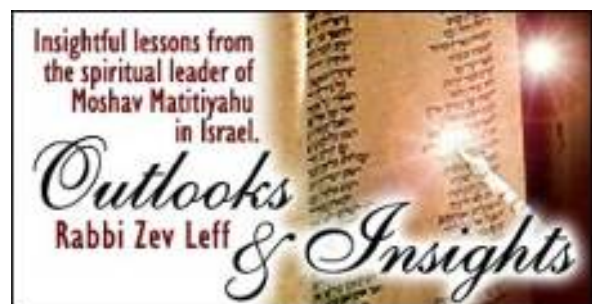
Moreover, it seems that is not just the damage caused by being two-faced that is the subject of such a strong curse, rather it is the basic character trait that seems to be so repulsive to the Sages.

The idea is demonstrated by the Minchat Chinuch in his discussing of the prohibition of *Geneivat Daas* (literally translated as ‘stealing the mind’). This takes place when a person lets his fellow think that he did a favor for him, when in truth he did not. For example, if a person consciously gives the impression that he traveled a long distance to attend the wedding of his friend, when in truth, he was at another wedding next door and it was easy to pop in.

The Minchat Chinuch offers a suggestion as to why this kind of deception is so bad: He explains, based on the idea that the term ‘*Geneivat Daat*’ – literally stealing one’s mind -- indicates an element of thievery: In Jewish law stealing is defined as an act without anyone knowing, as opposed to *gezeilah*, robbery, which is stealing in front of other people. One is the unlawful taking of someone else’s property, and the other is the fact that it is a bad character trait to take from someone behind their back.

My Rebbe, Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, Rosh Yeshiva of Aish HaTorah, elaborates that the trait of being two-faced or ‘sneaky’ is viewed extremely negatively by the Sages. It indicates dishonest and fear of people as opposed to fear of God.

The Eleven Curses do not necessarily represent the worst sins in the Torah, but they all involve the despicable traits of sneakiness and two-facedness, which indicate fear of people and not God. May we all merit to avoid these damaging traits.



First and Foremost

"You shall take of every fruit of the ground produced by the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You must place it in a basket, and go to the site that God will

choose."(Deut. 26:2)

The Torah commands us to take the first fruits and bring them to the Kohen as a thanksgiving offering to God. Elsewhere we are enjoined to dedicate all our "firsts" to God – the first shearings of the wool, the first of the dough, the firstborn of man and animal, etc. Why does the Torah command us to offer the *first* of our produce instead of the *best*?

The importance of the "first" lies in the fact that it is the root and foundation of all that follows. The foundation of a building must be totally free of imperfections. A hairline crack in the foundation endangers the entire building, whereas that same crack in the fourth floor would not be significant. Similarly, with respect to everything having to do with *kedusha*, the beginning must be holy and pure if holiness and purity are to emanate from it. Any imperfection in the root will manifest itself a hundredfold in what grows out of it. Therefore, we dedicate all "firsts" to God to firmly establish the foundation and root of all that follows.

The Talmud (Yerushalmi – Chagiga) blames Elisha ben Avuya's tragic departure from the path of Torah on an incident that occurred on the day of his *brit*. The great Sages of Jerusalem were discussing Torah at his *brit* with such intensity that a fire descended from the heavens and surrounded them. When Elisha's father saw this, he announced that he would devote his son to Torah so that he would also be able to work such wonders.

His father's distorted motivation left its mark on his brilliant son, when later in life Elisha came to distorted conclusions on the basis of various incidents he witnessed. He saw a child fall to his death while fulfilling his father's command to

send away the mother bird before taking her eggs. Since the Torah specifically promises length of days for honoring one's parents and sending away the mother bird, he concluded there is neither justice nor a judge. (Rabbi Yaakov, however, saw that reward for mitzvos is not in this world but rather in the next.)

GOOD BEGINNINGS

And so, too, from a good beginning comes good. The Talmud (Bava Metziah 85b) relates that when Rebbe Chiya reintroduced Torah in a generation in which it had been forgotten, he began by planting flax. From the flax he made nets to capture deer. Upon the skins of those deer he wrote the Five Books of the Torah. He would then travel from town to town teaching Torah to five boys in each town. With each he learned one book of Chumash. To six older boys he taught one order of Mishnah each. Each then taught the others what he had learned, and in this way, Torah was once again established.

Why was it necessary for Rebbe Chiya to plant the flax and make the nets? Couldn't he have *bought* these? The answer is that every new beginning is the construction of a foundation. Only if every step is taken with holy and pure intentions will the result be holy and pure.

The same principle answers a question asked with respect to Chanukah: Why was a miracle necessary to insure that the menorah not be lit with impure oil? The law is that impure oil may be used for a mitzvah incumbent on the community.

[The answer is that] Chanukah was a rededication of the Temple and the Menorah. As such it was a new beginning, and only pure oil was fitting. Only when the holiness has been

firmly established can impure oil be used for its maintenance.

The special significance that the Sages attach to the education of young children lies in the fact that we are setting the foundations of their Torah. Similarly, the blessings and curses uttered upon our entrance into the Land of Israel, at Mount Eival and Mount Grizim, emphasize the fact that our first encounter with Israel must set the foundation for our future settlement of the land. That required an intense awareness of our duties and responsibilities.

NEW YEAR

During the Ten Days of Repentance from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, it is customary to be extra stringent in one's observance of mitzvot. Thus, even one who is not usually strict about eating kosher bread baked by a non-Jew (*pas palter*) should nevertheless be strict during that period. At first glance this practice seems difficult to understand, for it applies even to a person who intends to eat *pas palter* the rest of the year. Are we trying to fool God into thinking we are more pious than we actually are in order to secure a favorable judgment?

The significance of this conduct lies in the fact that Rosh Hashanah is not just the beginning of the year, but *reishis hashana* – the foundation and root of the year. Each of these ten days must be treated as firsts, dedicated to God in purity and holiness. Hence the extra stringencies, the more intense prayer and learning, are not merely for show. They are designed to lay the foundation for the entire year. Even if the building of the coming year is not constructed of such quality materials, the foundation will give it strength.

Thus did [King Solomon], the wisest of men say, *tov acharis davar me'resihiso* (Ecclesiastes 7:8), which is usually translated as "*The end of the matter is greater than the beginning*," but can also be understood, "*A good end emanates from the beginning*."



An Out Loud Prayer

This week's parsha discusses the mitzvah of "first fruits." A Jew who owns land in Israel and grows produce on it - specifically, the seven species for which the Land of Israel is praised - must gather the first of his crop in a basket and take it to the Temple, where a special ceremony takes place (see Deut. 26:2). This parsha is always read prior to the beginning of Slichot prayers for forgiveness preceding Rosh Hashana. What is the message of this parsha, and how does it help us prepare for Slichot?

The Midrash (Tanchuma 1) states that Moses saw prophetically that the Temple would be destroyed in the future, and that the mitzvah of the first fruits would no longer be able to be fulfilled. In response, Moses instituted three daily prayers to replace this service. The Midrash's statement is striking, since the Talmud (Brachot 26b) teaches that our three daily prayers were instituted by the Patriarchs. How can we understand this contradiction? Was it Moses or the Patriarchs who established our

current system of prayer?

Furthermore, the Torah teaches that a specific statement must be recited by the person bringing the first fruits: "Then you shall answer and say... 'An Aramean destroyed my forefather...' (Deut. 26:5). Rashi (citing Sotah 32b) explains that the word "you shall answer" refers to calling out in a loud voice. How is this interpretation derived? According to the Siftei Chachamim (9), the literal meaning of "you shall answer" is logical only if another person has previously spoken, necessitating a response. In this instance, however, no one has spoken at all. Therefore, our Sages explained the phrase "you shall answer" to mean that we must say the prescribed statement in a loud voice.

This interpretation raises a difficulty. The Talmud (Brachot 24b) teaches that a person who raises his voice in prayer is considered to have little faith in God! Rashi explains that loud prayers imply a lack of belief that God can hear a whisper just as clearly. In practice, Jewish law follows this opinion (Orach Chaim 101:2, Mishna Brura 7). If we are not permitted to raise our voice in prayer, how can our Sages specifically require it at the time we bring the first fruits?

The commentator Chanukat HaTorah addresses this issue by stating that there are two categories of prayer. The first category is regular prayer, containing the three standard elements of praise, request and thanks. The second category is prayer that testifies explicitly that God hears our thoughts. There is an obvious difference between these two categories. It is forbidden to raise our voices if we are praying according to the first category, because the volume might be misconstrued as a lack of belief. However, if we

pray according to the second category, and explicitly state that God hears our thoughts, then surely He can also hear our whispers! Thus, it is permitted to raise our voices, because doing so will not lead to any improper assumptions.

TWO CATEGORIES OF PRAYER

This helps us understand a seeming misstatement in the ceremony of the first fruits. The person bringing his produce is required to say, "An Aramean [Lavan] destroyed my forefather [Yaakov]." But historically, this is not true! If Lavan didn't kill Yaakov, why would the Torah command us to say that he did? Rashi explains (Deut. 26:5, based on Sifri and JT Peah 1:1) that Lavan *wanted* to destroy Yaakov and his entire family. Since, among the non-Jewish nations, evil thoughts have the same status as evil acts, Lavan's desire to kill Yaakov was considered an actual murder. Therefore, a Jew who explicitly states, "An Aramean destroyed my forefather" is effectively stating that God hears a person's thoughts! Therefore, the person falls under the second category of prayer, and is allowed to raise his voice.

Once we are permitted to raise our voice in prayer, it is actually preferable to do so. The Aruch HaShulchan (Orach Chaim 101:8) states that raising our voices in prayer awakens our hearts. Additionally, we can suggest that loud prayer helps free us of our inhibitions, which elevates the words we say.

The concept of two categories of prayer will resolve the problem of who instituted daily prayers as a replacement for the service of first fruits. Based on the Talmud (Eruvin 16b), which teaches "These and those are the words of the living God," we can suggest that both Moses AND the Patriarchs established our daily prayer

service. The Patriarchs instituted prayer according to the first category, in which it is forbidden to call out loudly. Moses instituted prayer according to the second category, in which we explicitly state God's omniscience.

We see that the Amidah, corresponding to the Patriarchs, is said silently. But when do we experience Moses's type of prayer? One example is the Slichot service, in which we ask God's forgiveness for not only our improper actions and speech, but even for inappropriate thoughts. Asking forgiveness for improper thoughts is tantamount to acknowledging that God is aware of them. Thus, it is permissible to raise our voices. Furthermore, according to some customs, Slichot are said immediately after the Amidah, thereby juxtaposing the Patriarchs (silent prayer) with Moses (heartfelt cries for forgiveness).

At last we see how this week's parsha relates to Slichot. When we read about the prayer spoken over the first fruits, we prepare ourselves to call out to God. Slichot, too, are spoken out loud, in order to awaken our emotions. They belong to the second category of prayer - Moses's category - in which we are encouraged to raise our voices to God and arouse our hearts to higher levels of connection.

May we all raise our voices in prayer so that, through truly meaning and feeling what we say, we arouse ourselves to become closer to God. In this merit may we be completely forgiven, and deserve to hear the loud shofar blast symbolizing the building of the Third Temple, where we'll once again bring the first fruits.

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