

The Commandment to Rejoice: The entry to the land will result in the eventual establishment of a central location for the people to gather and worship God: **הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יבְחַר ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מִכָּל שְׁבֵטֵיכֶם לְשׁוֹם אֶת שְׁמוֹ שָׁם ה' – the place that the Lord your God chooses from among all your tribes to put his name there, to have it dwell** (Deut. 12:5). That is the place where: **you are to bring your offerings and your sacrifices, your tithings and the contributions of your hands, your vow-offerings and your freewill offerings, the firstborn of your herds and of your flocks. And you are to eat there, before the presence of the Lord your God, and you are to rejoice in all the enterprises of your hand, you and your households, with which the Lord your God has blessed you.** (12:6-7) The commandment to **rejoice** occurs only once in Leviticus in connection to Sukkot, (Lev. 23:40), and this is its debut in Deuteronomy where it occurs a total of eight times, twice in the plural form, **וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם** and six times in the singular **וְשִׂמַּחְתָּ**.¹ How are we to understand the commandment to rejoice?

The Plain Meaning: Rejoicing is simply the consequence of people coming together. That is to say, once you have brought your offerings and eaten them, **you will rejoice.** This seems fairly obvious, since we are usually joyful when we get together as families or larger groups. In this reading, **And you shall rejoice** is not a commandment per se, but simply a description of what you will experience.

The Rabbinic Interpretation: Joy = Meat-Eating. To the rabbis **וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם** is the specific way one rejoices at a pilgrimage, namely, by consuming special **joyful** sacrificial offerings. **וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם** means: **you shall rejoice by eating the meat of these specially designated celebratory offerings.**² They associate meat eating with joy, stating: **אֵין שְׂמִיחָה אֵלָּא בְּבֶשֶׂר – there is no joy except with (the consumption of) meat.** Lest we understand this as an anti-vegan polemic, we should cite it in its full context:

תִּנָּא: רַבִּי יְהוּדָה בֶּן בֶּתִּירָא אוֹמֵר: בְּזִמְנָן שְׁבִית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ קָיִים אֵין שְׂמִיחָה אֵלָּא בְּבֶשֶׂר שְׂנֵאמֵר: וְנִבְחַת שְׁלָמִים וְאָכַלְתָּ שֶׁם וּשְׂמַחְתָּ לְפָנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְעַבְדְּשֵׁי שְׂאֵרֵי בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ קָיִים אֵין שְׂמִיחָה אֵלָּא בְּיֵינוּ שְׂנֵאמֵר: וְיֵינוּ שְׂמִיחָה לִבָּב אָנוּשׁ. פסחים קט.

It was taught that Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira says: When the Temple exists, rejoicing can only be achieved by the eating of sacrificial meat, as it is stated: And you shall sacrifice peace-offerings and you shall eat there and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God (Deut. 27:7). **But now when the Temple does not exist, and one cannot eat sacrificial meat, one can still fulfill the mitzvah of rejoicing on a Festival, only by drinking wine instead, as**

it is stated: Wine gladdens the heart of man (Ps 104:15). (Pes 109a)

Evidently, the requirement to eat meat for purposes of rejoicing is only in force when it is possible to eat sacrificial meat, i.e. when the Temple is standing. But the rabbis were great oenophiles, and, in an era in which there is no Temple they made the consumption of wine an obligation for joyous occasions. Thus, we have an obligation to recite a blessing over a glass of wine at all joyous occasions, shabbat and festivals, but no obligation to eat meat.

A Commandment Directed Against Paganism: Moses' agenda in Deuteronomy is to install a people in its land and have it live out its covenantal relationship with its God, who is One. Moses knows however, that the vestiges of Canaanite paganism, its holy places and adherents, are still very much present in the land, and that they will mesmerize the Israelites for several centuries after the conquest. Why? Because paganism is sensual. It celebrates the body, human pleasures. It's easy. It provides a clear explanation for good and evil, (good gods, bad gods) and is a great stimulus for the creation of visual and plastic arts, music and dance. In a word, paganism: **fun**; Israelite monotheism: **not as fun!** Thus, Deuteronomy's emphasis on **the obligation to rejoice**, ought to be seen in opposition to pagan joy. While joy for Canaanite pagans depended on satiation and pleasure, and the gratification of self, joy for Israelite monotheists depended on the deeper spiritual and transcendent satisfaction of family, generational continuity, community cohesion and the people's relationship with God. Every time Deuteronomy issues the commandment **to rejoice**, it mentions the people you are supposed **to rejoice with**, namely, **your household, your sons, and your daughters, and your menservants, and your maidservants, and the Levite who is within your gates.** The privilege of joy is not restricted to the elites or the powerful, but it is available to everyone equally, including slaves.

Pilgrimage can be Painful: Deuteronomy relates to the period in Israel's history after the conquest of the land, prior to the centralization of ritual and worship. Shrines had been located in different areas, and these laws of centralization put those shrines out of business. As a consequence, pilgrimage to the central location, sometimes over large distances, became the most important religious activity. While there is great joy in packing up your household and going on a trip, we can imagine that the obligation to do so also entailed no shortage of arduous logistical challenges and burdens. And complaining. The obligation to rejoice

¹ See Deut. 12:18, 14:26, 16:11, 16:14, 26:11, 27:7.

² The talmudic argument points to a specific text later on in Deuteronomy in which joy is directly connected to the sacrifice and consumption of the meat of a peace-offering:

נֵאמַר כָּאֵין שְׂמִיחָה וְנֵאמַר לֵהֲלוֹן שְׂמִיחָה (פ' תבא) מֵה שְׂמִיחָה הָאֵמֻרָה לֵהֲלוֹן שְׁלָמִים אִם שְׂמִיחָה הָאֵמֻרָה כָּאֵין שְׁלָמִים.

Here, in our parasha, it says simcha (joy) and there (at the end of Deuteronomy in parashat Ki Tavo, Deut. 27:7) it says simcha (joy). If the simcha there refers to peace-offerings, then simcha here must also refer to peace-offerings. (Jer. Talmud Hagigah 1:2).

ought to be seen in the context of the intense efforts and enormous expenses that one incurred in order to be able to travel to *the place that God chose*. For that reason, the people needed to be reminded that they had an obligation *to rejoice*; moreover, it was incumbent on the head of the household to ensure that everyone *rejoiced with him*.

The Crowd Effect: Anyone who has ever been present at a large gathering of people, whether it is a sporting event, a concert, a rally, or a convention, knows that a crowd can turn on a dime and get very dangerous. Current scholars of crowd behavior observe that when individuals come together in crowds they *shift from the 'personal self' to the 'social self' or social identity, from 'I' to 'we', and they start acting in terms of the norms and the values of the group. So, it's not that you lose identity and lose control. You shift control to the norms and values of the group...* *to invoke Dickens, crowds are sometimes the best of worlds and sometimes they're the worst of worlds. They act and they tell us about the values of a particular group.*³

A crowd that organizes around negative values, such as hate and grievance, will eventually express itself in negative ways, like violence. A crowd that organizes around the positive value of gratitude will express itself in a positive way, like joy. Seen through the lens of crowd theory, when the people assemble in large gatherings to celebrate their festivals, the commandment to rejoice is an expression of their deepest value: gratitude.

Rejoicing as Defiance: At any given moment in the life of a community, there are people who are suffering, experiencing illness and who have endured the loss of loved ones. As we mark 11 months since October 7th - the completion of the Kaddish period for many individuals - we reflect on how complicated this year has been in terms of both celebrating the holiday cycle and rejoicing at personal and communal milestones. For us in the Diaspora, October 8th was Simchat Torah, and many of us will recall how we deliberated on that day about how we were going to celebrate in the face of such terror and devastation. During the weeks and months that followed, we asked ourselves what was appropriate and where the line was between the communal need to grieve and the communal obligation, and legitimate need, to rejoice at holidays, celebrations, or personal and communal milestones. The last mitzvah of the Torah - arguably the Torah's climactic mitzvah - is the mitzvah *to choose life* (Deut. 30:19). In a very deep way, it anticipates the existential challenge that the Jewish people

TODAY IS DAY 330 OF THE WAR AND THE CAPTIVITY OF THE HOSTAGES. WE PRAY FOR THEIR RELEASE. MAY GOD HEAL THE WOUNDED SOLDIERS OF THE IDF AND SHIELD ISRAEL FROM TERROR AND MISSILES.

³ Stephen Reicher, PhD, Crowds, Obedience and the Psychology of Group Behavior. APA Podcast 241.

⁴ The artwork above, by Nissim Hizme, is a verse from this week's Third Haftarah of Consolation: *And all your children*

will always face: survival. Some people, in the midst of tremendous emotional anguish and pain, are faced with this choice on a daily basis. The commandment *to rejoice* seems impossible in these circumstances. In the Laws of Mourning, mourners are restricted in terms of how they celebrate, but also have the obligation *to rejoice*, to celebrate, and *to choose life*. Rabbinic Judaism emerged from the crucible of national catastrophe and destruction. **In the context of catastrophe, the obligation to rejoice is an act of defiance against despair and hopelessness; it enables us to fold our tragic experiences of suffering into our collective memory, and orient ourselves towards our future, with hope and joy.**

The Moral Responsibility of Being Joyful:

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (Ukraine, 1772-1810) famously stated: *מִצְוַת גְּדוּלָה לִהְיוֹת בְּשִׂמְחָה תָּמִיד - it is a great mitzvah to always be happy* (Likutei Moharan, Part II 24:1). These words, now set to a lively melody, have become a raucous anthem often accompanied with exuberant dancing. Ironically, the revelers are very likely unaware that the man who wrote them, suffered from terrible bouts of depression throughout his life. Reb Nachman understood the profound necessity of joy and describes it as, *הַגָּדוֹל הַרְפוּאָה הוּא רִפּוּאָה גְּדוּלָה*. There are probably dozens of clinical studies that support this idea, that joy helps in healing. Nevertheless, while we might be inclined *to rejoice* because it's good for us *therapeutically*, we ought to also understand that *to rejoice* is vital for us *morally*. **It is our moral responsibility to be happy. Why? Because the way we behave and comport ourselves affects the people all around us. Joy and misery are contagious. Being bitter and miserable makes everyone else bitter and miserable, and being joyful and happy makes everyone else joyful and happy.** For most people, being joyful or miserable is a matter of choice.

Even people who have every reason to be sad, still have the capacity to choose how to comport themselves, and act joyfully. As Abraham Lincoln said, *"most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be"*. The obligation to rejoice is a moral obligation because the overall health and wellbeing of the people depends on every individual's emotional comportment. When the Torah commands the people to rejoice on its pilgrimages, it is stating so out of moral necessity: *You shall rejoice, because the health and vitality of our people depends on it!*

Shabbat Shalom.⁴



shall be disciples of the LORD, And great shall be the happiness of your children. (Isaiah 54:13) Presented by Florence and David Thaler z'l to each of their children and their spouses on the occasion of their 30th anniversary (1969).