



In exactly 7 weeks it will be Sukkot, and the earworm, *ve-samahta be-hagekha ve-hayyita akh sameah!* is already burrowing itself into our ears. That song is based on two verses from our parasha:

וְשָׂמַחְתָּ בְּחֶגְךָ אַתָּה וּבְנֶךְךָ וּבִתְּךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וַאֲמָתְךָ וְהַלְוִי וְהַגֵּר וְהַיְתוּם וְהָאֵלֶּמְנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ. שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תִּחַג לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּמָקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר ה' כִּי יִבְרָכְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כָּל תְּבוּאָתְךָ וּבְכָל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֶיךָ וְהֵייתָ אֶךְ שָׂמֵחַ. (דב' טז:יד-טו)

You are to rejoice on your festival, you, your son, and your daughter, your servant and your maid, the Levite, the sojourner, the orphan and the widow who are within your gates. For seven days you are to celebrate-a-festival to the Lord your God in the place that the Lord chooses, for the Lord your God has been blessing you in all your produce and in all the doings of your hands, and you shall be oh so joyful! (Deut. 16:14-15)

The commandment **to rejoice** is found not only in conjunction with Sukkot but also with Shavuot. Curiously, there is no commandment to rejoice on Passover.¹ But the commandment **to rejoice** occurs five more times in this parasha, in connection with pilgrimages to **the place that God chooses** and also sacrificing and tithing, suggesting how important rejoicing was and still is in the life of Israel.² In the broadest sense it is a commandment to experience joy and happiness, but in a narrow more technical sense, according to Prof. Jeff Tigay, it means: **you shall celebrate with a sacrificial meal.** In other words, **וְשָׂמַחְתָּ** or its plural **וְשָׂמַחְתֶּם** ought to be understood as a reference to the shared activity of eating a sacrifice, principally the **sacrifice of well-being (שְׁלָמִים)** the only sacrifice on the main menu of sacrifices that was to be shared by the person who was offering it with others, hinting to us that **the essence of joy is the shared experience.** Tigay continues: **Although each type of offering has a specific purpose, Deuteronomy emphasizes their overall value in providing occasions for celebration over God's bounty, which is the principal ceremonial means recognized by the book for thanking Him. These occasions serve to inculcate love and reverence for God (see esp. 14:23). Deuteronomy stresses the effect that the offerings have on people rather than any effect they may have on God.**³ That last point is worth emphasizing. If that is the case, Deuteronomy represents a different orientation to ritual than say, Leviticus. In Leviticus the purpose of sacrifice, broadly speaking, is to maintain the divine presence in the community and a state of order in the world. The role of the kohen within the

sacred area is quite prominent, the regulations regarding the sprinkling of blood, and the arrangement of the sacrifice on the altar receive a lot of attention, and everything was conducted in silence. In Deuteronomy the focus is on the pilgrim and his family and presumably, like all family gatherings, the event would have been rather boisterous. **In Leviticus we focus on the recipient of the sacrifice: God. In Deuteronomy we focus on the donor of the sacrifice: the person and his/her relationships to family, community and people.** Yet despite the technical sense of **וְשָׂמַחְתָּ** as a celebration with a sacrificial meal, are there other ways of interpreting this? Why does the Torah feel the necessity to command the pilgrim to rejoice? Why does the Torah repeat it so often? How do the rabbis understand this mitzvah? And what are the moral dimensions of joy?

1. Pilgrimages are Hard. Let's look at the challenges of pilgrimages. Pilgrimage involves transportation, lodging, and organizing provisions for the way. Anybody who has planned a visit to relatives understands this. Compared to our biblical ancestors, we have it easy because we can load up our cars and drive long distances whereas they had to



travel on foot or on mules or on camels. Travel by foot takes a toll on the body, let alone the prospect of falls, inclement weather and, in the case of the climate in ancient Israel, excessive heat, narrow mountain passes, encounters with wild animals, and nasty criminals. Pilgrimage involves physical risk

and dislocation. It is very easy to understand how people, especially the elderly or people who prefer to stay home, would dread the very idea of yet another pilgrimage to **the place that God chose.** On top of all of that, pilgrimage is expensive. From time to time, we encounter a modern iteration of this dread. We are all reading this with the holidays of Tishri not far from our minds and we are beginning to make our plans. **Where are we going to be? Who is going to be with us? What meals do we need to prepare? Did we make our seat reservations in shul?** Not infrequently, we also express our own complicated relationship with the holidays with bemused exasperation. We love them, we love to celebrate them, and we love the



¹ Perhaps this is because Passover coincides with the barley season, a busy and anxious time, with concern over how successful the season would be.

² 12:7, 17, 18, 14:26, 15:11.

³ Jeffrey Tigay, JPS Commentary: Deuteronomy, p. 122.

meaning that they add to our lives. Yet we dread them also. We dread the work, the disruption, and expense. While our ancestors would have understood that **לָפֹם צִעָרָא אֲגָרָא**-*the reward is commensurate with the effort* (Avot 5:23), we can also sympathize with the head of household who has to make all this happen. Not all people are endowed with such spiritual equanimity. Hence the commandment to rejoice.

2. The Familial Context. Without going into actuarial detail, one can imagine that a large and vibrant clan in biblical society would have consisted of a founding couple, several children and their mates, and several dozen grandchildren, great-grandchildren and other in-laws. Loss is woven into biblical stories, and it is not farfetched to imagine that in a large clan, loss and suffering would have been a regular experience. Death features prominently in biblical stories because death also features prominently in life. Pilgrimage takes place within the context of a family's life cycle. We all know how difficult it is to sit at the family table on Rosh Hashanah or the Passover Seder when a loved one has passed away during the previous year. And yet. And yet, we are commanded to rejoice. *Which means that even when we are less inclined to rejoice, we must rejoice.* Or, to put it slightly differently, *the commandment to rejoice signifies a commitment to life, that despite the pain that a large clan would have experienced on a regular basis, we are still commanded to rejoice.* Indeed, one could argue that **וְשִׂמְחָתָם** is a manifestation of the theme that dominates the end of the Deuteronomy: *choose life. In the face of sorrow and loss, rejoicing is choosing life.*

3. The National Context. Over the last three years we have experienced the impact of world historical events on our individual, familial and communal lives. The events of October 7th took place as we in the Diaspora were celebrating Shmini Atzeret. In Israel it was already Simchat Torah. When we were beginning to internalize the horror and magnitude of the events, we were faced with the problem of how are we going to actually rejoice the next day, one of the most joyous of the festivals? At the same time, we also understood that we needed to demonstrate to ourselves, and perhaps to others, that we would overcome this terrible moment, and still maintain the capacity to hope for better days. **וְשִׂמְחָתָם** ought therefore to be understood as an imperative to rejoice - *You must rejoice!* - under all circumstances, even during national crises or moments of trauma. It stands to reason that in both the eras of the First and Second Temples, there was plenty of crisis and trauma. Against that backdrop, the commandment to rejoice would situate the present moment in a larger context and it would be a demonstration of national will and hope.

4. The Moral Obligation. Deuteronomy over and over, stresses the moral dimension of life.⁴ Indeed, the parasha begins with the idea that a life of blessing is available to us as a reward for making moral choices, when we choose to

follow God's commandments. Deuteronomy will return to this theme at the end of the book, when it conveys to us the importance of choosing between good and evil, and choosing life (Deut. 30:15-20). Thus, in addition to the personal, familial, and national contexts of an individual life, *we can place the obligation to rejoice in a moral context.* To put it simply: *Being happy is a moral obligation.* Dennis Prager explored this idea in his bestselling book on happiness, entitled, *Happiness is a Serious Problem*. He gives us three reasons why being happy is a moral obligation. The first reason: *We owe it to ... everyone who comes into our lives, to be as happy as we can be ... We do not enjoy being around others who are usually unhappy. Those who enter our lives feel the same way. Ask a child what it was like to grow up with an unhappy parent or ask parents what pain they suffer if they have an unhappy child (of any age). A second reason ... In general, people act more decently when they are happy... There is yet a third reason. I once asked a deeply religious man if he considered himself a truly pious person. He responded that while he aspired to be one, he felt that he fell short in two areas. One of those areas, he said, was his not being a happy enough person to be considered truly pious.* Prager's point was that unhappy religious people put both religion and God in a very bad light. *Unhappy religious people pose a real challenge to faith.* Why would one aspire to be a religious person if all the models of piety seem so dour? Religious people have even more reason to be happy. Being happy sanctifies God's name and brings more godliness into the world. *Joy, rejoicing, the great elation of religious life is the best demonstration of the depth and value of religious life in a world where grievance has supplanted gratitude.*

In sum: happiness brings out the best in us and in others. Happiness amplifies decency. And happiness is a calling card of a life well lived, a life of faith and gratitude. It is the ultimate demonstration of the religious disposition. We are obligated to rejoice not only for joy's sake, but because it is central to being human. And it's really important to God too! We will leave the final word to the rabbis. The mishna explores the pilgrim's declaration when presenting a tithe. When he gets to the point where he says, **עָשִׂיתִי כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָנִי**-*I have done as you have commanded me*, the rabbis add these words: **וְשִׂמְחָתִי וְשִׂמְחָתֵי בּוֹ**-*I have rejoiced and made others rejoice.* The Torah commands us to rejoice. But rather than vocalizing the word in its regular form, **וְשִׂמְחָתָם**-*and you shall rejoice*, we should vocalize it as **וְשִׂמְחָתָם**-*and you shall cause others to rejoice.* And here we can hearken back to the *sacrifice of well-being* (שְׁלָמִים). *The greatest way to fulfill the commandment to rejoice is to enable others to rejoice with us.* **Shabbat Shalom!**

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Suzy Levin
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⁴ We argue that Deuteronomy's great statement of monotheism, *Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One*, (Deut. 6:4) is

not as much of a mathematical statement as it is a moral one, stressing that all humanity is bound by one universal authority.