

From 1290 to 1656, Jews were barred from living in London. After an intervention from a Dutch Rabbi, famed politician Oliver Cromwell ultimately decided to change the rules and Jews were finally allowed to worship openly. Soon after, Samuel Pepys, noted British diarist and naval administrator visited the Spanish-Portuguese synagogue. Here is what he wrote:

When after dinner my wife and I, by Mr. Rawlinson's conduct, to the Jewish Synagogue: where the men and boys in their vayles (i.e. *tallitot*), and the women behind a lattice out of sight; and some things stand up, which I believe is their Law, in a press (i.e. the Torah in the *Aron*) to which all coming in do bow; and at the putting on their vayles do say something, to which others that hear him do cry Amen, and the party do kiss his vayle. Their service all in a singing way, and in Hebrew. And anon their Laws that they take out of the press are carried by several men, four or five several burthens in all, and they do relieve one another; and whether it is that everyone desires to have the carrying of it, I cannot tell, thus they carried it round about the room while such a service is singing ... But, Lord! to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true God, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this.

It's all very British, right? The curt linguistic flourishes. The naming of a tallis as a veil. Mostly though, the uniquely British scoffing at the lack of decorum. Dear heavens, the singing!? Laughing? My word! Clearly, Pepys was not used to such behavior during a religious service. That being said, attending davening for on Simchat Torah will have that affect on a first-timer.

Nonetheless, I find this account resonant for what living joyously Jewish can look like. Whether we're talking about ritual, ideology, or visioning for the Jewish community, it seems we have taken on the identity of a lachrymose and guilt-ridden people wholeheartedly.

How many articles could we find bemoaning the lack of engagement among young people with Judaism? Look at our rates! They're plummeting! How much hand wringing is there over the choose-your-own-adventure problem: Israel, anti-semitism, intermarriage. If we listen to our fellow

Jews talk, we'd think a people that have survived multiple acts of genocide, multiple forms of expulsion, and multiple destructions of a religious center have rarely faced as nefarious an enemy as what the 21st century offers.

Admittedly, I don't mean to be too glib here. There clearly are very real problems that do have life and death consequences. What am I addressing is less about external threats and more about the internal. It's a message directed at the way we talk as Jews, pray as Jews, and live as Jews. We need to shift from a woe-is-us to joyous.

The back and forth between joy and lamentation is a real one, felt acutely in our portion, *Ki Tavo*, this week. The latter of the two *tochachot* rebukes is read this Shabbat. So severe are the curses in this portion that the Torah reader traditionally reads them in a hush to diminish some of their harshness. We know they're possible but maybe if whisper them, we'll lessen the chance of having to face such a situation.

Amid the typical diseases and plagues of being cursed, our children being taken from us, and our enemies wiping us out, we learn of a peculiar consequence for our disobedience. These curses will come in Deuteronomy 28:47

תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עַבַדְתָּ אֶת־יְהוָה  
אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְטוֹב לֵב מְרֹב כֹּל

Because you would not serve your God יהוה in joy and gladness over the abundance of everything. Not exactly what we'd normally expect. Not following the rules or worshipping other Gods are our usual mistakes but here, our lack of joy and gladness seem to be a root cause of our being punished.

The first Lubavitcher Rebbe, Shneur Zalman of Liady jumped quickly on this verse. He imagines a person suffering through the usual rigamarole of life, nothing too out of the ordinary, just stuff that could put one down in the dumps.

In those moments, he sees joy and gladness are part of the antidote to those pits. He explains that especially in those moments in life, one has to double down on joy because of how powerful it is: "It redeems their soul from the pit. That is, they redeem the innermost point of their heart which was in a state of exile and captivity." This intentional gladness and joy has the ability to transform us and the parts of us that feel beleaguered.

Now, you might look at this and wonder what does this guy know about real sadness? This discounts the real emotional turmoil that people feel! First I would tell you that he was imprisoned two times by Napoleonic forces for month long periods which, I have to imagine, was a pretty dark place. Secondly, he's not saying that to feel bad in general is problematic. It's a bit more nuanced.

“But he who is grieved and laments makes himself appear as if he has it somewhat bad and (is) suffering and lacking some goodness; he is like a heretic, God forbid.”

It's specifically those moments in life when we get a rough deal and we tell ourselves, we're wholly bad. We have nothing redeeming in us that goes against the very nature of Judaism. For if we're all created in the image of God, then no matter what happens, we shine with divinity. To fully emote otherwise is deeply problematic.

The other piece to this puzzle comes from a bit earlier in the portion when we are told of the blessings that we'll be rewarded with presuming we remain obedient to God. The text in 28:2 says:

וּבָאוּ עֲלֶיךָ כָּל-הַבְּרָכוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וְהַשִּׁיגְךָ כִּי תִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

All these blessings shall come upon you and take effect, if you will but heed the word of your God

יְהוָה:

Fairly simple, yes? Listen to God. Get rewarded with blessings! Note the language though. You don't go after the blessings. The blessings come after you- וְהַשִּׁיגְךָ. The blessings are animate and in pursuit of you. How could such a thing be?

Here is the Degel Machane Ephraim's answer:

אך דהענין הוא כמ"ש דהמע"ה אך טוב וחסד ירדפוני וכו': והיינו כי לפעמים אדם בורח מן הטוב מחמת קוצר דעתו שאינו יודע אם הוא טוב ולכך התפלל דהמע"ה אך טוב וחסד ירדפוני שהם ירדפו אחרי וישיגו אותי אף שאיני יודע לרדוף אחריהם והוא שמרמז ובאו עליך כל הברכות האלה והשיגוך והבן

The matter here is related to what King David said in Psalm 23 that goodness and kindness shall pursue me all the days of my life. There are times in which we flee from goodness because of a troubled spirit. We don't know if we're good or not. When King David wrote these words about goodness and kindness, it was specifically for a moment when one doesn't know how to pursue them.

The same is true here. The blessings will pursue you even when you're not sure you have it in you to pursue them.

We have moments in life when we're really struggling. The beauty of our relationship with God is that in those moments, especially when we don't have the internal strength to go after the blessings, we will receive them nonetheless. Opting in to that partnership gives us this benefit.

These two teachings speak to the human experience. Our baseline in life should be to strive after joy. We should live our lives always seeking out gladness. This applies even more to our Jewish identities. In Deuteronomy alone, there are 12 references to joy along with countless others throughout the Torah. We sing over and over again, *come pray to God in joy, let's sing out in gladness*. To default to lament all the time runs counter to the Jewish message.

And yet, we know that we have these moments where we just can't muster it. We're down and in the pit. It's in those moments when we can bank on our relationship with God. That is when goodness, joy, and blessing will come after me even when I can't them even halfway.

It's purely anecdotal, but I have heard from enough young Jews who feel disenchanting with Judaism not because it feels antiquated or it believes one way about Israel but because it lacks a sense of verve and happiness. I strongly believe that for the betterment of the future of Judaism here, we need to weave this joy within the fabric of our Jewish communities. We need to sing with more joy. We need to speak with more positivity. We need to act in the world with more gladness. We need to unabashedly embrace a Judaism that loves disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion much to the chagrin of ol' Mr. Peyp. *Zeh Hayom Asah Adonai, Nagilah V'nishmecha bo*. This day, tomorrow, and the day after are all days that are divine gifts. Be happy and rejoice in them.

Let's get after it!

Shabbat Shalom

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