

Chapter 1 – Simcha

Imagine a religion that begins with “God wants you to be happy!” Beware of anything that threatens to take away your joy. In the end it will probably take you away from God as well. Simhah , or joy, is the attitude toward life that Judaism seeks to instill. Despite the fact that Jewish history has more than its share of bleak and depressing chapters, the tradition sees itself as a joyous one. “Serve Y-H-W-H * with joy; come before God with singing.” As the angels (literal or metaphorical, as you prefer) exult in the privilege of calling out “Holy, Holy, Holy” each day before the divine throne, we too are called upon to rejoice in the gift of knowing God, of loving God’s creation, and of attesting to the divine presence that fills this world, both within us and around us.

This way of living is particularly emphasized in the Hasidic tradition, a form of Judaism that broke away from a growing tendency toward self-punishment that seems to be the shadow side of most religions.

Rabbi Israel Ba’al Shem Tov, the first great master of Hasidism, taught us to turn away from that shadow. Y-H-W-H created human beings, becoming present in the human soul, he taught, so that we might serve God in joy. The key biblical verse here reads “May the God-seekers’ heart rejoice” (1 Chron. 16:10). Seeking God itself is an act that is to fill the heart with joy. The delight is not only in the finding but also in the seeking.

The great enemy of such a joyous quest is self-doubt, often caused by excessive worry about one’s sins. Too much concern about sin puts you in mortal danger. The greatest trick of the evil forces, the Ba’al Shem Tov taught, is to make you worry about some small transgression you committed. That worry occupies your mind, takes you away from joy, and leaves you unable to see the beauty and wonder that always surround you. This leaves you feeling empty and hence unable to pray or to feel the warmth of God’s presence. Your distance from God only grows greater, until you find yourself alone and abandoned, ripe to be picked off by the forces of further

temptation. To avoid this pattern, he taught, repent of your sin quickly, decide you will not repeat it, and go back to serving with as much wholeness and joy as you can muster. Love, the wonders of nature, music, dance, and the close companionship of friends are all there to keep you on the path of joy. Storytelling, including lots of humor, is also part of the therapy. A famous later Jewish writer called Sholom Aleichem, who grew up in the Hasidic part of Eastern Europe, used to say, “Laughing is good for you; doctors prescribe laughter.”

Joy is a gift that comes to people in different measures. Some folks seem to be blessed with a radiant personality that fills up with joy at the slightest stimulation. Even living with what appear to be the heaviest burdens does not dampen their spirit. For others, achieving joy represents a lifelong struggle against a natural tendency toward depression. Moments of true joy in such lives are rare and long treasured; we have to cultivate them, nourish them, and make them grow.

Those who struggle for joy have a special master within the Hasidic tradition. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav was a great-grandson and expected heir of the Ba'al Shem Tov. He tried to live as his revered ancestor had taught, filling each moment with simple joy, but it failed to work for him. When he opened his eyes to discover God's presence filling the world, he instead felt God's absence and his own abandonment. Nahman's teachings on the struggle for joy are especially moving because they are so personal. He insisted that you must never let up in the search, that you have to turn your own shadows into light. Don't ignore your sadness, he taught, but chase it in order to transform it into happiness. He offered a parable that describes you, his reader, as a person in a roomful of dancers, but standing on the sidelines because your mood is too dark to let you enter the circle. Finally, someone grabs you by the hand (and this book may just be that “grab”), forcing you to join in the dance. As you warm up and begin to move, you notice your former sadness still standing back there on the side, looking somewhat disapprovingly at this new behavior and just waiting for you to stumble or feel self-conscious. The real task, says Rabbi Nahman, is to force that sadness itself into the circle and to make it dance, to see that it too is

transformed into joy.

Simhah shel mitzvah , “joy of the commandment,” is essential to the religious life as Judaism views it. A mitzvah may be a ritual form or an act of kindness to others. The point is that doing it is meant to fill our hearts with joy. A mitzvah is a place where you can meet God; of course it makes you happy. We anticipate it and look forward to fulfilling it. It’s true that the sources also speak of the “yoke of the commandments,” but the following story illustrates the sort of yoke they mean.

It is a pious custom to bake special matzahs right on the eve of Passover, in order to be engaged fully in the celebration of our freedom. To make matzah properly, you need to use water that has been left standing overnight, to ensure its absolute stillness. Once in the old country, where water was still brought from the river, an elderly rabbi was seen carrying two heavy buckets full of water for this purpose tied to a yoke around his neck. A neighbor riding by in a horse-drawn cart saw him and said, “Come here, rabbi! Put your buckets on my wagon, and we’ll give you a ride.” The rabbi looked up, smiling, and said: “I have the joy of doing this mitzvah only once a year, and you want me to give it away to a horse?”

Here the burden itself has become a source of joy. When the ancient Israelites wandered through the wilderness for forty years, a certain group of Levites were given the privilege of carrying the Holy Ark. “How heavy it must have been,” somebody commented, “with those massive stone tablets inside it!” “No,” a Levite answered. “The Ark carried those who bore it.”

The same is true of any mitzvah carried out with joy. It elevates and “carries” the one who does it.

“The world is like a wedding feast,” the Talmud teaches. Like good guests at the wedding, we are there to rejoice over everything at once. We love the music, the dancing, the special food and drink. We are happy for the companionship of family and good friends. Still more, we are happy for the bride and the groom and anticipate the

further happiness their life together will bring to them and those around them. We rejoice at once over all the goodness and blessing of life. 4 Among those blessings is that of our own awareness of how blessed we are and our ability to express our gratitude for life's many gifts. That is the way we are supposed to feel about the opportunity of doing a mitzvah .

A joyous occasion like a wedding, a birth, or another happy event in the life of a family is referred to among Jews simply as a *simhah* , a joy. When we see one another at sad moments, especially at a funeral or when visiting a house of mourning, we express the wish to be with one another in better times. *Nor oif simhas* in Yiddish is the way we say it: I hope to see you again, but “only at joys!”