

## D'var Torah – Parashat Re'eh 5770

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By Rabbi Maurice Harris

Shabbat shalom. This week's Torah portion is Re'eh, and in it we continue to listen to Moses's final review of the laws and statutes that the Israelites are to observe as part of their covenant with the One who redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, the Eternal One. Moses goes over many different topics in Re'eh, and tomorrow morning Ethan, our bar mitzvah, will focus on an area having to do with kashrut, the laws governing how we make eating food a holy act. In another part of this parashah, however, Moses gives an overview of the rituals involved in the celebration of the great festivals of the people of Israel. The three pilgrimage festivals – Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot, get special attention. Tomorrow morning, when Ethan chants the *maftir*, or last few verses of the portion, he'll be chanting words that describe some of the things we're supposed to do on Sukkot. Listen to what the text says:

After the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths, *chag ha-sukkot*, for seven days. You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow in your communities. You shall hold a festival for the Eternal your God seven days, in the place that the Eternal will choose; for the Eternal your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy.

You might have noticed the emphasis on happiness and joy in this passage. There's a key word that recurs in the Torah's discussion of sukкот, and that word is *sameach*, or grammatical variations on it. *Sameach* is the word for happiness or joy, and in fact one of the various names for the holiday of Sukkot is *Zman Simchateynu*, or "Season of our Joy." In the passage I just quoted above, the Hebrew root *sameach* comes up twice. We hear it first with the words "you shall rejoice in your festival" – *v'samachta* is the Hebrew for "you shall rejoice." Then, towards the end of the passage, it says "you shall have nothing but joy." The Hebrew reads *v'hayitta ach sameach*.

Eric Mendelsohn, a past President of Congregation Darchei Noam, a Reconstructionist synagogue in Toronto, writes the following:

The grandchildren of the great medieval Jewish commentator Rashi, building on his commentary, note that the word "Simcha"... - "Be happy !" occurs three times in the description of Sukkot (and with the extra command "Ach Sameach" - "[really] be happy", it is almost like a parents' reminder -- "Have a good time and by the way, have a good time.") On the other hand, [even though this Torah portion also describes the other 2 great pilgrimage festivals, the word] "Simcha" is mentioned only once for Shavuot, and not at all with regard to Pesah.

In a d'var Torah he gave at his synagogue, he asks why this might be. Here's some of what he writes:

The agricultural basis of these holidays provides a simple explanation. Passover is the time of lambing and the sign of spring, but there is great apprehension about the crops to come. The winter wheat is in but the barley and vegetables will take seven more weeks. At Shavuot - the barley is in and one can breathe somewhat easier. But Sukkot is the grand Thanksgiving feast, at which rich and poor alike are assured enough sustenance. Judaism teaches that one has the right to enjoy the material benefits of this world and we are enjoined to rejoice in having them.

The Rabbinic linking of the three festivals to history also provides a reason for the differing amounts of required happiness. At Pesah - Egyptian soldiers have been drowned; we cannot rejoice when others are suffering. At Shavuot we can be happy that we have received Torah, but there was the incident of the Golden Calf which mutes our joy. But Sukkot celebrates the Mishkan (the portable Tabernacle of the desert). It provides the wholeness of having a spiritual center that moves with one -- and that is cause for unbounded joy.<sup>1</sup>

Something that grabbed my attention in thinking about this triple commandment to be happy is a question many before me have asked. Can we really be commanded to be happy? Let me stray far afield for a moment, and share a thought from another religious tradition. The American Buddhist writer, Sharon Salzberg – Salzberg, hmm... -- writes:

Contemplating the goodness within ourselves is ... done to bring light, joy and rapture to the mind. In contemporary times this practice might be considered rather embarrassing, because so often the emphasis is on all the unfortunate things we have done, all the disturbing mistakes we have made. Yet this classical reflection is not a way of increasing conceit. It is rather a commitment to our own happiness, seeing our happiness as the basis for intimacy with all life.

I'm especially struck by that last phrase – our happiness is the basis for intimacy with all life. She continues:

When we truly love ourselves, we want to take care of others, because that is what is most enriching, or nourishing for us. When we have a genuine inner life, we are intimate with ourselves and intimate with others. The insight into our inner world allows us to connect to everything around us, so that we can see quite clearly the oneness of all that lives. We see that all beings want to be happy, and that this impulse unites us. We can recognize the rightness and

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<sup>1</sup> *Re'eh: "Be Happy!"* By Eric Mendelsohn, October 16, 2007 on the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation website.

beauty of our common urge toward happiness, and realize intimacy in this shared urge.<sup>2</sup>

The great Hasidic master, Reb Nahman of Bratslav, taught the following, and I quote:

It is a great mitzvah to be happy always! Make every effort to maintain a happy, positive outlook at all times. It is a natural human tendency to become discouraged and depressed because of the hardships of life: everyone has their full share of suffering. That is why you must force yourself to be happy at all times. Use every possible way to bring yourself to joy, even by joking or acting a little crazy!<sup>3</sup>

And elsewhere, from the compilation of his sayings, *Likutey Moharan*, Rebbe Nachman teaches:

You must search for the good in yourself.

When you start looking deep within yourself, you may think there is no good in you at all. You may feel you are full of evil: a negative voice inside you may try to drive you into depression. But you must not allow yourself to fall into depression. Search until you find some little good in you. For how could it be that you never did anything good in your whole life?

When you start to examine the good you have done, you may see many flaws. Maybe you did what you did for the wrong reasons and with the wrong attitude. Even so, how could it be that your mitzvah or good deed contains no good at all? It must contain some element of good.

You must search and search until you find some good point within you to give you new life and happiness. When you discover the good that is still inside you, you literally swing the scales from guilt to merit. This will enable you to return to God. The good you find inside you will give you new life and bring joy to your soul.

Having found one good point, you must continue searching until you find another. Even if you think this good point is also full of flaws, you must still search for some good in it. In the same way, you must continue finding more and more good points.

This is how songs are made! In essence, music is made by sifting the good from the bad. The musician has to find the “good spirit” – the good air – and reject the bad. A musical instrument is a vessel containing air. The musician produces the

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<sup>2</sup> Salzberg, Sharon, *Lovingkindness*, © 1997 Shambala Press.

<sup>3</sup> Translation by Rabbi Avraham Greenbaum

sounds by causing the air to vibrate. His [or her] task is to move his [or her] hands on the instrument in such a way as to produce good spirit, “good vibrations”, while avoiding the “bad vibrations” – the dissonant winds of gloom and depression.

When people refuse to allow themselves to fall into despair but instead vitalize themselves by seeking out and gathering together their positive points, this produces melodies, and they can then pray, sing and give thanks to God. When a person recognizes the wrong she or he has done and how grossly materialistic and impure he or she is, that person can become so depressed that she or he is completely incapable of praying. He or she simply cannot open his or her mouth to God. This is because of the deep sorrow and heaviness that overcome people when they see their overwhelming distance from God.

But finding your good points can give you new life. Even if you know you have done wrong and caused damage and that you are far from God, you must search until you find the good that is still inside you. This will give you new life and make you truly happy. You are certainly entitled to feel the greatest joy over every good point you find in yourself, because each good point comes from the holy soul within you. The new life and joy you will gain from this path will enable you to pray, sing and give thanks to God.

By the way, if you are interested in studying more of Rebbe Nahman’s teachings on line, you can Google “The Essential Rabbi Nachman” and go to the top listed web site for many of his teachings in clear English translation.

The challenge to be happy is the challenge of people whose basic needs are met. Call it Maslow’s hierarchy of needs; call it common sense, but the pursuit of happiness that the Declaration of Independence views as a basic human right is something we can only focus on if our food, shelter, clothing, and freedom from other forms of major adversity are intact. Millions who have fled flooding in Pakistan this week aren’t so lucky. I think that the teaching here about seeking to be *sameach*, happy, is that it’s part of what we were born to do. All beings truly do yearn for their own well-being, their own happiness, and true happiness naturally leads to seeking the happiness of others. We know this deep inside.

May God help us to find a path to happiness that connects us deeply to life all around us.

Shabbat shalom.