

“Worship G-d in joy”
Parshat Re’eh
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Parshat Re’eh, like several Parshyot in Devarim finds Israel at the precipice of the Promised land. This represents one small step for Joshua and one giant leap for Israel. This giant leap is a complete transformation for the people of Israel. They are changing from a people of the wilderness to a landed nation. They are changing from a nation who carries G-d’s home with them, assembling and disassembling the mishcan as they go, to a nation whose G-d will have a permanent home in their midst. They are changing from a nation that is still learning G-d’s laws, to the nation that is sworn to live by G-d’s laws as an example for all other nations.

This parsha is a bit of a hodge-podge. It begins with a sweeping statement for Israel to choose to follow and receive G-d’s blessing, or else they will be cursed. It follows with laws about destroying all pagan altars and erasing their practices. It moves on to a repetition of the laws of Kashrut. We are warned against following false prophets. We are then reminded to tithe, to give charity with an open hand, to free our slaves - with severance pay, every seven years and finally to make feasts and to make pilgrimages to the place where G-d will choose to dwell.

How do we begin to analyze such an unusual array of commandments?

Personally, I like to look for the *leitworts*, thematical words or phrases that are repeated with unusual frequency. In this parsha I found two. The first phrase is **במקום אשר יבחר ה'**. In the place where G- will choose to dwell.

This is often understood to mean that G-d wants to centralize religion. Instead of having altars in every tribe, and having the Levites scattered throughout the tribes, G-d wants a permanent home for sacrifice and pilgrimage.

This phrase is repeated 15 times.

The second leitwort is **ושמחתם**, “and you will rejoice”. Variations of the word **שמח** are repeated seven times, more than in any other parsha in the torah.



But wait, There's more! There's one more theme, not a *leitwort* but integral to the Parsha: Our final Aliyah this morning was for Rosh Chodesh. Tomorrow is the first day of Elul, marking the beginning of a 51-day period of self-reflection, what one may call חשבון נפש, an accounting of our souls, that will hopefully guide us to T'shuvah. We stand at our own precipice, the promise of transformation ahead of us.

My question is "How are these seemingly unrelated ideas, related? Is it possible to seek Tshuvah and personal transformation in a joyful spirit? How can we seek sincere forgiveness with joy? How can we go through vidui, confession with joy? I don't normally beat my heart when I am happy. And how do we find the place where G-d chooses to rest among us?"

We will put these ideas together, by first addressing each on its own.

First: Rejoice: What does it mean to be joyful in Jewish culture? In Re'eh G-d makes it very clear that we are not to worship or imitate the rites of the pagan cultures. Earlier in the year, when we read parshat Vayakhail, Rabbi Gordon taught us that we are commanded to throw a party, to include everyone, especially the orphan, the widow, the stranger and the Levite. Here too, G-d acts as our party planner – he tells us when to rejoice, what to eat and drink, and who should be on the guest list.

Think about the last time you had a really joyful time. For me it was at my niece's wedding. The food was delicious, the wine was plentiful, the toasts were hilarious, *not at all cringeworthy*, and thanks to our purchase of plastic bracelets for everyone on the dance floor that flashed and blinked in different colors (available at www.flashy-blinky-lights.com) the dance floor had a disco vibe and we danced with our children well into the night. I'm betting that when you think about the last time you had fun it didn't include a bacchanalia, a food fight or a toga party.

For us, joy is not hedonism, but it is connected to mindfulness. The Zohar notes that the Hebrew word for "in happiness" (*b'simcha*, [Hebrew](#): בשמחה) contains the same letters as the Hebrew word for "thought" (*machshava*, [Hebrew](#): מחשבה).^[26] This is understood to mean that the key to happiness is found through our minds, by training ourselves to weed out any negative thoughts that prevent us from experiencing happiness.^[27]

Psalm 100 tells us " עבדו את ה' בשמחה באו לפניו ברננה " worship G-d in joy, and go before him in song."

There is a lovely nigun that goes with these words. We often sing it at the beginning of class to put ourselves in a proper mindset so that we may learn in joy.

Second: Elul and T'shuva. For insight into the way to do T'shuva, it seems appropriate to look to the wisdom of the Chasidim. In their words, it seems only natural to connect personal transformation through repentance with joy rather than sorrow and guilt.

Your Word is Fire, a collection of poetry inspired by Hasidism, edited by Arthur Green and Barry Holtz describes the Ba'al Shem Tov's view that *"brooding on our sinfulness is merely a trick by the Evil One to keep us far from G-d. The service of G-d requires the deepest joy, and such joy cannot be experienced in a divided self. Repent of evil, know that G-d accepts your penitence in love, and return to serve with joy and wholeness."*

In his poetry, the Ba'al Shem Tov writes "How much more pleasing to G-d is prayer in joy, than that which is said in sadness and tears."

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, the great grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov is famous for many well-known aphorisms such as "mitzvah gedollah lehiot besimcha tamid". It is a big mitzvah to be in a state of happiness, always.

It may seem ironic that Reb Nachman battled with depression. He saw depression, sadness, and despair as obstacles to bringing G-d near to us. When we do T'shuva, it is easy to become pre-occupied and self-absorbed. But when we approach prayer with joy we break through these obstacles and bring G-d near.

How do we know that G-d accepts our penitence? In the Book of Legends there is a story from Genesis chapter 4, verse 16:

וַיֵּצֵא קַיִן מִלְּפָנֵי יְהוָה

"Cain went out from the presence of the Lord" Rav Huna, citing Rabbi Chanina bar Isaac, said: Cain went forth glad at heart. As he went out, Adam met him and asked "What sentence was given you?" Cain replied: "I vowed repentance and was granted clemency." Hearing this Adam proceeded to strike himself in the face in self-reproach saying: So repentance has all this power and I knew it not!?"

This brings us to the third theme of this week's Torah readings: G-d's chosen place for worship. Our history tells us that G-d dwelled in the Holy Temple. Our liturgy reflects the feeling that G-d's home is somewhere in the heavens. In more modern times, especially Chassidic philosophy, we think of G-d as being everywhere. Maybe the place G-d chooses to dwell is not a central location, but is actually

decentralized, located inside all of us. In the parsha, G-d tells the people many times to destroy the altars and places of worship of the idolators - (this one I didn't count, but trust me, it's a lot) But he never tells them where to build new altars and places of worship. Why?

When we worship G-d in joy, eliminating an obsession with our own guilt and self-absorption, we make room for G-d to reside within us. This is the place that G-d chooses as his home.

The twentieth century Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner composed these inspirational words - “בלבבי משכן אבנה” “In my heart I will build a Tabernacle” It's part of a lovely song which I sometimes use as a meditative start to my prayers.

How do we know that G-d resides within us? Ibn Ezra asks why does Moshe say “re'eh” – the singular imperative of the verb “see” instead of “re'u” the plural form of the verb? This teaches us that each individual is given the choice between blessing and curse. As we enter the month of Elul, we each bear the responsibility to choose to obey the Torah, and we each will receive the rewards of joy, and nearness to G-d. Hopefully we won't find ourselves at the end of this period of reflection with a palm to our faces saying: “So repentance has all this power and I knew it not!?”

Finally, Rabbi Gordon brought this teaching to my attention, from the Talmud Yerushalmi, Masechet Rosh Hashana:

Rabbi Shimon said: Normally, if one knows that he is going to be judged, he dons black and cloaks himself in black, and goes unkempt, not knowing how his judgment will unfold. But Jews [on Rosh Hashanah] do not deport themselves thus. Instead, they don white and cloak themselves in white and groom themselves and eat and drink and rejoice, knowing that the Holy Blessed One will do miracles for them.

At the beginning of Elul, we are, like the ancient Israelites, standing at a precipice. We can dedicate this month to our own transformation. We must look at ourselves with introspection, acknowledge our shortcomings, be grateful for the opportunity we have to be better people and rejoice, mindfully, because G-d is merciful. Then we can continue on our life's journey, cross into the place of G-d's promise, and, live as G-d wants us to live - with great joy.

When assembling these thoughts for today's drash, I couldn't help hearing over and over, inside my head, the words of the great Jewish philosopher, Sheldon Harnick, best known as the lyricist for Fiddler on the Roof, and its ecstatically

joyful number “To Life.” As we begin this period of repentance, mindful joy and personal growth, I offer this wish:

“may we all be favored with the future of our choice,
And may we live to see a thousand reasons to rejoice.”

L’chaim!