

A Most Joyous Day of the Year: How to Serve God with Joy & Find Serenity

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Recently, I was scanning Art Green's latest book, "Judaism's Ten Best Ideas," and became enchanted by the first chapter entitled "Happiness as a Religious Precept."

Now that's my kind of religion! Yet, I don't remember being taught that God wants me to be happy. From the age of three, I learned that the Jewish people had more than our "share of bleak and depressing chapters."¹

So on this holiest of nights, I make a radical proposition, that the most important thing you can do this year, to be a better Jew, is to embrace joy! Joy "is not in the heavens" nor "across the sea.... "It is very near to you, ... in your heart, and you can do it!"²

Dr. Green writes:

"Beware of anything that threatens to take away your joy... In the end, it will probably take you away from God as well."³ . . .
. . . "Joy is a gift.... Some folks seem to be blessed with a radiant personality that fills up with joy... Even living with what appears to be the heaviest burdens does not damper their spirit. For other folks, achieving joy represents a lifetime struggle against a natural tendency toward depression....[We are all blessed by]

¹ Green, Arthur. Judaism's Ten Best Ideas: A Brief Guide for Seekers. Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2014, p. 3.

² Parshat Nitzavim, in the contemporary Yom Kippur morning Torah reading.

³ Green, Arthur. Judaism's Ten Best Ideas, p. 3.

[m]oments of true joy... We have to cultivate them, nourish them, and make them grow.”⁴

The importance of joy goes back to the Bible. Ivdu et HaShem B'Simcha Bo L'fanav Birnana. Serve God with Joy; Come before God in Song.⁵

2,000 years ago, the Rabbis declared:⁶ “There were no days as joyous for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur...” Really? Not Sukkot? Not Purim?

To learn why, we travel back to the shtetl.⁷

Dovid was a simple Jew, neither a wise man nor a fool.

Dovid lived near a family he didn't know well – Rivky, Shmuely, and their four children, who were deep in debt to their landlord. Like many landlords of the time, when he needed to collect, he dug a pit and through the entire family in, with no food nor water. Either someone would pay the family's debt in a few days, or they would die.

Dovid awoke at dawn, just before Yom Kippur, to discover that Rivky, Shmuely and their children were being thrown into a pit. They owed 350 rubbles, a huge sum.

⁴ Green, Arthur. Judaism's Ten Best Ideas, p. 5.

⁵ Psalm 100:2

⁶ Mishnah Ta'anit 26b Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel

⁷ Buxbaum, Yitzchak. “Simchat Torah Joy on Yom Kippur,” Jewish Tales of Mystic Joy. Toronto: Jossey Bass, 2002, p. 80-87.

The family would likely survive a few days, but Dovid couldn't let Jews spend Yom Kippur in such a prison. So he raced around town, knocking on every door, collecting from every Jew he could find. They all gave as much as they could, and by noon Dovid had collected 50 rubbles.

He realized he would never get close to the needed sum in this poor community. There was only one other place to go.

For there were three Jews Dovid hadn't asked. This being a Yiddish folktale, the Jews were, of course, men who had left the Jewish community and become rich dishonestly. Dovid knew what God wanted of him, so he begrudgingly trekked to the gentile side of town, where he found the three men at the tavern.

He approached the first, tried flattery, tried begging, tried Jewish guilt. "Why should I care if some poor strangers live or die? Go away."

"Please, my Lord," pleaded Dovid, "what can I do to make it worth your while to give 100 rubbles to this holy cause?"

The rich man thought. "You'll do most anything will you? Are you desperate enough to drink this entire bottle of wine at once?"

"Please, my Lord, if I drink so much wine, I may have difficulty walking back to synagogue before Yom Kippur. Perhaps instead I might..."

“No perhaps,” he screamed, and held out the new bottle of fine wine. And so Dovid drank, and received 100 rubbles.

Lightheaded, Dovid asked the next man, if he would so generously give 100 rubbles.

“You’re a drinking man are you?” he asked. “I bet you can’t hold your liquor. Have a glass of this whiskey. If you can still stand on your own two feet, I’ll give you the money.”

“Please, please,” Dovid begged, “if I fall and hurt myself I won’t be able to return home for the holy day.”

“Then don’t fall,” he sneered.

So Dovid drank the whiskey and by some miracle, though he started to fall, he steadied himself and stood up straight.

Slurring his words, Dovid begged the last man to please, please, just give him the last 100 rubbles. “If I drink anymore, even if I make it home, I won’t be able to pray on Yom Kippur.”

“Good,” he yelled. “What did that God of yours ever do for me?” He cackled, “I’ll give you your money if you drink these shots.”

Dovid prayed for God’s guidance and forgiveness, and he took the shots, and collapsed on the floor.

By some utter miracle, he managed to stumble home, without getting lost or mugged. He personally brought the 350 rubbles

to the landlord. Rivky and Shmuely thanked Dovid profusely, and hurried to prepare for the holiday.

Out of time, in his dirty clothes, Dovid stumbled into the synagogue, collapsed on a bench, and passed out.

After a while, Dovid came too, still drunk, having no idea how long he'd been asleep.

He saw the Torah scrolls being removed from the ark and thought perhaps it was Shabbos morning. Then he noticed that there was no light coming through the windows. Dovid knew that Torah was read at night only on Simchos Torah! Overcome with joy, he danced to the bimah, grabbed the Sefer Torah out of someone's hands, and started spinning around the room.

The congregation was shocked! They all started yelling at once. After all, the Torah scrolls had been removed so the Cantor could sing Kol Nidrei. Dovid seemed to be desecrating the holiest day of the year!

“Silence,” the rabbi cried!! “Let him dance. For Dovid has attained such pure joy, that surely his repentance is greater than ours.”

Quoting Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, the rabbi instructed, “Always remember: Joy, simcha, is not merely incidental to your spiritual quest. It is vital.”⁸

⁸ Rebbe Nachman of Bratslov, The Empty Chair, p. 99.

Nachman spoke a lot about joy. One of his most famous teachings is: “Mitzvah G’dolah Lihyot B’simcha Tamid!” Usually translated as ‘The greatest mitzvah is to always be happy.’

Always?

If Simcha means happiness, than that’s a lie. Yet we know that Rebbe Nachman was neither a liar nor a fool, and he was certainly not always happy. In fact, scholars agree, he had what we now call bipolar disorder, swinging wildly between mania and deep depression.

Rebbe Nachman lived in the eighteenth century, when there were no medical treatments for bipolar disorder (or any other mental illness), and the only way he could improve his mental state was through spiritual practice. We know that no spiritual practice can prevent or cure any mental illness. We also know, through medical research, that meditation, yoga, and biofeedback are effective as part of treatment for depression, addiction, and post-traumatic stress.

Surely Nachman knew that no person could always be happy.

So what does Simcha really mean?

So I looked in a dictionary, where simcha is translated as ‘to rejoice, ‘to express positive feelings.’ It is not translated as happy.

The Malbim, a commentator, “associates simcha with an enduring joy and a different word, gila with a new, intense, and sudden spurt of uplifting feeling.”⁹

Simcha is neither momentary nor circumstantial.

Since simcha is translated interchangeably as happiness and joy, the problem might be our Western concept of happiness. We are the victims of a consumerized notion of happiness. We’re told we’ll be happy if we buy this, look like that, or have a partner who looks like that. We play with gadgets, ride roller coasters, and bingewatch Netflix. We are sold the latest fad diets, and lots of pills – a different pill to fix our every ache and pain. Pharmacology improves lives, but as Americans we can overdo any good thing.

From the Jewish point of view, the purpose of life is not happiness. It is the meaning¹⁰ we find in loving others, doing good, and appreciating the beauty around us. It is a life of meaning that brings us true joy. As “Heschel... sought to remind us... the [simple] joy of being alive in God’s world, is as important a dimension of the religious life as piety and reverence.”¹¹

Recently, I heard Rabbi Marcia Prager teach that the root shin. mem. chet. means ‘connection’¹² or ‘being present.’

⁹ © Alan Morinis 2011. http://media.mussarinstitute.org/Mussar_in_Action/session20/joy.pdf

¹⁰ Personal conversation with Rabbi Marcia Prager via Zoom in August 2018.

¹¹ Kushner, Harold S, Nine Essential Things I’ve Learned About Life. New York: Anchor Books, 2015, p. 146-7.

¹² Personal conversation with Rabbi Marcia Prager via Zoom in August 2018.

Now I'm all for figurative translations but that seemed a bit too interpretive even for me, so I enquired. She explained the various mystical meanings of the letters, their shapes and their numerical values. For example, shin, the first letter of simcha, is the number 300, which is equal in value to the phrase *Ruach Elohim*, The Spirit of God.

I'd hate to put you all to sleep, so trust me that the root, shin. mem. chet, means literally 'the structure of the flow of the Divine Spirit.'¹³ Simcha is how we experience the Divine Presence flowing through us and around us.¹⁴

The storyteller, Yitzchak Buxbaum explains that "Ecstasy is not only joyful... A holy person is always blissful, whether it be the bliss of sorrow or the bliss of joy."¹⁵

The bliss of sorrow – not a Western idea!
Actually, I take that back. It can be found, in different terms, in 12-Step literature, but it's certainly not a popular notion that sells magazine or sports cars. The best English translation of the 'bliss of sorrow' may be 'serenity,' or *shalva* in Hebrew. If you've been blessed by this experience as I have on occasion, you know that when we are serene, we are calm and connected regardless of the external circumstances. When we face serious difficulties or severe pain, our ongoing spiritual connection

¹³ Personal conversation with Rabbi Marcia Prager via Zoom in August 2018.

¹⁴ My paraphrase, same conversation.

¹⁵ Buxbaum, Yitzchak. "Simchat Torah Joy on Yom Kippur," *Jewish Tales of Mystic Joy*. Toronto: Jossey Bass, 2002, p. 80-87.

keeps us from despair, and provides us with gratitude and reassurance that it's truly okay.

Mitzvah Gedolah Lihyot B'Simcha Tamid. If I am 'b'simcha tamid' I sustain serenity through it all.

So why is life so hard? (pause)

What stands in the way of your joy? Is it anger? Or physical pain? Or financial insecurity? Do you always want more? Is the glass half empty? Are you unable to put down your smart phone, even on Yom Kippur? Do you beat yourself up over small imperfections or imaginary sins?

“We sin against life, and against God... if we let... [anything]... rob us of our freedom to enjoy as much life as we are granted.”¹⁶

Tonight we release all those obstacles to joy! We feel our burdens lifted, carried away on the wings of our prayers!

We let go of our fears, our resentments, and our pain. “Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void” so we may forgive ourselves and others.

We let go of our sins, of our bad habits, and of our guilt. “Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void” so we may return to the Divine Presence.

¹⁶ Kushner, Harold S, Conquering Fear: Living Boldly in an Uncertain World. New York: Anchor Books, 2009, p. 157.

We let go of our plans, of our desire for more things, and of our desire to control others. “Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void” that we might ‘comprehend... serenity.’

No wonder Yom Kippur is one of the most joyful days of the year!

As Rabbi Prager taught, it is a:

“whole day devoted to reminding us that forgiveness and compassion are woven into the fabric of creation and are the gift of the universe to us and through us.”¹⁷

“I can make mistakes and be okay because compassion and forgiveness are part of the way that things are.”¹⁸

To reach the great joy of this day, we must forgive, especially when it is difficult. We must learn that “Forgiveness for ourselves is the journey from guilt over what we have done... to the celebration of... [who] we have become.” When we stop trying to be perfect, when we stop trying to be who someone else wants us to be, we can become the best version of ourselves.

In a culture that tells us, we never have enough and we’re never good enough, we must intentionally cultivate gratitude and humility.

¹⁷ Rabbi Marcia Prager, personal conversation with Marcia Prager via Zoom in August 2018.

¹⁸ Rabbi Marcia Prager, personal conversation with Marcia Prager via Zoom in August 2018.

So throughout the year, we must count our blessings and breathe deeply. We make time for the people and things we love. We stop to smell the roses. We reflect on what we've done well.

And when the state of the world brings us to the gates of despair, please remember that in troubling times, “joy is an act of spiritual resistance.”¹⁹ {#7}

We have ahead of us a “whole day devoted to reminding us that forgiveness and compassion are woven into the fabric of creation and are the gift of the universe to us and through us.”²⁰

So on this holiest of nights, I make a radical proposition, that the most important thing you can do this year, to be a better Jew, is to embrace joy! Joy “is not in the heavens” nor “across the sea.... “It is very near to you, ... in your heart, and you can do it!”²¹

Ivdu et HaShem b'simcha - rejoice in the gift of drawing near to the Divine Presence, and “[a]lways remember:... simcha is not merely incidental to your spiritual quest. It is vital.”²²

¹⁹ Kleinbaum, Sharon, online for Pride, June 2018.

²⁰ Rabbi Marcia Prager, personal conversation with Marcia Prager via Zoom in August 2018.

²¹ Parshat Nitzavim, in the contemporary Yom Kippur morning Torah reading.

²² Rebbe Nachman of Bratslov, The Empty Chair, p. 99.