



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

ראה תשע"ט
Re'eh 5779

Collective
Joy

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks* for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT RE'EH IN A NUTSHELL

Moving on from the general principles of the covenant, Moses now focuses on specific details, and begins with presenting the choice that lies before Bnei Yisrael: blessings if they are faithful to God's laws, curses if they are not. They are to proclaim these to the nation, on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, when they enter the land. They must destroy all traces of idolatry, and establish a central site that God will

choose where they will worship, offer sacrifices, and eat sanctified food. Moses then issues further warnings about idolatry, false prophets, clean and unclean animals, tithes, and the Sabbatical year, when debts are to be cancelled and Hebrew slaves set free. The parsha concludes with the laws of the three foot festivals when the nation is to celebrate together.



THE CORE IDEA

If we were to ask which key words Moses repeats over and over in his farewell speeches about the future society of Israel, we may hear answers such as justice, compassion, reverence, respect, holiness, responsibility, dignity, and loyalty. It is unlikely that we would hear anybody suggest *simcha*, joy. This is a word that appears only once in each of the other books of the Torah but it appears twelve times in Devarim, seven of these times in this very parsha of Re'eh.

It be a surprise that *simcha* is so often mentioned here. The story of the Israelites so far has not been a joyous one. It has been marked by suffering on the one hand, rebellion and disagreement on the other. Yet Moses makes it extremely clear that joy is what the life of faith in the land of promise is about. Here are the seven times in this parsha where he uses the word joy:

1. "In the presence of the Lord your God [in the Mishkan] you and your families shall eat and rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you" (12:7).
2. "And there [in Bet Mikdash in Jerusalem] you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you, your sons and daughters, your

menservants and maidservants, and the Levites from your towns" (12:12).

3. "You are to eat [Holy food] in the presence of the Lord your God at the place the Lord your God will choose [in Jerusalem] – you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites from your towns – and you are to rejoice before the Lord your God in everything you put your hand to" (12:18).

4. "Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine, or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice" (14:26).

5. "And rejoice before the Lord your God [on Shavuot] at the place He will choose as a dwelling for His name – you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, the Levites in your towns, and the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows living among you" (16:11).

6. "Be joyful at your feast [on Succot] – you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows who live in your towns" (16:14).

7. "For seven days [of Succot] celebrate the feast to the Lord your God at the place the Lord your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete [vehayita ach same'ach]" (16:15).

Simcha is usually translated as joy, rejoicing, gladness, happiness, pleasure, or delight. In fact, simcha has a subtle meaning that is untranslatable into English. Joy, happiness, pleasure, and the like are all states of mind, emotions. They belong to the individual. We can feel them alone. Simcha, by contrast, is not a private emotion. It means happiness shared. It is a social state, experienced as a "we," not as an "I." There is no such thing as feeling simcha alone.

Each time the word simcha is used in Parshat Re'eh it refers to a communal group experience of joy. The message Moses

is giving here is that the nation will come together naturally through crisis, catastrophe, or impending war, but the challenge, and the ideal, is for unity to also happen in good times, through collective celebration in the presence of God.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do all seven occurrences of the word *simcha* in this parsha have in common?
2. Can you think of a time in your life when you have experienced shared simcha? What made it so special?
3. What was the message Moses was giving the Israelites when he focused their attention on the role of simcha in these mitzvot?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Today was going to be a good day. Natan could feel it in his bones. His Bar Mitzvah was a week away, the sun was shining, and in the match ahead, he was starting in his favourite position, on the right wing. As he pulled on his red team shirt with the number 14 on the back, just like his favourite player, he felt sure of it. Today was going to be a good day!

So when he picked up the ball on the half way line and stormed into the opponents' half, he just knew he was going to score. It seemed as if the ball was magnetised to his feet as he weaved left and right, leaving a trail of bemused defenders in his wake. Teammates were calling his name, desperate for him to pass to them, but Natan only had eyes for the goal. Finally, through on goal, facing a one-on-one with the goalkeeper, he dropped his shoulder and feigned to shoot right, and then with a power that surprised even him, he shot a screamer into the top left corner of the goal. Gooooalll! A goal that was worthy of his idol deserved his famous celebration, and Natan performed a perfect somersault in the air.

He looked around waiting for his teammates to join him in celebrating his wonder goal, but they just walked away. As the final whistle blew shortly afterwards, he ran over to his best friend, Gilad. "Why did you guys just walk away from me when I scored? What's your problem?" he said trying to hide the hurt in his voice. Gilad replied. "We lost 3:1, or didn't you notice?!"

Only one week later did he really understand the lesson to be learned. As Gilad and the rest of their friends lifted him up on a chair, dancing and singing in joy and celebration, he realised that true joy is the simcha that we share together. That day on the football pitch, only he had felt joy, while his teammates were despondent about their loss. Today, on his Bar Mitzvah day, everyone was a winner!

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What was the difference between the joy Natan experienced after scoring and the happiness felt at his Bar Mitzvah celebration?
2. Do you think Natan would have experienced more joy if he hadn't scored but the team had won?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

While joy, happiness, and pleasure, are all emotions experienced by the individual, simcha is not a private emotion. It is a social state, a happiness shared. Moses repeatedly labours the point. When you rejoice, he says time and again, it must be "you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows in your towns." A key theme of Parshat Re'eh is the idea of a central Mishkan, a Sanctuary "in the place the Lord

your God will choose." As we know from later Jewish history, during the reign of King David this was place was Jerusalem, where David's son Solomon eventually built the Temple.

What Moses is articulating for the first time is the idea of simcha as communal, social, and national rejoicing. The nation was to be brought together not just by crisis, catastrophe, or impending war, but by collective celebration in the presence of God. The celebration itself was to be deeply moral. Not only was this a religious act of thanksgiving; it was also to be a form

of social inclusion. No one was to be left out: not the stranger, or the servant, or the lonely (the orphan and widow). In a remarkable passage in the Mishneh Torah, Rambam makes this point in the strongest possible terms:

“And while one eats and drinks, it is their duty to feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and other poor and unfortunate people, for those who lock the doors to their courtyard, eating and drinking with their family, without giving anything to eat and drink to the poor and the bitter in soul – their meal is not a rejoicing in a Divine commandment, but a rejoicing in their own stomach.”

Moses’ insight remains valid today. The West is more affluent than any previous society has ever been. Our life expectancy is longer, our standards of living higher, and our choices wider than at any time since Homo sapiens first walked on earth. Yet Western societies are not measurably happier. The most telling measures of unhappiness – drug and alcohol abuse, depressive illnesses, stress-related syndromes, eating disorders, and the rest – have risen by between 300 and 1,000 per cent in the space of two generations. Why so?

A man once wrote to the Lubavitcher Rebbe: “I am depressed. I am lonely. I feel that life is meaningless. I try to pray, but the

words do not come. I keep mitzvot but find no peace of mind. I need the Rebbe’s help.” The Rebbe sent a brilliant reply without writing a single word. He simply circled the first word of every sentence and sent the letter back. The word in each case was “I.”

Our natural tendency is to always think in the first-person singular: I want, I need, I must have. There are many things we can achieve in the first-person singular but we cannot have simcha alone – because simcha is the joy we share, the joy we have only because we share. That, said Moses before the Israelites entered their land, would be their greatest challenge. Suffering, persecution, and a common enemy, unite a people and turn it into a nation. But freedom, affluence, and security reduce a nation into a collection of individuals, each pursuing his or her own happiness, often indifferent to the fate of those who have less, the lonely, the marginal, and the excluded. When that happens, societies start to disintegrate. At the height of their good fortune, the long slow process of decline begins.

The best way, said Moses, is to share your happiness with others, and, in the midst of that collective, national celebration, serve God. Blessings are not measured by how much we own or earn or spend but by how much we share. Simcha is the mark of a sacred society. It is a place of collective joy.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

The ethical life is a form of celebration. Doing good is not painful, a matter of dour duty and a chastising conscience. The key term here is simcha, usually translated as ‘joy’. What it really means is the happiness we share, or better still, the happiness we make by sharing.

One of the great statements of individual dignity and responsibility, Judaism is also an intensely communal faith, not simply a matter of the lonely soul in search of God... It is about sharing what we have, seeing possessions less as things we own than things we hold in trust, one of the conditions of which is that we use part of what we have to help others. That is not self-sacrifice.

If there is one thing I have heard more often than any other from those who spend part of their time in service to others, it is that they gain more than they give. They do not want to be thanked; they want to thank. Lifting others, they find that they themselves have been lifted.

To Heal a Fractured World, p. 5

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How is the definition of *simcha* found in this quote subtly different from the definition used in the Covenant & Conversation?
2. How does this new definition connect to the message of the *Covenant & Conversation*?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What do all seven occurrences of the word simcha in this week’s parsha have in common?
2. Can you think of a time in your life when you have experienced shared simcha? What made it so special?
3. Why do you think Jerusalem and the Temple (or Sanctuary) also features in each of the seven mitzvot that require joy?
4. Why is it harder to achieve unity and shared joy in affluent secure times rather than in difficult challenging times?
5. Is there currently unity and shared joy in the society where you live? What do you think can be done to increase this?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. Each mention speaks of a mitzvah that involves celebration and joy, and that is accomplished in a group, be it as a family, a community or as the nation a whole.
2. Examples could include any shared joy, such as a family or community event, or even with a group of friends.
3. True joy can only happen when it is shared. Unity too often comes from challenging times. When life is good people tend to become overly focused on themselves. The challenge is to have unity and a strong society that is concerned for all members, even in times of success and security.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The joy Natan experienced after scoring was a personal joy that was not shared by his teammates, because the team did not win that day. In fact, they had not even played a part in Natan's goal. But the joy felt at his Bar Mitzvah celebration was when all his friends and family came together as a group and experienced shared joy, like the shared simcha described in the parsha.
2. The joy of an individual scoring is limited and not as powerful as the joy of a team working together to victory. Natan eventually realised that he would have experienced more joy (even if he hadn't scored), had he played as a team member and been able to celebrate with his teammates a well-played game. The team is always greater than the player.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. In this quote Rabbi Sacks defines simcha as "the happiness we make by sharing" rather than "shared happiness". This means that true joy is experienced not just in a shared environment, but by the act of sharing and giving.
2. The message is that simcha is joy that is shared in community. The mitzvot that appear in the parsha and are connected to joy ensure shared joy by forcing the people to appear together in Jerusalem in celebratory worship of God. This strengthens the unity and togetherness of society, in the same way as sharing and giving are integral values of a healthy society. Both definitions of simcha achieve the same goals.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea*, answer 1.
2. See *The Core Idea*, answer 2.
3. Jerusalem and the Temple (and before that the Mishkan) were the central focus of the entire nation (in much the same way that the capital of a country and the buildings of state found therein are in a modern country). They are where the entire nation came in unity to worship God. This is critical to achieve the shared national joy that these mitzvot require.
4. In times of affluence and security, individuals find themselves focusing on their own lives only (and perhaps forgetting the role of God in their affluence and security (see *Covenant & Conversation 5779*, Parshat Eikev) and ignore the importance of communal unity and the sharing and giving that is necessary to achieve this. When times are difficult, economically or from an external threat, groups naturally come together in strength, so unity is organically achieved without too much effort or thought.
5. Applying the theory presented here to the society where you live would mean that initiatives that encourage the fulfillment of the values of sharing and giving and volunteerism would increase shared joy and unity in society. This may be an opportunity to encourage the people around your Shabbat table or discussion group to think of creative, practical ways this could happen.