



## Why is it so Hard to Serve Hashem with Happiness?

### Why is it Such a Challenge to Rejoice Through Abundance?

King David urges us to “Serve Hashem with joy [and] come before Him with exuberance” (*Tehillim* 100:2). Yet, more and more people seem to be suffering from depression and anxiety, nowadays. It’s quite common to be on antidepressant meds. Even regular, drugfree, mentally healthy individuals tend to have mood swings. Much research is invested to uncover the reasons for depression. The experts enumerate many possible causes such as: faulty mood regulation by the brain, genetic vulnerability, stressful life events, medications and chemical imbalance. You would think that previous generations, who lacked the high standard of living we enjoy today, would have much more reason to be sad. Paradoxically, it appears that the more we have, the more we feel lacking and depressed. This principle is exactly what this week’s Torah portion teaches us:

**ספר דברים פרק כח פסוק מה, מז ובאו עליך כל הקללות האלה ורדפוהו והשיגורו עד השמדך... תחת אשר לא עבדת את השם אלהיך בשמחה ובטוב לבב מרב כל:**

“All these curses will befall you, pursuing you and overtaking you to destroy you...Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, with joy and a good heart, from everything in abundance” (*Devarim* 28:45-47).

According to the simple meaning, this verse admonishes us for not serving Hashem joyfully, even when He has blessed us with abundance. Yet, it can also be understood to mean that specifically, when we have an abundance of everything, we often lack happiness and gladness of heart. In the old country, when we suffered privation, and bare survival was at stake, receiving a tenth of an orange was occasion for celebration. Today, Tropicana freshly squeezed orange-juice is taken for granted. Why is it such a challenge to rejoice through affluence?

### The Half-Empty-Cup Syndrome

The following Midrashic statements about the darker side of human nature may shed light on our question: “He who has one hundred will want two hundred...” (*Midrash Kohelet Rabbah* 1:13); “A person doesn’t leave this world having fulfilled half of his desires” (Ibid. 32). Rabbi Yonatan Eibshitz noticed a miniscule contradiction between these two assertions. The first saying indicates that a person achieves 50% of his wants, whereas, the second implies that the person doesn’t even receive 50% of his desires. He resolves the contradiction by explaining that the part that we don’t have is more important to us than the part we do have. In other words, we notice specifically that our cup is half-empty. This explains the challenge of feeling fulfilled during times of wealth. The bigger our cup, the more volume is lacking when half-empty.

### There is no Greater Recipe for Happiness than Gratitude

Today, we grow up so pampered that we expect instant gratification and fulfillment of our every wish. People have way too much sense of entitlement. There is an attitude of ingratitude expressed in the Hebrew words: “מַגִּיעַ לִי!” which literally means, “Its coming to me” or I deserve it! – I deserve to be taken care of, respected, loved etc. This attitude causes a lot of pain, both for those who extend themselves for us without receiving recognition and for ourselves. If we don’t get what we want right away, we may become resentful, angry or depressed. There is no greater recipe for happiness than gratitude. In order to become truly happy with our lot in life, we need to learn to release attachments to certain privileges, as well as to let go of expecting favors from others. Happiness is a result of cultivating an attitude that everything is a gift. The more we recognize that our life, our body, the roof above our heads, our clothes and food, are all gifts from Above, not to be taken for granted, the more we will be able to rejoice when our cup overflows or even when its only half full!

## Happiness is a Choice

I used to think that the main thing is to serve Hashem by keeping His mitzvot. Serving Hashem with happiness would be an extra level of *hidur*, doing more than required. Yet, *Parashat Ki Tavo* enumerates a long list of curses that occur because we didn't serve Hashem with joy. Why isn't it enough to keep the mitzvot? Why is serving Hashem without happiness such a deal-breaker? Isn't the main thing to do the right thing, period? Rabbeinu Bachaya learns from our Torah verse that Hashem requires both that we perform His mitzvot and that we perform them happily. Thus, there are great rewards, as well as severe consequences, for missing either of these requirements. Therefore, we must strive to serve Hashem through complete intention and joy (Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Devarim* 28:47). Yet, what can we do if we aren't happy? Perhaps, we suffer from a chemical imbalance in our brain, lacking the happiness hormone, serotonin? What if we were abused or we grew up with a miserable childhood? How can we be held responsible for experiencing a feeling which is not in our control? Although modern psychology may teach that our feelings and moods are affected by a combination of our life incidents and brain-chemistry, if the Torah commands us to "Serve Hashem with joy" (*Tehillim* 100:2), it implies that our feelings, indeed, are in our control. Human freedom of choice extends to the ability to cultivate happiness no matter what kind of brain is on our shoulders and how much devastating suffering we may have undergone. We need to emerge from our victim script of "poor me" and start taking responsibility for our attitudes and feelings, meditating on the half-full cups in our lives.

## Rising Above our Circumstances

Why remain helpless victims of our circumstances when we can rise above them? Whenever we painstakingly review, renew and refresh our dire circumstances, we are taking ownership of them and reliving them instead of releasing the old limiting baggage that no longer serves us. Anxieties, worries and concerns may seem like products of our circumstances. Yet, we can make a spiritual transfer, releasing all of them by "casting our burden on Hashem" (*Tehillim* 55:22). Circumstances don't hinder our blessing flow. No matter what we're facing, how disturbing or distressing it may be, we must develop emunah that Hashem will take care of it. When we give over our past hardships to Hashem we can begin to praise Hashem in happy song!

## Sing Out Your Heart in Joy

Returning to our original Torah verse. The Talmud comments that the way to serve Hashem with joy is specifically through 'song:'

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ערכין דף י"א/א רב מתנה אמר מהכא תחת אשר לא עבדת את ה' אלהיך בשמחה ובטוב לבב איזו היא עבודה שבשמחה ובטוב לבב הוי אומר זה שירה...

...Rav Mattana said [that the source for the requirement to accompany the Temple offerings with song is derived] from here: "Because you did not serve Hashem your G-d with joyfulness, and with goodness of heart" (*Devarim* 28:27). What is this service of G-d that is performed with joyfulness and with goodness of heart? You must say that this is song (*Babylonian Talmud, Arachin* 11a).

If we at times may feel depressed, music is one of the best ways to lift ourselves out of our sadness. Rebbe Nachman explains that music has the ability to cleanse and clarify the spirit, since the sound of music emanates from airwaves connected with *ruach* – meaning both air and spirit. In this way, music can cleanse us from evil spirit, extract the good spirit from the bad and bring us closer to the highest spirit of happiness: *simcha* (*Likutei Mohoran, Mahadura Kama, Siman* 54). Therefore, music therapy was often used in the Torah, as for example, when David would play his harp for King Saul and alleviate his bad spirit (I *Shemuel* 16:23).

תלמוד בבלי מסכת פסחים דף קי"ז/א לדוד מזמור מלמד ששרתה עליו שכינה ואחר כך אמר שירה מזמור לדוד מלמד שאמר שירה ואחר כך שרתה עליו שכינה ללמדך שאין השכינה שורה לא מתוך עצלות ולא מתוך עצבות ולא מתוך שחוק ולא מתוך קלות ראש ולא מתוך דברים בטלים אלא מתוך דבר שמחה של מצוה:

When a psalm begins: "Of David mizmor," this teaches that the Divine Presence rested upon him first and afterward he recited the song. However, if a psalm opens with: "A mizmor l'David," this teaches that he first recited the song, and afterward the Divine Presence rested upon him. This teaches that the Divine Presence rests upon us neither through laziness, sadness, laughter, frivolity, nor from idle chatter, but rather from the joy of a mitzvah (*Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 117a*).

Whenever David would feel in low spirits, he would raise himself up through song, and so can we! Through singing our heart out we can learn to celebrate both the ups and down of our lives. It all depends on our attitude as King Shlomo proclaimed:

ספר משלי פרק טו פסוק טו כָּל יְמֵי עֲנִי רָעִים וְטוֹב לֵב מְשֻׁתָּה תָּמִיד:

"For the despondent, every day brings trouble; for the happy heart, life is a continual feast" (*Mishlei 15:15*).

If we are negative and gloomy, everything seems to go wrong; yet when we are cheerful, everything seems right! Feeling happy is surely in our hand: No matter what our circumstance, we can find a reason to be thankful and joyous.