

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny Freedman

**(Portion of Ki Tavoh)**

*Teaching in the Old City of Jerusalem, one develops a certain awareness, almost a radar, for the different types of people that can wander in off the street. Many of the people who frequent the old alleyways and ancient stones of Jerusalem are incredible people with incredible stories. But every once in a while, you can get interesting characters who walk in the door. We once had a fellow wanderer in who was absolutely convinced that he was King David.... (In fact, there is a medical term for a specific mental disorder which affects people who may visit Jerusalem and have too intense a spiritual experience, resulting in the conviction that they are prophets or the like, known as 'The Jerusalem Syndrome'.)*

*So you keep your eyes open for such individuals, and you develop an ability to deal with their issues without distracting the rest of the group.*

*One day, a few minutes after my class had begun, a fellow wandered in and sat down in the last remaining seat, right next to mine. (The last empty seats in any class will always be the ones nearest the teacher, a throwback, I think, to some deeply rooted trauma we all share from first grade....)*

*Something about him seemed a bit 'off', so I kept my eye on him, obviously not wanting to react in any way that might embarrass him, yet aware of a responsibility to the rest of the participants in the program, and their right to remain focused on the study and exploration they were pursuing.*

*I soon noticed he was staring at my coffee mug, bringing his face really close to it, with what seemed like a mad look in his eye, so, not wanting to break the flow of the class, I stood up as I spoke and gradually moved towards the other side of the room, figuring this way people wouldn't notice him.*

*Then he did a really odd thing: he picked up my mug, half full of coffee, continuing to stare at it. Now that's just not normal; you don't pick up someone else's cup of coffee, especially someone whom you've never met before.... And then he went too far, and, placing his lips over the edge of my mug, he took a sip of the coffee!*

*By this time, of course, no one was paying attention to my class anymore, so there was nothing left but to make light of it:*

*"Enjoy!" I said, and feel free to help yourself to more coffee in the back!"*

*Everyone laughed, and this fellow's pleased look changed to one of embarrassment, as he seemed to come out of his reverie.*

*"You don't understand", he said,*

*"I just wanted to see if this was a coffee mug. You see, I've never seen one before."*

*“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not an idiot, I know what a coffee mug is, he continued, “but I was born blind, and three days ago, they did experimental laser surgery on my left eye, and now I can see. So I decided to take some time to ‘see’ all the things I have seen, but never really seen!”*

*“I know what a coffee mug is, but I have never seen one. And I was looking at this, and realized this must be what a mug looks like, and just wanted to see if I was right....”*

*Can you imagine? Here I am thinking this fellow had completely lost it, but in truth, he was the sanest person in the room, because for that moment, he was in the process of appreciating the gift of sight.*

We are not really capable, most of us, of being in a constant state of appreciation for all the gifts we have in this world. In fact, if we really did succeed in maintaining that level of awe and joy, most probably no one else would be able to talk to us!

In truth, that may well be the theme of this week’s portion, *Ki Tavoh*, which begins with a rather strange ceremony, proscribed to all of us as a ritual, which occurs once a year, beginning on the festival of Shavuot.

Once a year, every Jew was meant to come to the Temple in Jerusalem with the first fruits of harvest in a basket for the Temple.

*“...And you shall come to the priest (Kohen) who will be in those days...  
And the priest (Kohen) shall take the basket from your hands, and place it before the altar of G-d, your G-d. ....*

*And you shall rejoice in all the good Hashem your G-d has given you....”*  
(Devarim 26:1-11)

It appears, that the Torah is introducing a special commandment to rejoice in all the good we have been given.

But how can we be commanded to rejoice? Joy is a psychological state; you are either experiencing it, or you aren’t; but you certainly cannot be commanded to experience joy, can you?

Further, this verse itself is part of what is certainly one of the most painful and challenging chapters in the entire Torah.

This week we will read what has come to be known as the chapter of *Tochachah*, or *Curses*, which delineate what will happen to the Jewish people when they do not hearken unto the word of G-d, abandoning the ethical recipe for a better world laid out in the Torah. And for 54 verses in the twenty-eighth chapter of *Devarim*, G-d tells us what will happen to us, in all of its unfolding horror.

In fact, these verses are so painful, that our custom is to read them in a lower voice, almost as if the Torah reader is expressing the pain of the congregation at the implication of this reading. The Torah here speaks of exile and destruction, full of pain and suffering.

But there is one verse in the midst of all of this pain and destruction, which causes all the others to pale in comparison. And it is best introduced by way of Maimonides.

**Maimonides**, at the end of his *Hilchot Sukkah Ve'Lulav* (the laws of the festival of Sukkot 8:15), describes the special mitzvah there to rejoice:

*“The joy that a person should rejoice in fulfilling the mitzvah and in love of G-d who commanded them is a great service. And whomsoever keeps himself from this joy is worthy of punishment (consequence), as it says: “ ...because you did not serve Hashem your G-d with joy and goodness of heart...”*. And incredibly, the verse (v.47) Maimonides is referring to occurs in this very same chapter 28 of Devarim!

In other words, according to Maimonides' understanding of this verse, the reason the Jewish people will undergo so much suffering, and endure such pain, for so long, is not simply because they did not listen to the word of G-d and fulfill His commandments. It is, rather, because they did not fulfill Hashem's Torah with *joy*!

This is unbelievable! It is not enough that we have an obligation to attempt to live up to all of the difficult challenges and demands the Torah expects of us; we actually have to rejoice in it!

In truth, this week's portion contains the secret recipe in Judaism for achieving joy in all that we are, and in all that we do..

Perhaps, when Maimonides suggests that all of the pain of the twenty-eighth chapter of *Devarim* was a punishment for not serving G-d with joy, he is not saying this is the **reason** for our difficulties. Rather, he is suggesting it is the **cause**. And the Torah is not describing the *punishment* for not serving Hashem with joy, rather, it is making note of the *consequence*.

Joy, you see, is all about purpose. Which is why a person who is depressed has no joy, because he feels he has no purpose. And a Judaism devoid of purpose, and thus of joy, will not, indeed cannot last. The Jew who serves G-d simply out of obligation, or fear, but without any joy, really does not understand the purpose of what he is doing, and ultimately his relationship with Judaism will not last, and all the unfortunate series of events described in our portion will ultimately unfold.

And make no mistake about it: a Judaism that is devoid of purpose cannot last. And if we do not find a way to fill our synagogues and our study halls with the sense of joy that comes with an imbuing of purpose, then all that we have built since the destruction of the Holocaust will, in the end, be for naught.

And all of this is why Maimonides makes this point in the laws of the festival of Sukkot (and why that holiday, in the Torah carries the special mitzvah of “*Ve'Samachtah Be'Chagecha*” “*And you shall rejoice on your festivals*”), because precisely on the festival of Sukkot, which occurs when the harvest is completed, do we finally see the purpose of all that hard labor; we finally see the grain house full of wheat.

The Torah is not saying that because of the first fruits I am obligated to rejoice, rather it is suggesting that during this period of the year, when I have this opportunity to tap into the purpose of it all, I should rejoice in my newfound sense of purpose. In other words, while it is true that when I discover a sense of

purpose it causes me to experience joy, I can go one step further: I can rejoice in the joy of having a sense of purpose.

And this may explain why this portion is always read in the weeks preceding Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Because the real challenge, is to reconnect with our purpose, with why we are here, and how we are meant to make a difference in this world.

There are so many Jews today, from all backgrounds and all walks of life, who seem to have lost the sense of joy and the gift of purpose that Judaism has to offer. And in the end, it is this lack of mission, this loss of inspiration, which is at the root of so much of the pain that we are experiencing today, both as a people, and as a world.

May Hashem bless us all, with the coming of a new year, with the wisdom to re-connect with all the fruits in our basket that we have to be thankful for, and may we be blessed with a renewed sense of purpose and joy in the year that lies ahead.

Shabbat Shalom, and best wishes for a sweet, happy, and healthy New year,

Wishing you all a *Ketivah Ve'Chatimah Tovah*,

Binny Freedman