

Dedicated in memory of Yaakov Aharonov z"l



REJOICING BEFORE GOD

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In this week's *parasha*, *Ki Tavo*, the theme of rejoicing is mentioned twice. The first time with the first fruits brought to the Temple (*bikkurim*): Chapter 26 - "*And now, behold, I have brought the first of the fruit of the ground which you, O Lord, have given to me.*" Then, you shall lay it before the Lord, your God, and prostrate yourself before the Lord, your God. Then, you shall rejoice with all the good that the Lord, your God, has granted you and your household you, the Levite, and the stranger who is among you."

The second time in the following chapter where the Jews are commanded to build an alter near Mount Ebal and offer sacrifices: "*And you shall slaughter peace offerings, and you shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before the Lord, your God.*" These should be combined with the theme of rejoicing which is mentioned half a dozen times in *parashat Re'eh* concerning the Temple and the festivals.

The common theme of all these rejoicings is that they are "before the Lord your God". This is the characteristic of rejoicing in Judaism – it is before God. This is especially true in the Temple, as Maimonides wrote at the end of chapter 6 of the Laws of the Temple (*Hilchot Beit haBechirah*) in explaining the difference between the sanctity of Jerusalem in contrast to the sanctity of the Land Israel resulting from the conquest of Joshua: "*Why do I say that the original consecration sanctified the Temple and Jerusalem for eternity, while in regard to the consecration of the remainder of Eretz Yisrael, in the context of the Sabbatical year, tithes, and other similar [agricultural] laws, [the original consecration] did not sanctify it for eternity? Because the sanctity of the Temple and Jerusalem stems from the Shechinah, and the Shechinah can never be nullified.*" The Temple is always considered to be before the God. Therefore, when one brings sacrifices to the Temple, or the "second tithe" (*ma'aser sheni*) to be eaten in Jerusalem, or he brings sacrifices during the festivals, he is commanded to rejoice for he is before God (*parashat Re'eh*).

However, this should be expanded: Not only is one before God in a physical place, but also selected times are considered before God, as formulated by Maimonides in the laws of festival (*Shevitat Yom Tov*), chapter 6:

"It is forbidden to fast or recite eulogies on the seven days of Pesach, the eight days of Sukkot, and the other holidays. On these days, a person is obligated to be happy and in good spirits; he, his children, his wife, the members of his household, and all those who depend on him, as it states: "And you shall rejoice in your festivals." The "rejoicing" mentioned in the verse refers to sacrificing peace offerings, as will be

explained in Hilchot Chaggigah. Nevertheless, included in [this charge to] rejoice is that he, his children, and the members of his household should rejoice, each one in a manner appropriate for him. What is implied? Children should be given roasted seeds, nuts, and sweets. For women, one should buy attractive clothes and jewelry according to one's financial capacity. Men should eat meat and drink wine, for there is no happiness without partaking of meat, nor is there happiness without partaking of wine."

But how does one rejoice before God? There are two ways in which to do it. The first way is to realize that rejoicing is not [in the language of Maimonides]: to "*become overly drawn to drinking wine, mirth, and levity, saying, "whoever indulges in these activities more is increasing [his observance of] the mitzvah of rejoicing." For drunkenness, profuse mirth, and levity are not rejoicing; they are frivolity and foolishness. And we were not commanded to indulge in frivolity or foolishness, but rather in rejoicing that involves the service of the Creator of all existence. Thus, it states, "Because you did not serve God, Your Lord, with happiness and a glad heart with an abundance of prosperity." This teaches us that service [of God] involves joy. And it is impossible to serve God while in the midst of levity, frivolity, or drunkenness."*

Rejoicing involves the service of God! How is this done? Maimonides himself gives the answer:

The following is the desired practice: In the morning, the entire people should get up and attend the synagogues and the houses of study where they pray and read a portion of the Torah pertaining to the holiday. Afterwards, they should return home and eat. Then they should go to the house of study, where they read [from the Written Law] and review [the Oral Law] until noon. After noon, they should recite the afternoon service and return home to eat and drink for the remainder of the day until nightfall.

Rejoicing before God is done intellectually and existentially – through prayer and Torah study.

The second way is to fulfill the biblical command (Deut. 16,11) "*And you shall rejoice before the Lord, your God - you, and your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite who is within your cities, and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are among you, in the place which the Lord, your God, will choose to establish His Name therein.*"

Rashi comments on this verse:

The Levite... the stranger, the orphan, and the widow: [God says:] *These are My four, corresponding to your four, [namely,] "Your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant." If you shall gladden Mine, I will gladden yours.* Maimonides formulates this quite sharply:

"When a person eats and drinks [in celebration of a holiday], he is obligated to feed converts, orphans, widows, and others who are destitute and poor. In contrast, a person who locks the gates of his courtyard and eats and drinks with his children and his wife, without feeding the poor and the embittered, is [not indulging in] rejoicing associated with a mitzvah, but rather the rejoicing of his gut."

Rejoicing on before the Lord is both an intellectual and existential experience. The intellectual experience is through studying God's Torah, especially the laws of the festival. The existential experience is by praying and hosting God's children, the

converts, orphans, widow, the destitute and the embittered. When you do this, especially on the festivals, you are in effect in God's house, standing and rejoicing before God.

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