



Parashat Masa'ei and Rosh Chodesh Av: A Concealed Spark of Joy

Dear Friends,

Today is Rosh Chodesh Av.

“...when Av begins, joy is reduced” - this is what it says in Tractate Ta'anit in the Babylonian Talmud.

As we know, throughout the ages many calamities befell the Jews in the month of Av. The first and foremost of which was the destruction of the First and Second Temples. Av is the month in which the exile of Am Yisrael from its homeland began, followed by 2,500 years of wandering and persecution.

Many interpreters ask, why reduce joy, and not, for example, increase sadness.

In the second chapter of Likutei Mohara”n, Rabbi Nachman’s great book of teachings, he says the following (the brackets are mine): “... **a person should be very careful to be in joy always, and to distance sadness greatly... and if one begins to look at himself and sees that there is nothing good in him and he is full of sin, and the yetzer hara [the inclination towards evil] wants to bring him down in this way [through feelings of guilt], and bring sadness and a dark mood upon him, God forbid, even so he is forbidden to fall for this, he must seek and find in himself some good, even the smallest...**”

According to classic Chassidic understanding (as opposed, unfortunately, to today’s Chassidism) there is no REAL sadness or sorrow in the world. These are the work of Yetzer Hara - “the evil inclination”. Sorrow sprouts in a person’s **consciousness**, and is an illusion.

The metaphor that symbolizes the yetzer hara in the Torah is the serpent. The mythological serpent (not the one found in nature) slithers around in the garden of life, i.e. in the web of human consciousness, and whispers to us constantly that we are not alright; not good enough; that our sins are great; that we are deficient. Without our noticing it, the venom spreads throughout our consciousness and poisons our mind. Once a person is certain that he or she is absolutely no good, the illusion is complete.

The description above is “The Short History of the Poisoning of Human Consciousness.” **No one has ever, to this day, survived this poison!**

As opposed to the illusion of sadness, joy is viewed in Chassidism as the true and real. Joy is equal to good, and - according to the ancient Israelite story of Creation - good is the way God Himself described reality.

Notice, that in the story of Creation the word “good” appears seven times: **“And God saw that the light was good,” “the waters pooled together...and land could be seen, and God saw that it was good,” “and the land brought forth grass...and God saw that it was good,” “the big light...and the small light, and God saw that it was good,” “the animal that creeps...and all of the winged birds...and God saw that it was good,” “And God made the creatures of the land...and God saw that it was good,” “And God saw everything that He had done, and it was very good.”** (Bereishit Chapter 1)

Evil appears for the first time only in the story of the Tree of Knowledge Good and Evil. According to the Israelite myth of creation, evil exists only in knowledge, in the mind, and not in reality itself. The awareness of evil, i.e. the diminishing, judgmental, degrading whisper of the snake, is the source of sorrow in the world of human beings.

Rabbi Nachman’s last story - A Tale of Seven Beggars - is considered the deepest and most profound of all of his stories. It opens with a prologue about a king (who, in Chassidic tales, is always God, the King of Kings) who decides to pass the kingship (life’s responsibilities) to his son (the human being). There was great joy in the kingdom and everyone was invited to a grand fair (as is the custom in Chassidic tales) to celebrate humans coming of age.

And then... (the interpretation in the parentheses is mine): **“As they all rejoiced, the king stood up and told his son: [I observe the ways of the physical world which I created] and I see that you will lose your throne in the future [i.e. you will forget entirely that you rule over your own life], but make sure that you do not have any sorrow when this happens. Just be joyful. And when you are joyful, I too will be joyful, and when you are sad I will nevertheless be joyful that you are not king, because you are not worthy of kingship because you are unable to maintain yourself in joy when you are no longer king [i.e. when you forget that you rule over your own life, you will find it difficult to maintain a sense of joy, and you will let the yetzer hara bring you down, to where there is sorrow], but when you are in joy [when you recognize the true reality - the reality of goodness - even when you don’t feel that you rule over your life and even when you are “down”], then I will be truly very joyful.”**

In the month of Av we “lost our throne,” in the words of Rabbi Nachman’s tale. On the 9th of Av our world was destroyed. Twice! Our world got darker. The light of Creation which is entirely good seems to have dimmed.

The most natural response to disaster, when our world is in ruins, is to sink into despair, into a deep, dark place; into sorrow. But what comes naturally does not require a mitzvah. There is no need to state “When Av begins you should increase your sadness,” because we do that naturally, and we do it very well! Therefore, instead of increasing sadness, the instruction is to “reduce joy.”

I would like to suggest, that Jews have misunderstood this instruction all these years! Reducing joy is not a mitzvah at all! It is just a **permission**! In other words, because you, Jews, feel that the light has dimmed, you have **permission** to reduce your joy. No, you may not be sad, but **if** you can't maintain a full sense of gratitude and joy, you may lessen your levels of joy slightly.

The world has not really darkened. It is not really bad. It just appears to us to have darkened. Darkness, destruction, pain - or evil, as we call it - are what we experience.

The permission (not the commandment!) to reduce joy, is a concession to our subjective human experience. The Creator would be very joyful if we, too, would be joyful - always and in every situation - but He "understands" that we cannot maintain a state of joy over time. He "accepts" that human consciousness is fragile and tends to judge reality negatively when we encounter hardship.

Now, let's take one step further: permission is NOT granted to reduce joy. Rather, one has permission to experience reduction, but one should do so *with* joy! In other words, the permission is to experience deficiency, distress, ruin, and pain - but nevertheless be joyful. Yes, to know how to be joyful even when there is no apparent reason for it.

I admit this understanding is difficult. Very difficult. I am certainly not there yet, but this is where the compass is pointing to. This is the vision. This is the spiritual work that lays before us.

This week's parasha is Masa'ei. It relates the 42 stops on Bnei Yisrael's journey from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Parashat Masa'ei is a metaphor for a person's life - every human being's journey from the fleshpots to becoming a whole person. On the way, we experience a few moments of abundance and many more moments of deprivation, pain, fear, and terror.

Only those who are able to see an opportunity for growth at each stop along their journey will make it to the Promised Land. Growth is the ability to see the good that is concealed in all situations, whatever they may be. It is the ability to see and gather the wondrous Manna and to sip from the life-sustaining water that is concealed within every rock in the arid wilderness of our lives.

It's alright if we are not there yet. This is why we are given permission to diminish our joy. But then we are to return to worshipping God - each person in their own way - to see and to gather the sparks of light and joy that are scattered throughout the journey - the Masa'ei - of our life.

Shabbat Shalom and Chodesh Tov,

Elisha