

From the Rabbi

June 2016

“The Mitzvah of Simchah”

Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav (Ukraine, 1772-1810) suffered from depression. Having no resort to pharmaceuticals, he found respite in music and prayer, not unlike King Saul’s turning to young David to play soothing music on his harp. Thank God we have access to drugs, psychiatry, and other scientific interventions today. Still, we can learn something from the unique approach of Rebbe Nachman, not just for depression, but very much in general.

Nachman made the audacious statement that it is a *mitzvah gedolah* (“an important commandment”) to be joyful always. For “joy” he used the word *simchah*, which resonates in a number of ways, not the least of which is its Biblical reference to Sukkot and the other major holidays, including Shabbat. For “always” he wrote *tamid*. This is the word used in the Torah to indicate the daily offering in the sanctuary, as well as the nightly re-lighting of the Temple menorah.

Audacious, because there is no such mitzvah. Nowhere does the Torah instruct us to be joyful “always,” except in a very specific sense on the pilgrimage festivals. Generally speaking, mitzvot are about doing something (or not doing something), not about “being” in a certain state of mind.

There are, however, the terms *simchah* and *tamid*, “joy” and “consistency,” in the Torah. These words are at the heart of the Torah’s construct for connecting to God. The daily *tamid* sacrifice at dawn and dusk gave our ancestors a sense that God was always being “checked in” with by

the fatherly priesthood, and that societal well-being was thereby assured. The divine *shechinah* seemed ever-present and close at hand. Consistency was the key. The Israelites did not check in with God *from time to time*. Rather, as with good adult children who call their parents every day or so, the Israelites made an offering at the start and close of *each* day. Whether or not God was paying any attention, they themselves always knew who they were by virtue of their regular ritual.

Likewise, three times a year the Israelites could walk into the environs of Jerusalem and make pilgrimage offerings, as a result of which they would try to “be joyful” (*v’hayita ach sameach*). These three festivals represented closer than usual contact with divinity, and thus an intensified renewal of our ancestors’ relationship with the essence of the life itself.

Consistency and joy. Modern meditators would call this a “practice.” A practice is not something one dabbles in. It is something one refashions one’s life around. It is a tool for centering oneself, with the Sacred at the center of one’s own center.

Our synagogue is not the *beit mikdash*, the sanctuary of yore. We don’t bring an unblemished sheep each morning and evening for the altar. We don’t bring seventy bullocks and draw water for libations over the course of the week of Sukkot. A synagogue is merely a memory of the shrine on Jerusalem’s high place that provided glorious opportunities for *simchah*, and for a consistent connection to divinity.

Still, it can be a place where one brings the regularity of one’s presence, and where one strives to provide deep inner joy to oneself and one’s fellow congregants. It can be a place where the brokenhearted go to receive a smile; a place where a person filled with gratitude can offer

words and song in such a way that they feel their thanks have been “heard” and acknowledged; a place where someone suffering from true depression or other illness can ask for help and direction, counseling and advice. It can be a place for serious prayer, or at least for creating a mood in which one could approach a state of prayerfulness. It can also be a place of serious learning, wherein one finds oneself in an intellectual frame of mind much like the joyfulness of prayer.

Our synagogue can be a safe, compassionate, kind space in the Jewish world, and in the world around.

Such places are few and far between. So counsels my dear friend Larry Schwartz when discussing his own work building up the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. Our own *tamid* offering might be our commitment – each and every member’s commitment – to making our shul a space of kindness. Such a place would be one to which we would come not to get anything, but to bring something; and in the act of bringing, to achieve a state of *simchah* more profound than any we might have otherwise dreamed of.

For many of us, our congregation already fulfills Rebbe Nachman’s vision. We feel deep joy here, as well as safety and kindness. For others, not so much. A prolonged process of communal debate such as we engaged in this past year can make some of us feel depressed, alienated, and full of despair, even while many of us feel buoyed and uplifted by that same experience. A simple *niggun* or prayer session will not make such feelings go away. Neither did a bit of strumming on David’s harp dispel the king’s jealous anger toward David and the world in general. Hurt feelings run deep.

A strong middle-aged congregation like ours knows how to tap its inner resources to bring its hurting folk back into the zone of *simchah*. Loving outreach, caring words, courteous speech, sensitive dialogue in meetings and informal gatherings – all contribute to the slow process of healing.

So too does a willingness on the part of those of us who are hurt to be welcomed back in. Even when we are sure we have been wronged, there is a limit to the capacity of those who have harmed us to make amends. We need to want to make it work, and not simply continue making the point of our hurt. The repentant need incentive, too. They need to know that the wronged want to forgive and be embraced.

Rebbe Nachman would have told us to return again and again to the source of our pain and to offer it on the altar of service to God. There, he would say, would we find our way to *simchah*. That path doesn't work for everybody. For one thing, not everyone dares to literalize God to the point of trying to make that kind of intimate contact. Not everyone is ready to use the metaphor of "offering" in such a self-exposed way.

My teacher, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, used to tell his congregants to read the words of the Amidah from the prayer book out loud *as if* they believed every word, knowing all the while that no one in our time could really believe so literally. That, too, didn't work for everybody, though I personally found it extremely useful in getting to a place where I could tap into the joy of prayer.

I believe, though, that most of us could take heart in Rebbe Nachman's bold advice about having a positive attitude. In one of his most touching *kavvanot*, or invocations of

intentionality, he adjures us to own our despair and strive to overcome it. I will close with his words, translated by my late great colleague, Rabbi Ron Aigen, in his siddur *Chadesh Yameynu* (“Renew Our Days”). I share them here in the hope that they will give us one tool in our work to build and re-build ourselves as a place of safety, kindness, compassion, and hope.

Friends, do not despair.

When a difficult time is upon us,

Our joy must fill the air.

Do not give in to temptation;

Friends, do not despair.

When a difficult time is upon us,

Our joy must fill the air!

Rabbi Lester Bronstein