

What It Means to Enjoy

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At one of our Shabbat afternoon Talmud classes some 50 years ago, after the usual bout of eating, drinking, and singing, the topic under discussion was what it means to “enjoy” Shabbat and Yom Tov (Sabbath and Festivals). We discussed Rabbi Eliezer’s statement that Festival “rejoicing” is obligatory,¹ as well as the two alternative ways he proffers for attaining pleasure: either by eating and drinking or by sitting and studying. Rabbi Joshua interjects that it should be half of one and half of the other (BT [Pesachim 68b](#)).

Our teacher then turned his attention to the notion that the characteristic joys of Shabbat and Yom Tov arise from how we differentiate holy days from ordinary weekdays. At that point a fellow student (a bit of a wag) inquired, “Rabbi, you study Torah all week and you study Torah on Shabbat, so what’s the difference?” The rabbi replied without missing a beat, “Ah, on Shabbat I *enjoy* it!”

In our amusement at the rabbi’s response, we failed to recognize his intentional allusion to a passage in the midrash *Pesikta Rabbati*, ch. 23:

R. Berekiah taught in the name of R. Hiyya: Shabbat was given only for enjoyment. R. Haggai taught in the name of R. Shemuel bar Nahman: Shabbat was given only for Torah study. But there is no difference. What R. Berekiah said ... applies to scholars who exhaust themselves studying Torah all week and enjoy themselves on Shabbat. What R. Haggai said ... applies to working people who are busy with their work all week and occupy themselves with Torah on [Shabbat](#).²

¹ “Festival rejoicing is a mitzvah” (*simhat yom tov mitzvah*). The parallel in the Jerusalem Talmud, [Shabbat 15:3/78a](#) (Venice ed. 15a), discusses “Sabbaths and Festivals” (*shabbatot veyamim tovim*).

² The substance of the passage eventually finds its way into halakhic discourse. See Joseph Caro, Beit Yosef on Tur [OH 288](#); Moses Isserles, gloss to [Shulhan Arukh OH 290:2](#). [Here](#) is a summary of the

Our rabbi evidently was having it both ways—learning all the time but with unalloyed pleasure on Shabbat. The upshot: one way or another, we are supposed to find enjoyment in the opportunities that Shabbat and Yom Tov provide for us to deviate from our daily routine.

In fact, it is a mitzvah that we enjoy those occasions, a mitzvah that manifests the Torah’s remarkable tendency to legislate feelings and emotions. For example, we are charged negatively not to covet, not to bear grudges, and not to harbor feelings of enmity towards our fellows. We also are instructed positively: to love God, our neighbors, and perhaps even ourselves. Legislation of this sort makes sense if one considers thoughts and feelings to be precursors to actions, especially if God’s omniscience takes in our thoughts as well as our deeds. In attributing this knowledge to God, the Torah seeks to encourage right action and discourage its opposite.³

In Deuteronomy, the Torah commands us no fewer than eight times to “rejoice” in the fulfillment of religious obligations.⁴ Two of those occurrences are in this week’s parashah. The first comes after bringing first fruits to the sanctuary and thanking God for the harvest: “And you shall *enjoy all the goodness* (*vesamahta bekhoh hatov*) that Adonai your God has bestowed upon you and your household, together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst (26:11).” The second, after constructing a shrine and an altar on Mt. Ebal to commemorate the entry into the Land of Israel: “You shall sacrifice there offerings of well-being and eat them, *rejoicing*

halakhic sources.

³ Thus Saadia Gaon, in his *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* (*Emunot Vede’ot*), IV.4: “God foreknows the final outcome of human activity as it turns out after conception, planning, and delay, as Scripture says, ‘God knows people’s thoughts’ ([Psalm 94:11](#)), and ‘I know what plans they are devising even now’ ([Deut. 31:21](#)).” See also Bahya ibn Paquda, *Duties of the Heart* (*Hovot Halevavot*), IV.3

⁴ 12:7; 12:12; 12:18; 14:26; 16:11; 16:14; 26:11; 27:7.

(*vesamahta*) before Adonai your God (27:7, JPS translation with modifications).”

Those two passages are followed by a third that is strange and discomfiting, warning us that we will endure terrible calamities should we fail to serve God “in joy and gladness”:

Because you would not serve Adonai your God *in joy and gladness* (*besimhah uvetuv levav*) over the abundance of everything, you shall have to serve—in hunger and thirst, naked and lacking everything—the enemies whom Adonai will let loose against you. He will put an iron yoke upon your neck until He has wiped you out (28:47-48).

Bahya b. Asher comments, “The joy in the performance of the mitzvah is a mitzvah in its own right.” He continues, “Aside from the reward for [fulfilling] the mitzvah there is reward for the joy; therefore, one who observes the commandment is punished for not performing it joyfully. And thus one must observe the mitzvot with joy and with complete concentration.” The spirit in which one performs mitzvot matters profoundly: perfunctory and joyless performance is not only insufficient; it justifies punishment.

The manifestation of “joy” necessarily entails more than just putting on a happy face. The manner in which biblically mandated joy finds expression is taken up in the Talmud. In a discussion of the music that accompanied Temple sacrifices, Rabbi Yehudah asks in the name of Rabbi Shemuel, “Where do we learn from the Torah the principle that song is obligatory?” Rabbi Mattenah responds by quoting [Deut. 28:47](#) and asking rhetorically, “What *is* service ‘in joy and gladness?’” He answers his own question: “You should say that it refers to song, or you might say to words of Torah, as it is written [in [Psalm 19:9](#)], ‘The precepts of Adonai are just, rejoicing the heart’” ([BT Arakhin 11a](#)).

A lovely answer: serving God with joy means accompanying the performance of the mitzvot with both song and study. This text thus adds a third component to the joyous observance of mitzvot: to Torah study and a good meal (or vice versa), we add music. Indeed, what could be more pleasurable than fine food accompanied by words of Torah and heartfelt song?

As I noted previously, the first of the two positive commands to rejoice in Ki Tavo comes immediately after the Torah describes the ritual for presenting the first fruits of the harvest at the sanctuary. At the conclusion of the ritual, the text states ([Deut. 26:11](#)), “And you shall *enjoy all the goodness* that Adonai your God has bestowed upon you and your household...”

In the immediate context of the verse, the phrase “all the goodness” refers to the bounty of the harvest, but there are many other good things for which we ought to be grateful. Midrash Tannaim elaborates: “‘You shall enjoy’ refers to all kinds of enjoyment [that is, not only to the pleasure of a good meal at harvest-time] ... ‘with all the goodness’ refers to the song.” So there is another nod to music as a source of joy. As Malbim explains, “Just as in service of the Creator joy is aroused by songs and praises, so also joy in ‘all the goodness’ should be through song.”

As for the joy of Torah study, we learn from the commentary of Hayyim ibn Attar, the Or Ha-hayyim,

The term “all the goodness” alludes to the Torah, as the sages said [in [M. Avot 6:3](#)], “‘good’ means nothing but Torah,” for if people were to feel the sweet delight of the Torah’s goodness, they would pursue it madly, considering all the silver and gold in the world to be worthless, for the Torah contains all the good things in the world.

I have forgotten much of what I learned in my youth, but my teacher’s rejoinder, “On Shabbat I *enjoy* it,” has stuck with me all these years, and the anecdote never fails to elicit a smile. In this week’s parashah, the Torah commands us to express our gratitude to God with “joy and gladness,” ardently pursuing Torah and delighting in the beauty of song as we partake of the bounty that God has so graciously bestowed. In the words of the Psalmist, “Serve Adonai with joy; enter into God’s presence with song” ([Psalm 100:2](#)).

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