

PARASHAS KI SAVO

The Little Voice

Joyous enthusiasm is the child of inspiration. It is the emotional elixir that galvanizes, energizes, electrifies our lives. It empowers us to move mountains and make impossible dreams come true. Without joy, we plod mechanically toward our goals, seeking relief rather than fulfillment, but with joy we soar toward glittering mountaintops.

Clearly then, joy is a critical factor in our service of the Creator. It infuses every observance, every prayer, every moment of study with a divine energy that brings us that much closer to our Father in Heaven. One of the Chassidic masters once said, "Joy is not a commandment, but no commandment can accomplish what joy can."

But what if a person cannot achieve joy? What if a person is overwhelmed by the vicissitudes of life and is unable to free his spirit and let it soar? Surely, he does not deserve to be condemned and chastised for this failure. Surely, he should continue to serve the Creator to the best of his ability even if his efforts are less than inspired.

Let us now look for a moment into this week's Torah portion. The Torah describes the terrible consequences of the disloyalty of the Jewish people to their Father in Heaven. How does the Torah characterize this disloyalty? "Because you did not serve Hashem your Lord with joy." How can this be? How can the Torah deliver such harsh punishment for the failure to achieve a high standard of excellence?

Some commentators resolve this perplexing problem homiletically. They read the verse as follows, "Because you did not serve Hashem your Lord - with joy." It is not the absence of joy which is deserving of punishment but rather the presence of inappropriate joy. It is one thing to fall short in the service of Hashem, to fall victim to the weakness of the flesh. But it is quite another to revel in sinfulness, to delight in the saccharine juices of forbidden fruit. This is an unconscionable affront to the Creator and it is deserving of the most severe punishment.

Modern psychology has made the eradication of guilt one of its primary objectives. But in the Torah perspective, guilt a very valuable trait, a true blessing. The insistent voice of our conscience reminds us who we are and where our responsibilities lie. Whenever we step over the line, this same little voice berates and chastises us, and more often than not, it robs us of the pleasures of sin. No matter how far we stray, guilt is our lifeline to Hashem.

Should we, however, find unmitigated joy in a sinful life, it would be a clear sign that the inner voice of conscience had been quashed, that our innate guilt had been expunged from our hearts, that our connection to Hashem had been severed, Heaven forbid. In this case, only the most severe afflictions could effect a reconciliation.

A king was angry with his son for neglecting his princely duties. He decided to discipline him by banishing him incognito to a remote village.

When the prince arrived in the village of his banishment, he was mortified. The place was a collection of rude huts without the most basic comforts and refinements of polite society. There were no books or works of art for miles around. The people were vulgar and ignorant. The stench in the streets was overpowering.

A year passed, and the king began to reconsider his decree of banishment against the young prince. But first he sent spies to see how the prince was faring.

The spies arrived in the village, but it was a while before they located the prince sitting among a group of peasants in a barnyard. The once handsome and elegant young prince was filthy and dressed in vermin-infested rags. He was stuffing his face with half raw meat, the red juices running down his chin. Every few minutes, he would roar with laughter at one or another of the coarse peasant stories that were being bandied about. The spies immediately returned to the palace to report on what they had seen.

When the king heard their report, he wept. "If my son is happy among the peasants, he will never be a prince."

In our own lives, we know all too well how difficult it is to avoid occasional missteps and lapses. After all, we are only human. But let us never forget who we are and what is expected of us. If we listen to the little voice of our conscience, if we embrace our guilt and use it as a lifeline to bring us back to Hashem, we will always remain royal princes and princesses and the doors to the palace will always be open to us.