

5780 – Deuteronomy 11-26 – Re'eh (See)

In *Parashat Re'eh*, Moses turns from the general principles of the covenant to the specific details, prefacing them with a warning of the choice that lies before them: blessings if they are faithful to God's laws, curses if they are not. They are to proclaim these to the nation, on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, when they enter the land. They must destroy all traces of idolatry, and establish a central site that God will choose where they will worship, offer sacrifices, and eat consecrated food. Moses then issues further warnings about idolatry, false prophets, clean and unclean animals, tithes, and the Sabbatical year, when debts are to be cancelled and Hebrew slaves set free. The *parasha* concludes with the laws of the three pilgrimage festivals when the nation is to celebrate and the men “appear before the Lord” at the central place of worship.

The first of the following essays is about the choice itself, between the blessing and the curse. Not only individually but also collectively the nation must exercise its free will to choose the good and stay faithful to God. **A free society must be a responsible society.** The second is about a recurring theme of the *parasha*: joy. **It is not enough to be free; we must celebrate our freedom, seeing what we have as God's gift, not to be taken for granted.** The third and fourth essays are about *tzedaka*, charity-as-justice, the great command alluded to in the course of the command to release debts in the seventh year. One is about what makes this idea untranslatable into Western languages. The other is about **the deep psychological dimension of *tzedakah* legislation. Not only must we relieve physical poverty; we must also alleviate the humiliation it brings.** The fifth essay is about the festival added to the Jewish calendar in the Middle Ages—*Simchat Torah*—and **the moving story it tells us about the spirituality of joy even in the midst of uncertainty and exile.**

*Insecurity and Joy*¹

On October 14, 1663, the famous diarist Samuel Pepys² paid a visit to the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Creechurch Lane in the city of London. Jews had been exiled from England in 1290 but in 1656, following an intercession by Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel of Amsterdam,³ Oliver

Cromwell⁴ concluded that there was in fact no legal barrier to Jews living there. So for the first time since the thirteenth century Jews were able to worship openly.

The first synagogue, the one Pepys visited, was simply a private house belonging to a successful Portuguese Jewish merchant, Antonio Fernandez Carvajal, that had been extended to house the congregation. Pepys had been in the synagogue once before, at the memorial service for Carvajal, who died in 1659. That occasion had been sombre and decorous. What he saw on his second visit was something else altogether, a scene of celebration that left him scandalised. This is what he wrote in his diary:

After dinner my wife and I, by Mr. Rawlinson's conduct, to the Jewish Synagogue: where the men and boys in their vayles [i.e., *tallitot*], and the women behind a lattice out of sight; and some things stand up, which I believe is their Law in a press [i.e., the ark] to which all coming in do bow; and at the putting on their vayles do say something, to which others that hear him do cry Amen, and the party do kiss his vayle. Their service all in a singing way, and in Hebrew. And anon (*soon, shortly*) their Laws that they take out of the press are carried by several men, four or five several burthens (i.e., *burdens, Torah-scrolls*) in all, and they do relieve one another; and whether it is that every one desires to have the carrying of it, I cannot tell, thus they carried it round about the room while such a service is singing ... But, Lord! to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true God, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this.⁽¹⁾

Poor Pepys. No one told him that the day he chose to come to the synagogue was *Simchat Torah*, nor had he ever seen in a house of worship anything like the exuberant joy of the day when we dance with the Torah scroll as if the world were a wedding and the book a bride. **Nor had he any reason to suppose that Jews had any reason to rejoice.** I want in this essay to tell the story behind the story of Pepys' incomprehension and surprise, because it is a moving, unexpected one.

There is a line in *Ne'ila*, the concluding service of Yom Kippur, that epitomises the situation of Jewry during the tragic centuries of exile and persecution. It was written by Rabbenu Gershom (c. 960–1040) in Metz, in what is today northwest France. The age of the Crusades had not yet begun. Europe had not yet descended into the mad frenzy of anti-Semitism

1 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation, Deuteronomy*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), pp. 143-148.

2 Samuel Pepys, (1633–1703), English diarist and naval administrator, celebrated for his *Diary* (first published in 1825), which gives a fascinating picture of the official and upper-class life of Restoration London from 1660 to 1669.

3 Menasseh ben Israel was a Portuguese rabbi, kabbalist, writer, diplomat, printer and publisher, founder of the first Hebrew printing press in Amsterdam in 1626.

4 Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) was an English general and statesman who led the Parliament of England's armies against King Charles I during the English Civil War and ruled the British Isles as Lord Protector from 1653 until his death in 1658.

that was to mark Jewish history for almost a thousand years until the Holocaust. Yet we already sense in the poem he wrote an anticipation of what was to come. The line reads simply: “There is nothing left but this Torah.”

Jews had lost almost everything. They had no land, no home, no power, no rights, and no security. They never knew when the local population would turn against them, massacring or expelling them. **All they had was a book, the Torah. It was the record of their past and their promise of a future.** God may have abandoned them but He would not do so forever: “When they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking My covenant with them. I am the Lord their God” (Lev. 26:44). **Jews had “nothing left but this Torah.” It was their faint, flickering flame of hope.**

And it was “this Torah” that inspired Jews in exile to create the one festival added to the calendar between the second century BCE, when Hanukkah was introduced, and May 14, 1948, when Yom HaAtzma’ut, Israel’s Independence Day, was observed for the first time. That festival was Simchat Torah, the Day of “Rejoicing in the Torah,” added around the time that Rabbenu Gershom was writing his poem (c. 1010). It celebrates the end of the annual reading of the Torah and the beginning of a new cycle.

1. John 10:22-30

²²Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Yeshua was in the temple courts walking in Solomon’s Colonnade ...

Simchat Torah is quintessentially a festival of the Diaspora, for two reasons. It is the second day of Shemmi Atzeret, the festival immediately following the seventh day of Sukkot—and in Israel, there is no second day. The other reason is that, at that time, only in the Diaspora was the Torah read in an annual cycle. In Israel it was read in a three- or three-and-a-half-year cycle, so there was no annual celebration of ending and beginning anew. But note the name of the festival: not “concluding” or “beginning” the Torah, but rather “rejoicing” in it. That is what the Jews of the dark centuries chose to leave as their legacy to the calendar: **not a day of tears, but one of joy.**

That is what Samuel Pepys saw that October night that left him bewildered: the joy of Simchat Torah. For **how could anyone in those days associate Jews and Judaism with joy?** They were, for Christians, the “wandering Jew,” condemned like Cain to be endless exiles on earth, pariahs among peoples. There was hardly a city in Europe from which they had not at some time been expelled. As Rabbenu Gershom had said, **they had nothing left but a book**, yet they danced with it and sang to it as though it were alive, their one true love. Aristotle wrote, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that happiness is the ultimate purpose of human existence. People seek many things: pleasure, wealth, honour, fame. But if we ask why they seek them, the answer will always in the end turn out to be because they yield happi-

ness. We seek everything else as a means to an end. Only happiness is an end in itself something we desire for its own sake alone.⁽²⁾

Judaism sees things differently. To be sure, **happiness—*osher*, or as it generally appears in Tanakh, *ashrei*—is a value in Judaism.** It is the first word of the book of Psalms, and appears thirty-two times in that book. However, it appears only twice in the Torah: when Leah says, “Happy am I [*be’ashri*], for the daughters will call me blessed” (Gen. 30:13), and when Moses, in his final blessing, says, “Happy are you [*ashrekha*] Israel” (Deut. 33:29). **The Torah’s key word for positive emotion is not happiness but *simha*, joy.** As we saw in an earlier essay, “Collective Joy,” it is this of which Moses speaks no less than seven times in *Parashat Re’eh*, twelve times in Deuteronomy as a whole.

There are fundamental differences between happiness and joy. Happiness is a calm feeling, joy an exuberant one. One can feel happiness alone, but **joy in the Torah is always something shared with others.** **Happiness—in Aristotle’s sense—is a judgement on life as a whole, while joy lives in the moment. Happiness depends on things going well, but one can experience joy even in the midst of adversity.** King David, in Psalms, speaks of danger, fear, dejection, sometimes even despair, but his songs usually end in the major key:

Weeping may stay for the night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning ...
You turned my wailing into dancing;
You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing Your praises and not be silent.
Lord my God, I will praise You forever. (Ps. 30:6-13)

There remains, though, a fundamental question about the joy of Simchat Torah. As we saw in that earlier essay, Moses speaks of joy as the key emotion of the people of the covenant in the Promised Land. *Simcha* is what you feel when you have finally arrived at the land that is yours. How then could the Jews of the Diaspora discover, celebrate, and sanctify joy when they were exiled from home? The answer, it seems to me, is implicit in what *Re’eh* tells us about Sukkot, the festival to which Simchat Torah is joined. The verb “to rejoice” appears three times in the *parasha* in connection with a festival: not at all in connection with Passover, once in relation to Shavuot, but twice in connection with Sukkot: “Be joyful at your festival and your joy will be complete” (Deut. 16:14-15; *see also Lev 23:33-44*). It is for this reason that Sukkot (and Shemini Atzeret) are called *zeman simchatenu*, “the time of our joy.”

This is starkly counter-intuitive. We could understand why Passover should be a festival of joy: it recalls our ancestors liberation from slavery. Similarly with Shavuot: it celebrates the giving of the Torah, God’s great gift to us as a people. But why Sukkot? It represents not a positive event,

but forty years of wandering in the wilderness without a permanent home. A sukka is, by halakhic definition, a temporary dwelling. **Sukkot**, when we live for seven days in a hut with only leaves for a roof, exposed to the wind, cold, and rain, **is the festival of insecurity**. Why then is it, supremely, the “time of our joy”?

That is what makes *simcha* the supreme religious emotion. You do not have to be religious to be happy. **But there is something profoundly spiritual about our capacity to live in a state of total insecurity and yet feel the joy of simply being, under the shelter of the Divine Presence.**

2. Psalm 27:4-5

⁴One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple. ⁵For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; **he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent** and set me high upon a rock.

a. Psalm 91:1-6

¹Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. ²I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” ³Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence. ⁴He will cover you with his feathers, and **under his wings you will find refuge**; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

b. Hebrews 11:8-16

⁸By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, **even though he did not know where he was going**. ⁹By faith he **made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country**; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹²And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹³All these people **were still living by faith when they died**. **They did not receive the things promised**; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶Instead, they were longing for a better country—

a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Yes, there is danger, risk, uncertainty, vulnerability. But we are here, with a world to live in, family and friends to love and be loved by, and we are not alone, for **with us is the Torah, God’s unbreakable word**, and though we walk through the valley of the shadow we walk towards the redemptive light.

In the Diaspora, even the greatest mansion is, for Jews, only a sukka, a temporary dwelling. Yet we can still rejoice, remembering what our ancestors knew, that the wilderness is simply a series of way stations on the road to home. Kierkegaard⁵ once wrote: “It takes moral courage to grieve. It takes religious courage to rejoice.”⁽³⁾ Life is full of problems and pains, but beyond them is the sense of wonder that we are alive in a universe filled with beauty, and so long as we have the Torah, we still have hope. Pepys may not have understood what he was seeing in the synagogue, but Robert Louis Stevenson⁶ would have done, for it was he who said what Jews have always known: “Find out where joy resides and give it a voice far beyond singing. For **to miss the joy is to miss all**.”⁽⁴⁾

(1) Found in Robert Latham, ed., *The Shorter Papyri* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

(2) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a30-34.

(3) Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1970), 2:2179.

(4) Robert Louis Stevenson, “The Lantern Bearers,” in *Across the Plains* (Carlisle, MA: Applewood Books, 1892), 247.

3. Deuteronomy 12:1-14

¹These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess—as long as you live in the land. ²**Destroy completely** all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods.

³**Break down** their altars, **smash** their sacred stones and **burn** their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places. ⁴You must not worship the LORD your God in their way. ⁵But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go; ⁶there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed

5 Søren Aabye Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher, theologian, poet, social critic and religious author who is widely considered to be the first existentialist philosopher.

6 Robert Louis Stevenson was a Scottish novelist, poet and travel writer, most noted for *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and *A Child's Garden of Verses*.

to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. **7There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you.**

⁸You are not to do as we do here today, everyone as he sees fit, ⁹since you have not yet reached the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you. ¹⁰But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety. ¹¹Then to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name—there you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the LORD. ¹²**And there rejoice before the LORD your God, you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites from your towns, who have no allotment or inheritance of their own.** ¹³Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. ¹⁴Offer them only at the place the LORD will choose in one of your tribes, and there observe everything I command you.

a. Isaiah 35:1-10

¹The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom ... ³Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; ⁴say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."

⁵Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. ⁷The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. ⁸And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. ⁹No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, ¹⁰and **the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.**

b. 1Chronicles 16:1-17

¹They brought the ark of God and set it inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and they presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before God. ²After David had finished sacrificing the

burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD. ³Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each Israelite man and woman. ⁴**He appointed some of the Levites to minister before the ark of the LORD, to make petition, to give thanks, and to praise the LORD, the God of Israel ...**

⁷That day David first committed to Asaph and his associates this psalm of thanks to the LORD: **"Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done. ⁹Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts. ¹⁰Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. ¹¹Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always. ¹²Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced, ¹³O descendants of Israel his servant, O sons of Jacob, his chosen ones. ¹⁴He is the LORD our God; his judgments are in all the earth. ¹⁵He remembers (see also Psalm 105:8) his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations, ¹⁶the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. ¹⁷He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant:**

c. Psalm 32:10-11

¹⁰Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him. **¹¹Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!**

d. Psalm 33:20-22

²⁰We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. ²¹In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. ²²May your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD, even as we put our hope in you.

e. Psalm 40:16-17

¹⁶But **may all who seek you rejoice and be glad** in you; may those who love your salvation always say, "The LORD be exalted!" ¹⁷**Yet I am poor and needy;** may the Lord think of me. You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, do not delay.

f. Psalm 64:10

¹⁰**Let the righteous rejoice in the LORD and take refuge in him;** let all the upright in heart praise him!

g. Psalm 104:31-35

³¹May the glory of the LORD endure forever; **may the LORD rejoice in his works**—³²he who looks at the earth, and it trembles, who touches the mountains, and they smoke. ³³**I will sing to the LORD all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. ³⁴May my**

meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the LORD. ³⁵But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more. Praise the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD.

h. Psalms 119:14-18

¹⁴I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. ¹⁵I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. ¹⁶I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word. ¹⁷Do good to your servant, and I will live; I will obey your word. ¹⁸Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.

i. Prov 24:17-18

¹⁷Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice, ¹⁸or the LORD will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from him.

j. Zephaniah 3:14

¹⁴Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!

רְנִי בַת־צִיּוֹן הָרִיעִי יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׂמְחִי וְעָלִי בְּכָל־לֵב בַּת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם

(Roni bat-tzion ha-ri-oo Yisrael sim-chi v'al-zi b'chol lev bat Yerushalim)

k. Matthew 5:11-12

¹¹"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

l. Luke 10:17-20

¹⁷The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." ¹⁸He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. ¹⁹I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. ²⁰However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

m. Romans 5:1-5

¹Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Yeshua HaMashiach, ²through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we (or let us) rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. ³Not only so, but we (or let us) also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

n. Romans 12:9-18

⁹Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.

¹²Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

¹³Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position (or willing to do menial work). Do not be conceited. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

o. Phillipians 1:15-19

¹⁵It is true that some preach Messiah out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷The former preach Messiah out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Messiah is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Yeshua HaMashiach, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance (or salvation).

p. 1Pet 12:3-7

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, ⁵who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷These (i.e., the trials) have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Yeshua the Messiah is revealed.