

## 5784 - Deuteronomy 29-30 – Nitzavim (You are standing)

This is Rabbi David Fohrman, and welcome to *Parshat Nitzavim* ...<sup>1</sup>

So this week's parsha begins with Moshe having gathered all the people and telling them that he is ushering them into a covenant with G-d. Some of the commentators, such as the Rashbam,<sup>2</sup> seem to suggest that the covenant that Moses is talking about is actually the covenant that you and I talked about last week.

It's the covenant involving **the 12 secret sins that must not be done**, that's supposed to be verbalized on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. So if you take that approach then really the end of the Torah is kind of all about Israel accepting this covenant—it must be a pretty important covenant. We began to talk about it in last week's *parsha* video, I want to continue that discussion with you now.

### 1. Deuteronomy 27:15-26

<sup>15</sup>"Cursed is anyone who makes an idol ... and sets it up in secret" ...

<sup>16</sup>"Cursed is anyone who dishonors their father or mother"...

<sup>17</sup>"Cursed is anyone who moves their neighbor's boundary stone" ...

<sup>18</sup>"Cursed is anyone who leads the blind astray on the road" ...

<sup>19</sup>"Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow" ...

<sup>20</sup>"Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his father's wife, for he dishonors his father's bed" ...

<sup>21</sup>"Cursed is anyone who has sexual relations with any animal" ...

<sup>22</sup>"Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his sister, the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother" ...

<sup>23</sup>"Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his mother-in-law" ...

<sup>24</sup>"Cursed is anyone who kills their neighbor secretly" ...

<sup>25</sup>"Cursed is anyone who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person" ...

<sup>26</sup>"Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out" ...

### Serving God with Joy and Happiness

Here's something that's been bothering me about this covenant. As you may know from last week, G-d says that if you fail to keep the terms of this covenant there's bad stuff that's going to happen. There's a whole long section of a few dozen verses that details all that really bad stuff—slavery, exile, things like that.

1 <https://members.alephbeta.org/video/what-is-true-happiness-in-the-bible/where-joy-happiness-comes-from-bible>

2 Samuel ben Meir (c. 1085–c. 1158), after his death known as the "Rashbam," a Hebrew acronym for Rabbi SHmuel Ben Meir, was a leading French Tosafist and grandson of Shlomo Yitzhaki, "Rashi"

But just about two-thirds the way through that whole litany of bad stuff, the Torah takes a break for a second and kind of gives you almost a throwaway line. Just a little sentence that comes out of the blue and says: and you know why all this stuff is happening to you? תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר לֹא-

עֲבַדְתָּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְטוֹב לֵבָב (tachat asher lo avad'ta et Hashem elohecha b'simcha uv'tuv leivav)—**because you failed to serve G-d with gladness of heart and joy**. That's why (Deu 28:47).

I'm reading those words and I'm thinking, what was that about? If the Torah really thinks that's why all these terrible curses would befall the people, then you should come out and just say that at the very beginning. Before you even get to this whole litany of awful, terrible things that are going to happen, say, 'I expect you to serve Me with joy and gladness of heart and if not, here's the terrible things that will happen.'

Don't just go and launch into this whole laundry list of awful consequences and then two-thirds of the way through stop and say, 'And by the way this is happening because you failed to serve G-d with joy.' As if I like knew that already somehow. How am I supposed to know that? **I thought this bad stuff comes because you committed these 12 secret sins, what happened to all of that?**

### What Is the Bible Saying About Happiness?

It turns out that there might be a reason why the Torah is assuming you'd already know that all this terrible stuff would happen to you because of a failure to serve G-d with joy. The reason is, is that **joy has actually been an undercurrent in the whole discussion that the Torah has been having with us ever since the beginning of last week's parsha, Ki Tavo**.

When Israel is beckoned to go to the top of Mount Ebal and to actually write down the blessings and the curses on these huge, big stones, right before that it says: and **you should rejoice before G-d as you're doing this**. Strange, what does rejoicing have to do with it? But there's that undercurrent of joy.

Even earlier, when we were talking about the farmer who comes to the Temple with his basket of fruits—and we discussed this in last week's *parsha* video—there too the Torah says: and after he gives his declaration for the first fruits **he should rejoice before G-d**. Joy has been this constant undercurrent in everything the Torah has been talking to us about.

As a matter of fact, if you go back to last week's video I talked about how there are so many different themes in last week's *parsha*, and even though the themes seem to be very, very different, **one of the things that maybe binds the themes together under the surface is that undercurrent of joy**. What are we to make of that? How do we understand that? How could joy pull together all of these different ideas?

## Connecting Joy and Happiness in the Bible

If you think about it, if you had to summarize *Ki Tavo*—last week's *parsha*—you might say that *parsha* deals with three people:

- 1) It deals with the farmer who comes to the Temple with his basket of first fruits.
- 2) It deals with this fellow who has all these tithes that he's stored up in his household that you're supposed to give to people in need, people like the Levi who doesn't have any land of his own, poor people. Another kind of tithe known as *Ma'aser Sheini*, is the tithe that you, yourself bring to Jerusalem to celebrate and to delight in before G-d. But this fellow has separated these tithes but he's kept them for some reason in his house and the Torah talks about what he needs to do, how he needs to make this declaration as he lets go and actually delivers the tithes to the people or places they're supposed to go. That's the second person.
- 3) The third person you might say is the person that we're addressing in the top of Mount Ebal with these 12 secret sins—the hypothetical person who is cursed with all of these terrible curses if they don't keep these obligations, if they transgress them in secret.

What if, instead of thinking about them as three different people, we looked at this as a kind of story that was evolving, we looked at it almost as if it was one person going through three different stages? **A stage we might call success, another stage we might call flirting with failure and then a third stage which we might call actual failure.** Let me explain what I mean by that.

The story begins with our farmer, things have gone well for him agriculturally. I mean he's obviously had a good year, he's got all these fruits, he's bringing some of them to the Temple. But when you think about it his good fortune is not just the product of a single, good harvest; no, it's really much more than that.

He actually lives at a pretty privileged point in history. If you go back a bunch of years things weren't so pretty. This guy's forefathers, they were traveling through the desert for 40 years, and before that, 400 years of slavery. **There were many generations of misery before fate smiled upon this particular farmer.**

So if this farmer takes a good, hard look at himself, there's a very uncomfortable question he needs to confront: what distinguishes me from all of the previous generations who had it so tough? Yeah, I worked hard but I can't take credit for the timely rains. Bottom line, yes, this wonderful bounty is mine, but can I say in all honesty that I deserve this? Why was I so fortunate?

It's actually a chilling question and, by the way, not such a foreign question for those of us who live 70 years after the Holocaust. Sure, I went to Graduate School, I got a good job, but look at how fate smiled upon me; **could I just as easily have been born 75 years ago in Poland? Do I really deserve this?**

So here is what everything depends upon: how will the farmer choose to confront that question? He has a choice and the Torah lays out for him what he must do if he is to face his not-entirely-deserved good fortune with integrity.

**If you're that farmer, you have to recognize that what you have is a gift and you have to learn to share it. It's as simple as that.**

## Where Does Happiness Come From According to the Bible?

Listen to how the Torah puts it. Here's this farmer, the Torah describes him taking his basket of first fruits and putting it down before G-d's altar. Then the words are: **וְעָנִיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ** (*v'anita v'amarta*)—he has to answer. What does he have to answer, no one said anything? But as I discussed last year, it's as if that basket has a silent question for him, a question he must in fact answer. Do you get it? Do you understand?

And you have to answer that question and the farmer begins his declaration: I know it wasn't always like this, he says. **אָרָמִי אֲבִד אָבִי** (*arami oved avi*)—my father was just a wandering Aramean, we went down to Egypt, we were oppressed there for many years, we screamed in pain, G-d heard our cries. We traveled through the desert for many years and here I am, the last link in that chain. **I understand the privileged position that history has placed me in. I get it. That, right there, is the antidote to his crisis.**

Because if he fails to recognize that it's a gift, he's saddled by guilt—why me? But once you recognize that, look at the next words of the Torah: **וְשָׂמַחְתָּ בְּכָל־הַטּוֹב** (*v'samachta v'chol ha'tov*)—and then **rejoice in all of the goodness that G-d gave you (Deu 26:11), you can now finally be happy, you can delight in the gift having acknowledged it's a gift.**

Ah, but then there's one other thing you have to do, look at the next words of the Torah. **Who should you rejoice with? With the Levi who doesn't have any land, with the poor people, and the stranger who also doesn't have any land of his own. And when you do all this, your happiness will be complete.**

## The Bible's Lesson on Finding True Happiness

If you can acknowledge your privilege, thank the Almighty for it, and share what it is that you've been given, then you'll be able to live with that undeserved gift that history and good fortune have placed in your lap.

But what if you fail to do this? What if you fail to thank and fail to share? What if you turn into the next kind of guy we meet, person number 2? **It's the fellow who stored up years of tithes in his house; he separated those tithes from his produce but hasn't given them to those who he ought to.**

What's going on with this guy? What's actually going on with him is that **he's withholding thanks and he's failing to share.**

Who do the tithes go to? The Levi who doesn't have any land on his own, so share your bounty with him. The poor people, so share your bounty with them. The other tithe, *Ma'asser Shenit*? That you bring up to Jerusalem and you rejoice before G-d, you partake of it with your family in a celebratory kind of way, you're thanking G-d for the good fortune that you got. All of these tithes are about sharing and thanking.

The same thing that the farmer needed to confront, this fellow needs to confront—the fellow with the tithes—except he's on the verge of failing. He has stored up all these tithes but he's not letting go of them, he's keeping them in his house. So that's person number 2.

But, if this person is sort of balanced on the precipice, flirting with the failure to thank and to share, the next person we meet, **the third person is the portrait of failure itself.** He's the one who transgresses the 12 secret sins.

What, in fact, would motivate someone to commit those 12 secret sins? How exactly do you go to sleep at night, do you live with yourself if you're the guy who sneaks around, moves the property marker between his house and his fellow's house in secret? Gives bad advice in secret; always trying to get a leg up in secret; how does he rationalize this?

If you can imagine a conversation with him and his psychiatrist, the psychiatrist is going to say, what makes you think you're entitled to all of this? That's the whole point, **he does somehow think he's entitled to all of this;** it's like life has given me a bad shake and I'm going to do what I can to be able to get it under the table. **If I didn't get it over the table from life, I'm going to take it under the table from life.** I'll sneak around and make sure I get what's due to me.

So let's talk about this third guy at the top of Mount Ebal, this portrait of failure. How did he get that way? I want to suggest the Torah's answer is he is just the third link in this chain. It all boils down to a choice you make, the choice epitomized by that first guy, the farmer.

### Finding Happiness Is a Choice

The farmer, he is the recipient of undeserved bounty; what if he fails in what the Torah asks of him? What if he can't thank? What if he can't share? What happens then? Then your only way out of the guilt of your

undeserved, wonderful circumstances is to lie to yourself and convince yourself that you do deserve this.

**Once I start getting used to thinking that I deserve stuff that I really don't, I start losing my bearings.** I no longer trust my intuitive sense of what I deserve and what I don't deserve. I don't know the difference between the two anymore.

Now I look around, I see stuff I don't have, and I wonder to myself, do I deserve that too? Why don't I have that? That extra property over there doesn't feel so different than the property I already have; and suddenly I'm resentful—why don't I have that? **How come he's got a bigger house than me?** I'll move over the property marker. **How come I got stuck in this relationship?** Oh, I'll have a secret, intimate encounter with that forbidden person over there. I'll get what's due to me.

The farmer has a choice, yes, but if he chooses badly, he ends up as person number 2, and eventually as person number 3.

So at the end of all of this, after detailing all the terrible consequences that will come to that person who commits all of those secret crimes, the Torah just backhandedly says—as if we've known it all along—you know why all this happened?

תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עֲבַדְתָּ אֶת־הי אֱלֹהֵיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְטוֹב לֵבב מְרַב כֹּל (*tachat asher lo avad'ta et Hashem Elohecha b'simcha uv'tuv leivav meirov kol*)—because **you didn't serve G-d with happiness in the bounty that you were given by Him.** You weren't able to confront the undeserved gifts squarely, that's why.

This isn't the first time this idea has come up, that's why the Torah talks about it backhandedly; we've been talking about this the whole time. What do you think the whole story with the farmer and the guy who has the tithes in his house is all about? It's just one, long progression.

I'm just showing you the end product here. **Don't be that guy at the top of Mount Ebal, be the farmer who can look his good fortune in the eye and can say thank you from the bottom of the heart and can share what he has.**

In the end it's nothing less than a recipe for how happiness can be pursued. Have the courage to recognize undeserved good fortune and have the generosity of spirit to thank the Almighty for it and to share your bounty with those whose position in life is less privileged than your own.

1. *It turns out that there might be a reason why the Torah is assuming you'd already know that all this terrible stuff would happen to you because of a failure to serve G-d with joy. The reason is, is that joy has actually been an undercurrent in the whole discussion that the Torah has been having with us ever since the beginning of last week's parsha, Ki Tavo.*

a. Leviticus 23:39-43

<sup>39</sup>"So beginning with the fifteenth day of the seventh month, after you have gathered the crops of the land, celebrate the festival to the LORD for seven days; the first day is a day of rest, and the eighth day also is a day of rest. <sup>40</sup>On the first day you are to take choice fruit from the trees, and palm fronds, leafy branches and poplars, and **rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days.** <sup>41</sup>Celebrate this as a festival to the LORD for seven days each year. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come; celebrate it in the seventh month. <sup>42</sup>Live in booths for seven days ... <sup>43</sup>so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God."

1) פָּרַח (samach)—to rejoice, be glad, celebrate, express joy.

b. 1Chronicles 16:7-10

<sup>7</sup>That day (when David brought the ark to Jerusalem, he) ... committed ... this psalm of thanks to the LORD:

<sup>8</sup>Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done. <sup>9</sup>**Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts.** <sup>10</sup>**Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.**

c. Isaiah 35:10

<sup>10</sup>and 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.

d. Psalm 32:10-11

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

e. Psalm 33:20-22

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

f. Psalm 40:16-17

<sup>16</sup>But **may all who seek you rejoice and be glad** in you; may those who love your salvation always say, "The LORD be exalted!" <sup>17</sup>**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.

g. Psalm 64:10

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

h. Psalm 104:31-35

<sup>31</sup>May the glory of the LORD endure forever; **may the LORD rejoice in his works**—<sup>32</sup>he who looks at the earth, and it trembles, who touches the mountains, and they smoke. <sup>33</sup>**I will sing to the LORD all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.** <sup>34</sup>**May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the LORD.** <sup>35</sup>But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more. Praise the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD.

i. Psalm 119:14-18

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

j. Prov 24:17-18

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

k. Zephaniah 3:14

Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! **Be glad (simchi) and rejoice (v'alzi [exult]) with all your heart,** O Daughter of Jerusalem!

רְנִי בַת־צִיּוֹן הֲרִיעִי יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׂמְחִי וְעֲלִזִי בְכָל־לֵב בַּת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם

(Roni bat Tzion ha-riu Yisrael sim-chi v'alzi b'chol lev bat Yerushalayim)

l. Matthew 5:11-12

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

m. Luke 10:17-20

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

n. Romans 5:1-11

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Yeshua the Messiah .... <sup>2</sup>**And we (or let us) rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.** <sup>3</sup>Not only so, **but we (or let us) also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character;**

**and character, hope.** <sup>5</sup>And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

o. Romans 12:9-18

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

<sup>12</sup>Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

<sup>13</sup>Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

<sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup>**Rejoice with those who rejoice**; mourn with those who mourn.

p. Philippians 1:15-19

<sup>15</sup>It is true that some preach Messiah out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill ... <sup>18</sup>But 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** ... <sup>19</sup>for I know that ... what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance (*or* salvation).

q. 1Peter 12:3-11

... <sup>3</sup>In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah ... <sup>4</sup>into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade ... <sup>6</sup>**In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.** <sup>7</sup>These (trials) have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold ... may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Yeshua the Messiah is revealed.

2. *In the end it's nothing less than a recipe for how happiness can be pursued. Have the courage to recognize undeserved good fortune and have the generosity of spirit to thank the Almighty for it and to share your bounty with those whose position in life is less privileged than your own.*

a. Rabbi Tarfon<sup>3</sup> was a rich man. Once, his disciple and colleague, Rabbi Akiva,<sup>4</sup> met him and said to him: "Would you like me to buy you some durable goods?" Rabbi Tarfon immediately gave him four thousand golden coins. Rabbi Akiva took the money and gave it away to poor Torah scholars. When Rabbi Tarfon met Rabbi Akiva

later, he inquired as to the location of the properties that Rabbi Akiva was to have bought for him. Rabbi Akiva took him by the hand and led him into the Beth HaMidrash. There he took out a book of Psalms, and started reciting the Psalms from the beginning until they reached the verse: "He gave away to the poor people ..."<sup>5</sup>

**"These are the everlasting possessions that I bought you ..."** Rabbi Akiva told him. Rabbi Tarfon arose and kissed Rabbi Akiva on his head and exclaimed: "My teacher and leader-my teacher in wisdom and my leader in conduct."

1) Psalm 112:5, 9

<sup>5</sup>Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice ... <sup>9</sup>They have freely scattered **their gifts to the poor, their righteousness endures forever**; their horn will be lifted high in honor.

2) Psalm 41:1

<sup>1</sup>For the director of music. A psalm of David. Blessed are **those who have regard for the weak; the LORD delivers them in times of trouble.**

3) Proverbs 19:17

<sup>17</sup>**Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD**, and he will reward them for what they have done.

b. Matthew 6:19-21

<sup>19</sup>"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup>But **store up for yourselves treasures in heaven**, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

<sup>21</sup>For **where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Tarfon or Tarphon, a Kohen, was a member of the third generation of the Mishnah sages, who lived in the period between the destruction of the Second Temple and the fall of Betar.

<sup>4</sup> Akiva ben Joseph (c. 50–135 CE), was a leading Jewish scholar and sage, a *tanna* of the latter part of the first century and the beginning of the second. Rabbi Akiva was a leading contributor to the *Mishnah* and to *Midrash halakha*.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/112314/jewish/Rabbi-Tarfon.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/112314/jewish/Rabbi-Tarfon.htm)