



The Work of Joy • Parshat Yitro

Upon hearing the Exodus story from Moses, “Jethro rejoiced over all the kindness that God had shown Israel when delivering them from the Egyptians” (Exodus 18:9). Curiously, instead of using the more popular term “*simcha*,” for “rejoiced” in the verse, the Torah uses the uncommon term “*vayichad*.” After first acknowledging the simple meaning of the word, Rashi quotes a *midrashic* reading of the Talmud, that this word choice alludes to a physiological manifestation of Jethro’s emotional reaction. His flesh became “prickly,” as he was aggrieved over the destruction of Egypt (*Sanhedrin* 94a).

While Rashi’s two explanations can be interpreted as two distinct emotional reactions, psychoanalytically inclined interpreters assume that both emotions were experienced concurrently. In his chapter on “The Use of the Unconscious in Bible Interpretation,” Dr. Aaron Rabinowitz writes that the two explanations “relate to two different levels of Jethro’s psyche. Each level expresses a different truth and reflects one part of the complex human personality.” Also pointing to the unconscious, Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg writes that Jethro’s “involuntary nervous reaction betrays his visceral loyalties. Against his conscious intent... his flesh expresses” his connection to Egyptian culture. These dual, simultaneous responses underlie the psychological reality that “joy and pain coexist within him.”

Already in the 19th century, Malbim suggested a reading rooted in a split between Jethro’s conscious and subconscious reactions. According

to Malbim, *vayichad* comes from the Hebrew word *chedva*. In his estimation, the word *chedva* is used to express a conscious desire for happiness that works to overcome an external, physiological manifestation of sadness. While Jethro felt an external element of pain as evident from his skin prickling, his stronger, internal emotion was joy.

During the same time period as Malbim, Rabbi Israel Joshua Trunk, the Rabbi of Kutno, Poland in his *Yeshuot Malko*, made the exact opposite suggestion. According to Rabbi Trunk, *chedva* conveys an external expression of happiness, though, internally, Jethro felt sadness for the downfall of Egypt. Knowing that the socially and perhaps religiously correct response was to show signs of joy, he strengthened his emotional control, conveyed happiness to Moses, and blessed God for His deliverance of the Israelites. Rabbi Trunk’s message echoes what sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild later termed “emotion work,” which she defined as the ability to regulate one’s emotions for the sake of personal relationships. This would include acting cheerful, even when internally sad, for the sake of a child who needs encouragement.

To support his idea that *chedva* entails emotion work, Rabbi Trunk pointed to Ezra the Scribe, who after the rebuilding of the Second Temple implored the people to “not mourn, or weep... for the joy (*chedvat*) of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:9-10). Rabbi Trunk posited that those who returned to the land were sad that the Second Temple was not as glorious as the First Temple. Their hopes for full redemption were

disappointed, so they cried. Ezra validated their emotions but encouraged them to conduct the emotion work of expressing joy, for their sake, for God's sake, and for the sake of others.

Perhaps Rabbi Trunk also alludes, consciously or subconsciously, to disappointment felt in his lifetime. Rabbi Trunk, an avid lover of Zion, visited the Land of Israel in 1886, and encouraged the settlement of the land, calling it a "great mitzvah, as the ingathering of the exiles is the beginning of the redemption." While there was palpable excitement, many struggled to settle and cultivate the land. Acknowledging the challenge, Rabbi Trunk was one of the rabbis to allow the land to be sold during the *Shemittah* controversy of 1888. By invoking Ezra's message to the original returnees two and a half millennia earlier, Rabbi Trunk

may have subtly encouraged his contemporaries to perform the emotion work of expressing joy for being in the Land of Israel, despite its many hardships.

Since October 7th, we have analyzed several angles related to the emotional experience of the war. Dating back to the 1880's, the excitement of a redemptive return to the Land of Israel had been continually marked by pain and suffering. Learning from the commentators' analysis of Jethro's mixed emotions, we can cull two strategies for coping with these challenges. Despite the pain, we could perform the emotion work of trying to inject some level of joy, at least for the sake of helping others. We could also validate the complexities of the human psyche and acknowledge the reality that joy and pain can coexist.

*Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman is an assistant professor at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration, associate faculty at the Sacks-Herenstein Center, and the author of *Psyched for Torah: Cultivating Character and Well-Being through the Weekly Parsha*.*

Character Challenge: If you are feeling down, try to put in the emotion work of expressing happiness for the sake of cheering up someone else who can use support.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l: "In Judaism joy is the supreme religious emotion. Here we are, in a world filled with beauty. Every breath we breathe is the spirit of God within us. Around us is the love that moves the sun and all the stars. We are here because someone wanted us to be. The soul that celebrates, sings. And yes, life is full of grief and disappointments, problems and pains, but beneath it all is the wonder that we are here, in a universe filled with beauty, among people each of whom carries within them a trace of the face of God" ("The Deep Power of Joy," *Covenant & Conversation*).