**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**Parashat EKEV**

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**לע"נ**

**Jeffrey Paul Friedman z"l**

**August 15, 1968 – July 29, 2012**

**יהודה פנחס ע"ה בן הרב שרגא פייוועל נ"י**

**כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב**

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**The Virtue of Joy in Torah Study**

**I. The Reward for *Mitzvot***

Our *parasha* opens with a description of the reward for keeping the *mitzvot*:

And it shall be, because you hearken to these ordinances, and keep and do them, that the Lord your God shall keep with you the covenant and the kindness which He swore to your fathers. (*Devarim* 7:12)

The Torah mentions in many places the rewards and punishments that depend on keeping the *mitzvot.* Nevertheless, a unique element is found in our verse: here the Torah uses the term *eikev*, "because, in the wake of," whereas elsewhere it emphasizes the term *im*, "if." Thus we find at the beginning of *Parashat Bechukotai*:

**If** [*im*]you walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments, and do them, [then] I will give your rains in their season, and the land shall yield her produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. (*Vayikra* 26:3-4)

The same language is familiar to us from the *Shema* passage later in our *parasha*:

And it shall be, **if** [*im*]you shall hearken diligently to My commandments which I command you this day. (*Devarim* 11:13)

Many Biblical commentators were interested in the choice of the word *eikev*. Rashi (ad loc.), for example, cites a midrashic play on words here: our verse refers to the lighter commands, which a person might tend to “tread on with his heels (*akeivav*)” – i.e., ignore. Others (such as Ibn Ezra and Ramban) explain the word in the sense of "end."[[1]](#footnote-1) The *Or Ha-Chaim* takes this latter view but, due to the linguistic anomaly in the verse, introduces a totally new meaning that does not follow from the plain sense of the text.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* references a statement of Rav Shmuel bar Nachmani that imbues our *pasuk* with a particular tone based on its opening word, *vehaya*:

Rav Shmuel bar Nachmani came and made a distinction: Everywhere that "*vayehi*"is stated, it alludes to trouble, and "*vehaya*" [alludes to] joy. (*Bereishit Rabba* 42:3)

In the wake of this *midrash*, the *Or Ha-Chaim* understands our verse as alluding to the virtue of joy in Torah study:

One must understand: When the Torah writes "*vehaya*" – what is it that “will be”? If it refers to God keeping His covenant with us, i.e. "because you hearken… the Lord your God shall keep," it need only have written “Because you hearken…” What need is there for "and it shall be [*vehaya*]"?

One must also understand use of the word "*eikev*" instead of "*im*," as it is stated: "If [*im*] you walk in My statutes" (*Vayikra* 26:3). *Chazal* expounded the word "*eikev*" as an allusion to those commandments that a person treads on with his heels (*Tanchuma*). This is a homiletical comment.

But the verse can be explained based on the statement of *Chazal* that the term "*vehaya*" alludes to joy. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Devarim* 7:12)

Joy is a very important element in the service of God, as the Rambam writes in the wake of the verses in *Parashat Ki Tavo*:

The joy that a person feels in the fulfillment of the *mitzvot* and the love of God who commanded them is a great service. Whoever holds himself back from this joy is worthy of retribution, as is it stated: "Because you did not serve God, your Lord, with happiness and a glad heart” (*Devarim* 28:47). (Rambam, *Hilkhot Lulav* 8:15)

And as King David famously wrote:

Serve the Lord with joy. (*Tehillim* 100:2)

But we must examine precisely what kind of joy we are talking about: When must a person rejoice, and about what must he rejoice, so that the joy will fulfill this element of the service of God?

**II. The Joy of a Mitzva**

The starting point for defining appropriate joy is a passage in the Gemara that addresses an apparent contradiction in the words of King Shlomo:

Rav Yehuda the son of Rav Shmuel bar Shilat said in the name of Rav: The Sages [at first] sought to hide the book of *Kohelet*, because its words are self-contradictory. So why did they not hide it? Because it begins with words of Torah and it ends with words of Torah. It begins with words of Torah, as it is written…

And how are its words self-contradictory?… It is written: "Then I commended joy [*simcha*]" (*Kohelet* 8:15); but it is written: "And of joy [*simcha*], [I said:] What does it do?" (*Kohelet* 2:2).

There is no difficulty… "Then I commended joy": this refers to the joy of a mitzva*. "*And of joy, [I said:] What does it do?": this refers to joy [which is] not in connection with a mitzva. **This teaches you that the *Shekhina* rests [upon man] neither through gloom, nor through sloth, nor through frivolity, nor through levity, nor through talk, nor through idle chatter, but only through a matter of joy of a mitzva,** as it is stated: "[And Elisha said…] But now bring me a minstrel. And it came to pass, when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him" (II *Melakhim* 3:15). (*Shabbat* 30b)

King Shlomo, according to the Gemara, distinguishes between the joy of a mitzva, which is commendable, and joy that is not connected to a mitzva, which does nothing. From this we learn that the joy that is included in the service of God is the joy of a mitzva.

But what is meant by "joy of a mitzva"? They distinguish it from mundane joy, but the critical element is missing: What should we be happy about?

The *Or Ha-Chaim* in his commentary to our verse proposes several ways to understand the "joy" of which Shlomo speaks.

**III. The Joy at the End**

The first type of joy the *Or Ha-Chaim* discusses is the joy experienced at the completion of a mitzva:

Moshe was gently cautioning the Israelites [through the allusion in the term *vehaya* in our verse] that it does not behoove a person to rejoice unless he is careful to do *everything* God commanded him to do; *then* his heart may rejoice and his glory [essence?] may exult [an allusion to phrasing in *Tehillim* 16:9]. But as long as a person is conscious that he lacks one of God’s commands, whether among the positive or negative commandments – this is what Shlomo had in mind when he said: "And of joy, [I said:] What does it do?" That is why [Moshe] said "*Vehaya*,”and it shall be that you will have joy, “because you hearken…" – meaning, "*eikev*" is used here in the sense of the end or goal, as we find that *Chazal* used this word in that sense in the Mishnaic phrase, "*be-ikvot meshicha*" (*Sota* 9:15), because the end of the period leading up to the coming of Mashiach is called "*ikvot*." So too, he said: At the end, when you hearken to these ordinances, and keep and do them, *then* it will be a time of joy – but as long as you have not reached that, there is no reason to rejoice.

Like the statement of the pious of Israel, that “one who is a *parush*, his sorrow is in his heart but joy is in his face” (*Chovot ha-Levavot*, in the fourth chapter of his treatise on *Perishut*). The reason he does not feel this joy is that it is not fitting for one who will eventually appear before the great King with shame and embarrassment – and all the more so, one who may be guilty of death [for sins he has committed] – to be joyful. In accordance with this, "*eikev*" refers to the completion of hearkening to all the ordinances. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The *Or Ha-Chaim's* first suggestion is that joy is fitting only after a person completes all of his obligations in his world. Only once a person finishes keeping *all* of God's commandments is there room for joy. This approach takes the path of negation; any joy in this world, according to this, will be lacking.

This approach is extremely surprising and also difficult to implement – according to this understanding, is every instance of a person's rejoicing in this world defective? Is that what the *Or Ha-Chaim* means to say? It becomes evident from the explanations that follow (which we will see below) that this is not his intention. It is clear that a person can also be happy in this world while studying Torah and performing *mitzvot* – but a distinction must be made between different types of joy.

We can understand this based on a statement of Rabbi Yochanan in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai:

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: It is forbidden to a man to fill his mouth with laughter in this world, as it is stated: "Then will our mouth be filled with laughter and our tongue with singing" (*Tehillim* 126:2). When will that be? At the time when "they shall say among the nations, The Lord has done great things with these" (*Tehillim* 126:3). It was related of Reish Lakish that he never again filled his mouth with laughter in this world after he heard this saying from Rabbi Yochanan his teacher. (*Berakhot* 31a)

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai learns from the verse in *Tehillim* that one should not “**fill** his mouth with laughter.” The prohibition here is not to laugh and rejoice, but to fill one's mouth with laughter. This is because such an attribute, a mouth that is filled with laughter, belongs only to the period of complete redemption: "**Then** [God] will **fill** our mouth with laughter." Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai did not forbid laughing, nor did Reish Lakish, a student of Rabbi Yochanan, stop laughing. He merely refrained from **filling** his mouth with laughter.

There is a difference between momentary laughter and the feeling that one has achieved his final goal. These are two types of joy – one joy that is temporary and fleeting, and another that comes from a much deeper place, from an inner sense of completeness and of having fulfilled one’s life mission. The latter is what is referred to as "**filling** one's mouth with laughter." There is no room for such filling as long as the redemption is not complete.

It seems that this is what the *Or Ha-Chaim* is talking about: A person can and even should be happy about his moments of Torah study and performance of *mitzvot –* but he must understand that true joy is not found in these moments, but in the completion of the great task of serving God that is imposed on a person throughout his life. Only then can man **fill** his mouth with laughter. Thus, there is no problem with being happy in this world, but it should be understood that this joy is momentary in relation to the constant and deep joy that will follow upon completion of keeping *all* the *mitzvot*.

**IV. The Joy of Studying Torah**

[Moshe] further intended [to convey] that one must study Torah in a joyful frame of mind, not in sorrow – for a mourner is not allowed to study Torah (*Yoreh De'a* 384). (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The source of the prohibition for a mourner to study Torah appears in *Ta'anit*, where the Gemara teaches us about the prohibitions that apply on Tisha be-Av:

Our Rabbis have taught: All the restrictions that apply to a mourner also apply on Tisha be-Av. Eating, drinking, bathing, anointing, the wearing of shoes, and marital relations are forbidden thereon. It is also forbidden [thereon] to read the Torah, the Prophets, and the Hagiographa or to study Mishna, Talmud, Midrash, *halakhot*, or *aggadot*; he may, however, read such parts of Scripture which he does not usually read and study such parts of Mishna which he usually does not study; and he may also read *Eikha*, *Iyov*, and the sad parts of *Yirmeyahu*; and the school children are free from school. For it is stated: "The precepts of the Lord are upright, rejoicing the heart" (*Tehillim* 119:9). (*Ta'anit* 30a)

A mourner is forbidden to study Torah because Torah causes joy. According to the plain meaning of the text, this can be understood as an objective assessment – Torah study is a joyful activity, regardless of the learner's subjective attitude toward it. That is why it is forbidden. But the issue is not that simple in the Gemara, as it is permitted to study "sad parts" and parts that one does not usually study.

Therefore, it seems that the *Or Ha-Chaim's* interpretation applies more precision. A mourner is forbidden to study Torah because Torah study is *supposed* to be joyful. From here we see that a person should strive, when he studies Torah, to learn out of joy and not out of sorrow.

This idea sounds obvious today, but in the past it was subject to considerable controversy – as Rabbi Avraham Borenstein, the Rebbe of Sochatchov, attests in the introduction to his book, *Iglei Tal*:

I remember hearing certain people who strayed from the path of reason regarding the study of our holy Torah, and said that if one learns Torah and suggests novel ideas and rejoices and delights in his study, this is not considered Torah study for its own sake as much as if he were simply learning, without deriving any pleasure from it, but only for the sake of the mitzva. Someone who studies and delights in his study mixes his personal pleasure into his study. (*Iglei Tal*, introduction)

Those opposed to joy in learning argued that it impaired "Torah for its own sake," since the person is studying for his own pleasure and not for the sake of Torah. The Rebbe counters this claim with his own argument:

In truth, this is a notable mistake. On the contrary, this is the essence of the mitzvaof Torah study, to be happy and rejoice and delight in one's study, and then the words of the Torah become absorbed in his blood. Since he enjoys the words of the Torah, he becomes attached to the Torah (and see Rashi, *Sanhedrin* 58a, s.v. *ve-davak*). (*Iglei Tal,* ibid.)

Happiness creates connection. When a person is happy about a certain thing, he feels an affinity, closeness, and devotion to it; therefore, it is joyful study that creates the connection between a person and the Torah.

It is also possible to understand the importance of joyful Torah study in another way. We saw the Gemara in *Shabbat*,which determines that the joy of a mitzvais commended – and as a result of this, it concludes:

**This teaches you that the *Shekhina* rests [upon man] neither through gloom, nor through sloth, nor through frivolity, nor through levity, nor through talk, nor through idle chatter, but only through a matter of joy of a mitzva,** as it is stated: "[And Elisha said…] But now bring me a minstrel. And it came to pass, when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him" (II *Melakhim* 3:15). (*Shabbat* 30b)

When the prophet Elisha is asked by Yehoram, king of Israel, to prophesy about the success of Israel and Yehuda in their joint war against Moav, he is angered by Yehoram's appeal because the latter believes in the prophets of the Ba'al. In the end, Elisha agrees to prophesy for Yehoshafat, king of Yehuda – but in order for prophecy to rest upon him, he calls for a minstrel to soothe away his anger. We see that joy is needed not only in order to create a spiritual or mental *connection* to the Torah, but also to properly *understand* the Torah – which, like prophecy, is the word of God. Our senses testify to this: when a person approaches Torah learning with joy, he understands better and achieves greater success in his studies.

**V. Joy as Reward for Study**

Our verse also alludes in the manner of the statement: "The precepts of the Lord are upright, rejoicing the heart" (*Tehillim* 119:9). This is what [Moshe] said: "*Vehaya*,And it shall be – i.e., there will be joy – as a result of [*eikev*] hearkening to God's ordinances." This means: As a reward for Torah study, You will make him happy. This is what the *Tanna* alluded to when he said (*Avot* 4:2): "One mitzva draws another mitzva [after it]; for the recompense for [performing] a mitzva is a mitzva,” which is happiness. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Another element of joy that the *Or Ha-Chaim* sees in our verse is the joy that is experienced in the wake of learning. If until now we talked about the fact that a person who engages in Torah study must *approach* his study with joy, here the process is just the opposite – his study *causes* joy. This is derived from the word "*eikev*," that is, in the aftermath of study. A person must rejoice when he completes his study. We find a practical example of this in the Gemara:

Abaye said: May I be rewarded, for when I saw that a disciple had completed his tractate, I made a festive day for the scholars. (*Shabbat* 118b)

Celebrating the conclusion of a unit of study is an expression of the joy in that conclusion.

In addition to the new understanding of joy in Torah study, another great concept is alluded to in the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* here*.* He notes that the reward for performing a mitzvais another mitzva.What is that additional mitzva? Joy. This indicates that there is independent importance attached to joy as a service of God. Thus far, we have seen that joy is good because it is beneficial for the service of God – it connects a person to the Torah or helps him understand it. Here, joy is a goal and not just a means. It itself is part of God's service. Joy expresses faith in God, for a man is happy in the wake of his Torah study and thus he presumably believes in God, and it seems that in this sense, it is an entirely independent service of God.

**VI. God's Joy in the Torah**

It also alludes to what is stated in the *Zohar* (III, 213), that there is no joy before God equal to the joy that God experiences when Israel toils in Torah study. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Here the *Or Ha-Chaim* relates to the world of *Kabbala*, which often describes God's joy in Israel's Torah study. The joy referred to here is not joy in the simple sense, but rather the realization of the mission of the people of Israel. The Gemara in *Shabbat* describes Torah study as sustaining the world:

Chizkiya said: What is meant by: "You caused law to be heard from Heaven; the earth feared and was tranquil" (*Tehillim* 76:9)? If it feared, why was it tranquil, and if it was tranquil, why did it fear? Rather, at first it feared, and subsequently it was tranquil. And why did it fear? As stated by Reish Lakish, for Reish Lakish said: Why is it written: "And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day [***ha****-shishi*]" (*Bereishit* 1:31)? What is the purpose of the additional *hey* [the "*ha*" prefix]? This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, stipulated with the works of creation and said to them: If Israel accepts the Torah, you shall exist; but if not, I will turn you back into emptiness and formlessness.[[2]](#footnote-2) (*Shabbat* 88a)

When Israel engages in the purpose for which they were created, then the purpose of creation is fulfilled. God is happy, as it were, that His works succeeded in fulfilling their purpose and spreading His name by teaching Torah in the world.

We have seen in the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* several explanations of the virtue of the great joy connected to Torah study. Let us pray that God will give us the ability “to study and teach, to keep and do,”[[3]](#footnote-3) with joy that will connect us to our study, help us better understand what we are studying, and also be an integral part of our service of God.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Editor’s note: As Ramban points out, the word *rosh*, head, is often used to refer to a beginning; so too, *ekev*, meaning heel, can refer to an end. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Editor’s note: Rashi (ad loc.) explains that the extra *hey* is understood here as an allustion to “*the* sixth specified elsewhere” – i.e., the sixth of Sivan, when the Torah was given. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This phrase appears in *Avot* 4:5 as well as many later references. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)