

JEALOUS OF A BIRD?

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"In compensation for your failure to [lit. that you did not] serve HaShem your G-d with joy and with happiness of heart, from an abundance of all." [28:47]

There are terrible calamities prophesied in this week's reading. Why will these tragedies occur? The Torah tells us: because we, the Nation of Israel, will fail to feel joy in all the blessings which G-d gives us, and will not infuse that joy into our performance of His Commandments, into our conduct towards G-d. Maimonides in the Laws of Lulav (the palm frond taken during the holiday of Sukkos) (8:14) says that the joy which a person takes in doing the Mitzvos, and in love of the A-lmighty who Commanded us to do them, is a great service of G-d. A crucial element of our relationship with the Divine must be a feeling of joy and gratitude for all that G-d gives us every day.

Earlier in the parsha, we see that there is a Mitzvah to be happy, as part of the Commandment to bring the First Fruits to the Temple: "And you shall rejoice in all the good which HaShem your G-d has given to you and to your family..." [26:11] The Chumash Rav Peninim asks: how can there be such a Commandment? If HaShem gives a person all he needs, and he comes to the Temple with his offering, of course he will be happy - he's been given something to rejoice about. If, on the other hand, a person is impoverished and starving, then he has no land or no produce to offer, and thus this Mitzvah will not apply to him. So to whom does it apply?

Rabbi Asher Rubenstein of Jerusalem offered the following example:

Imagine a farmer who owns a few acres of land, who works throughout the year, harvests his crop, produces his bread from start to finish and feeds his family. He's happy, because he has all that he needs. As the Chapters of the Fathers tell us, "Who is wealthy? He who is happy with his lot." Now, before he can take advantage of that crop, the Torah tells him to take his First Fruits off to Jerusalem. So he packs his bags, saddles his donkey, puts a few loaves and a few clusters of grapes in a big basket, and heads off -- happy to go to Jerusalem, rejoicing in the Mitzvah he is going to perform.

He reaches the main highway to Jerusalem, and the entire roadway is blocked. One huge carriage after another is going by, each led by a team of white horses. One is laden with grapes as big as plums, another with huge loaves of bread whose fragrance fills the air. And all of it belongs to one wealthy man, sitting in his carriage in the middle of it all, who owns hundreds of acres and whose hired help did all the work.

The farmer looks down at his bag, and now he's not so happy any more. Is anything different? Has anything changed? Nothing has changed -- except his heart. Now he's seen what someone else has, and his joy has been replaced by jealousy. This is what the Mitzvah is all about.

Every person is obligated to say, "the entire world was created for me." This does not mean that we should be given everything in the world - but that the world is here to answer to our unique needs and to help us to grow as individuals. Whatever a person needs, HaShem gives him.

We introduce tremendous sorrow into our lives when we start to compare ourselves to others. Other people are wealthier, more capable physically, and more intelligent than us. Unless Bill Gates signed up for Lifeline in the last week, we can assume that each of these is true for every reader. And our problem is that we start to live by comparison, thinking that we could be someone other than who we are.

Have you ever dreamed about being able to fly? It's probably safe to say that most of us have, at one time or another, imagined what it would be like to breeze through the sky -- especially when sitting in bad traffic.

But, on the other hand, have you ever been consumed with jealousy because the bird outside your window can fly, and you can't? Have you railed against fate (G-d) that you weren't born a bird? Doubtful, right? I remember a children's film about a man who wished he could become a fish, which he eventually did. One of the childish delights of the movie was thinking about this poor guy who _wanted_ to be a fish. I mean, especially with all the pollution today, would _you_ like to live in the water?

Our problem is that we look at other people, and we imagine we could be like them. Not that we would want to _be_ them, but we want the same things that they have. With birds, we don't have this problem. We know that we are more advanced than birds, and have many capabilities we'd never give away in exchange for a pair of wings. But we look at other people, and only imagine that they are superior to us in one of many ways.

So let us not look at what others have - because it is jealousy which stands in the way, when otherwise we would recognize the obvious: G-d gives us and sends us everything we need, and we have everything. Let us rejoice in all the good!

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The author is the Director of Project Genesis.