

# BEING SERIOUS

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

*This is in order to elevate you today as a people to Him, and so that He may be to you God . . . (Devarim 29:9)*

It's the last two parshios of the year. Every new year represents an exciting momentous change in time and life, but particularly in the Jewish yearly cycle. The change of number of the year, in the Jewish world, doesn't just have a numerical significance. It always represents some kind of historical transition, with a whole new potential to drive history in ways it may not have previously gone.

This is why, unlike in other societies in which the beginning of the new year may be celebrated by simply having a good time, the Jewish world ushers in each new year with about as much seriousness as one can imagine. It's like being hired by a company and being made to stand before the CEO on the first day, an intimidating experience to be sure.

However, whereas disapproval from the CEO can result in the need to look for a new job, disapproval from the CEO of Creation results in fewer options. It's not about packing up and looking for a new place of employment; in this case, there is only one, and this is it. Getting fired means leaving this world altogether.

Judaism is not against having fun, not at all, and it has a sense of humor (in Israel, it's a shekel of humor). But the difference between what the Torah calls a leitz, a joker and someone who can forfeit his position in the World-to-Come, and a humorous person, who may even make Heaven chuckle, so-to-speak, from time-to-time, is that the former never takes life seriously, and the latter almost always does.

Personally, I love being witty. I thoroughly enjoy making a good pun, and get extreme satisfaction from making others laugh. But, only because most of the time I am so serious. During most of my day, I am either learning Torah, writing it, or teaching it, with very few opportunities, at least that I can see, to be funny or to laugh. I enjoy all of it not for its entertainment value, but because it is so sublime, and so inspiring, and so uplifting.

And prayer is no laughing matter either. Admittedly my mind drifts during some very serious moments to some very trivial thoughts during tefillah, especially when I am tired or mentally distracted. But, I try hard every time to connect to God during such times, to slow down to the point that I can make the words feel like my own.

And, for me, Kiddush on Friday night, is one of the most serious and joyous moments of my entire week. I try very hard at that time to maximize the experience, to remain focused on God and the blessing of life and all that it brings until the end. And, I try and use it as an opportunity to inspire others to do so as well.

I would like to believe that I have convinced Heaven that I take life seriously. Maybe Heaven will say, "Yes, but not seriously enough!" But, at least serious enough that Heaven will say, "Keep him in the game. He still has what to work on, but he's not out of the game yet." It is this, I hope, that gives me somewhat of a license to add some humor, as a spice of life, for others, and for myself.

I think, over all, this is the message of Rosh Hashanah. Yes, it is a very serious day, a day of judgment, of serious judgment. Yet we bathe, get dressed for a Yom Tov, eat a scrumptious meal, hopefully, and even make an event out of the simanim, which we eat during the evening seudah and which is fun to do. In Rosh Hashanah, the heavy and the light meet.

There are many ways to measure one's spiritual standing in life, many continuums on which to chart one's personal growth. A line can be drawn between selfishness, our state at birth, and selflessness, our desired state just before death. Or, another variation is immaturity at one end, and maturity at the other, another way of stating the end goal of life.

We can add to these versions a continuum that stretches from seriousness at one end to lightheadedness at the other. However, this example is not completely parallel with the previous ones, because a person must always try to be selfless and mature. Even when putting yourself before others it has to be for the right reasons, and we've all seen the negative impact of immaturity on a potentially positive situation.

Selfish and immature people have made the best dictators throughout history, not to mention destroyed a lot of potentially good marriages along the way. There is very little reason, if any at all, to ever move back and forth between the extremes on either of these continuums. Maturity and selflessness are the name of the game.

Even a teacher is advised by the Talmud to start off with something funny to catch the interest of the students. And, elsewhere, the Talmud speaks of a certain person who earned his portion in the World-to-Come because he made people laugh, apparently a great chesed, especially during times when people find little to laugh about.

On the other hand, we just finished reading Parashas Ki Savo, one of the more serious parshios in the Torah. So serious, in fact, that some people have difficulty reading it, becoming overwhelmed by the threat of destruction because of straying from Torah. Based upon Parashas Ki Savo and Parashas Bechukosai, the first of the two parshios that discuss consequences for disobedience, one might assume that there is no room for anything but seriousness, because the service of God is serious business.

And, indeed, this is the way many Torah Jews approach Torah Judaism, including many rebbis in chedarim, where young children are first exposed to a Torah attitude. The message they get: Torah is all seriousness with little room for anything else.

This talks to some students, the more serious ones, and often the more talented ones as well. But it doesn't talk to a lot of other students who have no problem being serious about life, Torah, and the service of God, provided it is seasoned with some lighter moments.

The body seems to agree as well, because these are some of the known health benefits of laughter, and even just smiling: lower blood pressure, increased vascular blood flow and oxygenation of the blood, a workout for the diaphragm and abdominal, respiratory, facial, leg, and back muscles, the reduction of certain stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, increased response of tumor- and disease-killing cells such as Gamma-interferon and T-cells, that defend against respiratory infections, and many more.

In fact, in a study at Johns Hopkins University Medical School, humor during instruction led to increased test scores. It also improved alertness, creativity, and memory. Humor and creativity work in similar ways, doctors say, by creating relationships between two disconnected items; you engage the whole brain.

And, humor works quickly, because in less than a half-second after exposure to something funny, an electrical wave moves through the higher brain functions of the cerebral cortex. The left hemisphere analyzes the words and structures of the joke; the right hemisphere "gets" the joke; the visual sensory area of the occipital lobe creates images; the limbic (emotional) system makes you happier; and the motor sections make you smile or laugh.

All of this is no laughing matter, and ought to be taken quite seriously, and that is precisely the point. Humor is a serious matter, as funny as it may be. As the Ramban points out at the beginning of Parashas Kedoshim, part of our test is not only to avoid that which is forbidden to us, but also to use that which is permissible in a responsible, and as a result, a holy way.

Take wine, for example. The most kosher wine, when abused, can result in unkosher behavior. As the Talmud points out, it is wine that can cause a woman and man to stray from their Torah obligations and become adulterers, not to mention to cause a whole host of other sins that may not be as extreme.

Yet, wine was also used as part of the Temple Service on the altar itself, and is an integral part of many religious activities, such as Kiddush on Shabbos and Yom Tov, or at a Bris. Certainly, Kabbalistically, wine is a very important part of life.

In fact, there is a very strong connection between laughter and wine, both of which can be intoxicating for good or for bad. Both are associated with the holiday of Purim, the very last holiday, according to Kabbalah, to be eliminated from the Jewish year as we reach new heights in the World-

to-Come. Even Yom Kippur is eliminated before Purim, and Rosh Hashanah, before that.

This is because Purim teaches us how to live life in this world, how to be serious about life, while at the very same time finding humor in life. It teaches us to serve God with fear, and to serve Him with joy as well, sometimes at the exact same moment, and it is for this that we are evaluated on Rosh Hashanah.

Because there is another continuum on which we can plot our spiritual level in life, the L'Shem Shemayim Continuum. It is the one that measures our intention behind all that we do, either for ourselves, or for God and His master plan for Creation. By serving God altruistically, we guarantee that we take serious what is serious about life, and that we make light of that which is light about life.

Just as we throw wine on the altar as part of our service of God, we can also throw laughter and humor there as well. Not to destroy it, God forbid, but to make sure that what we find funny about life, God too, so-to-speak, finds humorous as well.

L'Shannah Tovah. May you all be written in the Book of Life another year, and merit to be from those spoken about in the verses:

*A Song of Ascents. When God brought back those that returned to Tzion, we were like dreamers. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. Then those among the nations said: "God has done great things with these." God has done great things with us; we rejoice. Turn our captivity, O God, as the streams in the dry land. They that sow in tears shall reap in joy . . . (Tehillim 126-1:5)*

Text

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Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! [www.thirtysix.org](http://www.thirtysix.org)