

Personal Joy

By: Rabbi Ari Aragon (Originally Published 2017)

There is an important principle that has proven itself over and over again during the course of time. It is felt by every single person at some point in his or her life, and it shapes many of our decisions, often in a completely subconscious fashion. That principle is: Nobody likes tests.

The Torah says, "There [at Marah] Hashem gave them [the Jewish People] laws and statutes, and there He tested them." (Shemos 15:25) From the general context of the verses, it seems that there were two disparate events that occurred at Marah. One: Hashem gave the fledgling nation some mitzvos. Two: Hashem tested the Jewish People by taking them into a desert without any water to see if they would trust in Him. The Ramban, however, connects the two statements. He says, "Rashi says that Hashem gave the Jewish People parts of the Torah so they could be engrossed in it. It is implied from his words that Hashem both informed them of the laws, and taught them how to learn them... And the purpose of this was so the Jewish People could accustom themselves to mitzvos and see if they would accept the mitzvos with joy and a good heart. And this was the test, as Hashem wanted to give more mitzvos to them later on." The Ramban reveals to us that the test was really in the giving of a few mitzvos. However, the test wasn't merely to see if they would observe the mitzvos, it was to see if they could enjoy the mitzvos. But what a strange test this is - either you like something or you don't! The test of whether or not Hashem should give them more mitzvos should, seemingly, be dependent on whether or not they obey His command, not if they enjoy it. A math whiz may not enjoy the math portion of the SAT, but if he knows the material, he will do well. Would anyone think to fail him because he would rather be playing baseball or drinking a coffee with friends? Why do mitzvos have to be so intense?

Let's ask the basic question - how did the Jewish People actually pass this test? How did they develop a joy for mitzvos and learning inside themselves? Rabbi Yisroel Salanter (1809-1883), in a letter (letter 30 in Ohr Yisroel), states, "The fundamental point that a man should accomplish in his youth is to seek out different places in his life where he can fix his character, and to begin to fix them until his entire personality naturally gravitates toward that which is truly right and just. And with this he will have a joy (in the mitzvos)." The way a person feels joy in something is when his entire personality identifies with, and expresses itself through, that which he is doing. In other words, joy is a sign of who a person really is. If our enjoyment is in spiritual things, then our enjoyment in physical things is diminished because who we are is spiritual. And it works the other way, as well.

The test of the Jewish People was to see if their collective unique individuality could be expressed through the mitzvos themselves, thus resulting in an enjoyment of the mitzvah itself. To illustrate, one of the mitzvos given at Marah was Shabbos. It is easy for Shabbos to be a day of enjoying food, singing, family time, and relaxation. However, if the Shabbos itself doesn't excite us, it's a sign that deep down, we have yet to identify with the Shabbos. To identify with the Shabbos, you have to learn, simply, what Shabbos is (not the ideas behind it) and then see what excites you! The holiness of the day? The special closeness to the King of kings? The list of what to connect to, how you can connect to it, and how you can express yourself through it is literally endless, because every person is a complete individual in his or her own right! This is true for every mitzvah in the Torah, so much so that Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe (1914-2005) identifies this process of identifying one's personality in connection with mitzvos as the "mitzvah to serve Hashem." It's clear that the possibility of true individuality is infinite and an absolute necessity in living a life of Torah. When one looks at the Torah world from the outside, at first glance, one may see a world of robots where everyone looks and acts the same. One may see a world completely devoid of individuality and color, and, admittedly, a world which is quite stifling to individual personalities and ways of life. However, when one looks at it through the Torah's lens, one discovers two things. First, that one's personality is malleable, and a person is able and obligated to identify himself with the entire Torah. Second, there is nothing more individualistic than simply living the life of a Torah Jew. Hashem actively desires that we personally attach to His Torah and not leave it as something outside of ourselves. Hashem wants YOU! The means of determining how close or far the Jewish People were to the Torah - on a personal level - was joy.

What do we derive enjoyment from? We owe it to ourselves to give honest answers to these questions, to begin developing our Judaism into one of color and flavor, and to transform ourselves into true Torah personalities.

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