

## Verse 1:7

זָכְרָה יְרוּשָׁלַם יְמֵי עֲנִיָּה וּמְרוּרָהּ כָּל מַחְמְדֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ מִיְמֵי קֶדֶם בְּנֶפֶל עֲמָל בְּיַד צָר וְאִין עֹזֵר לָהּ  
רְאוּהָ צָרִים שָׂחָקוּ עָלֶיהָ מִשְׂבֵּתָהּ :

*Jerusalem remembered, in the days of her poverty and degradation, all the treasures she had in former days. When her people fell by the hand of the oppressor, with none to help her, her oppressors saw her and made jest over how she had come to a standstill.*

### The Joy Is Missing<sup>1</sup>

#### *What Is So Serious About a Lack of Joy?*

Let us bring out one of the deeper facets of this verse. Our starting point is the following Torah passage (Deuteronomy 28:45-47):<sup>2</sup> “And all of these curses shall come upon you – they shall pursue and overtake you – because you did not listen to the voice of the Lord your God, to keep His commandments and statutes which He commanded you. They shall be as a sign and a miraculous testimonial upon you forever, *because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy*, on account of an abundance of everything.” On the surface this passage is puzzling. One would expect the main reason for God’s anger to be dereliction in the actual service. Why is joy so important here that the Torah indicts us mainly for lack of joy?

#### *Temporary Pleasures*

Our answer to this question is built on two key statements: a Talmudic passage and a Biblical verse. We first analyze the Talmudic passage at some length, and then turn to the Biblical verse.<sup>3</sup> The relevant Talmudic passage is as follows:<sup>4</sup> “Go and see how the nature of the Holy One Blessed Be He is not like the nature of a mortal man of flesh and blood. A mortal man can put his wares into an empty vessel but not into a full one, while the wares of the Holy One Blessed Be He are put into a full vessel but not into an empty one.”

This Talmudic passage sets forth a basic principle regarding human desires and passions, which we can recognize clearly ourselves upon due reflection. Namely, a person will yearn for a physical pleasure while he lacks it, but after he attains it he gradually loses his interest in it. While a person has yet to attain the object of his desire, the flame of passion waxes stronger within him. But after he attains it, his passion for it dies off little by little, and his joy and gratification in it decrease. Eventually his gratification dissipates entirely, and then he does not feel any satisfaction at all. This pattern applies to all the pleasures of the world: food, drink, fine clothes, greatness and honor, and so on. With all of them, after

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<sup>1</sup> Parallel passages appear in *Ohel Yaacov*, in the commentary on *Parshas Beshallah*, the commentary on *Parshas Chukas* (end) and in the closing discourse on *Sefer Bamidbar*. The Maggid develops a similar theme in his commentary on Esther 1:10-12.

<sup>2</sup> The text quotes only the last of these three verses.

<sup>3</sup> In the original text, the two statements are presented one after the other. I have transferred the citation of the Biblical verse to the point in the development where the verse enters into the discussion.

<sup>4</sup> *Berachos* 40a, *Sukkah* 46a-b.

a person has become accustomed to them and satiated with them, their sweetness and zest wears off.

As a rule, a pleasure provides full satisfaction only right after it is attained, following a period of lack: food after hunger, drink after thirst, greatness after lowliness, and wealth after poverty. So long as a person remembers how the pleasure was lacking, the acquisition of it gives him gratification and happiness. But when he forgets how he was once lacking and becomes satiated with good, he no longer notices the pleasure at all. It gives his soul no gratification. When the pleasure is lost, however, the memory of its sweetness and his love for it are reawakened within him, and his feelings for it return. At that point, though, these feelings are of no help to him. Instead, they only lead him to lament over the lost pleasure.

### *Greatness Cherished and Then Forgotten, Lost and Then Missed*

So it was with the sweetness of the Land of Israel and Jerusalem. In the beginning it was so great that it engraved itself in the heart of every Jew. Her splendid majesty engendered such joy that the whole surrounding area would notice it. But as the days went by, the sweetness and zest wore off entirely, as happens with an old blessing. No man felt any pride over her splendor anymore. Then, after the destruction, the Jewish People woke up and took note again of the utter greatness they had – after it was gone.

We can see this pattern hinted at in our verse, if we read the verse in a slightly different way: “Jerusalem remembered the days of her poverty and affliction, and all the treasures she had in former days.”<sup>5</sup> Namely, after she was emptied of all blessing, she was aroused to recall her past circumstances. She first recalled the early days, before the Jewish People inherited the Land of Israel, when she was poor and lacking everything. Then she was led to recall as well all the treasures she had in her bygone days of glory.

The Jewish People lost feeling for Jerusalem when they became old-time residents of the city and accustomed to it. But when the blessings were taken away, their feelings were rekindled. They recalled both the pain of the early days of poverty and the exaltation of the subsequent era of prosperity. In this golden era, the Jewish People lived a life of greatness and happiness. Everyone sat in comfort beneath his vine and fig-tree, and blessing abounded. But when they were exiled, they were reduced back to poverty. This deprivation led them to appreciate anew the sweetness of their glory days and to long for their lost treasures.

### *Lasting Pleasure*

We find that God's anger is kindled against a person who despises the sweetness of Torah. Indeed, we are commanded to look upon the Torah as new every day. Yet, as we explained above, human nature makes it impossible to feel the same pleasure over an old blessing as over a blessing that he acquired today. Now it is not tenable that the All-Present One would require something that is beyond human capacity. How then could God punish someone for not taking pleasure in Torah as if it had been given today?

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<sup>5</sup> The original text points out that when the verse is read in this way, it is not necessary to read into the word ימי (days) the prepositional ב to yield בימי (in the days), as proposed by the commentators.

This paradox can be resolved perfectly via the Gemara we quoted earlier. A mortal man, the Gemara says, can put his wares into an empty vessel but not into a full one. As we have explained, no worldly pleasure will bring a person enjoyment unless he is still lacking it—empty of it—and pines for it. After a person becomes satiated with a certain pleasure, it is indeed human nature for the pleasure to become loathsome and sickening. Thus, one can deposit into an empty vessel but not into a full one.

God's wares, by contrast, are designed to be deposited into a full vessel. The Torah and mitzvos, which are delicacies for the soul, never become loathsome. The more a person reflects upon them, the more determined he becomes to acquire more of them and to stride from one attainment to the next. A person never becomes satiated with them. As King David puts it (Psalms 27:4): "One thing only I ask of the Lord, this alone I seek: to dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of my life." In this vein, our Sages compared Torah scholars to fish in the sea: although they are always in the water, they still crave the falling raindrops (*Bereishis Rabbah* 97:3). But an empty person can hold nothing—consider this well.

### *Delights of the Land of Israel*

To complete the picture, we bring in one further idea. We begin by introducing the second of the two key statements we referred to earlier (Deuteronomy 26:3): "I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come to the Land that the Lord swore to our forefathers to give us." The Land of Israel is a paragon of excellence in both the physical realm and the spiritual realm. The physical delights it affords, such as its uniquely sweet and delicious fruits, far exceed those of all other lands. In parallel, to exactly the same degree, one who dwells in the Land of Israel finds repose and delight for his soul. Indeed, the Sages say that the air of the Land of Israel makes one wise (*Bava Basra* 158b). In this land, and no other, is found the seat of wisdom, holiness, purity, prophesy, and Divine inspiration.

The influence that the Land of Israel has on a person depends on how the person relates to it. This fact is reflected in the following verse (Hosea 14:10): "For the ways of the Lord are straight; the righteous walk in them while the wicked stumble in them." For righteous people, the Land of Israel—with its special holiness and connection to God—is a springboard through which they refine their deeds. They stride and uplift themselves level by level to true contentment. But for the wicked, the Land of Israel is a stumbling-block through which they get caught up in the pursuit of physical pleasures and become increasingly wicked. The Land of Israel lacks none of the pleasures of this world. Every physical delight a person might seek in order to satisfy his physical lusts—without exception—is easily available there. And it is well known that satiation with physical pleasures leads to degeneracy. Thus, the Torah says (Deuteronomy 32:15): "Jeshurun became fat and kicked." Likewise, our Sages say that one who fills his stomach does all kinds of evil deeds.<sup>6</sup>

As time goes on, the transcendence of spiritual pleasures over physical pleasures becomes as clear as the transcendence of light over darkness. Not only are spiritual pleasures superior in terms of the ultimate benefit they provide, they are also more enduring. Wicked people who lust after worldly enjoyments eventually become satiated and

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<sup>6</sup> *Berachos* 32a, as rendered by the *Aruch*. *Rashi* renders: "Filling the stomach is one of the types of impropriety."

accustomed to them, and then the feeling of sweetness and pleasantness fades. Such people are in the system where an empty vessel can hold what is put into it, but a full one cannot. Not so with the righteous, whose sole desire is to behold God's sublimity and to bask in His spiritual radiance. They are in the opposite system, where a full vessel can hold what is put into it but an empty one cannot. Thus, the more they perfect their souls, the more they feel the sweetness and charm of the Land of Israel.

### *Eternal Joy*

This idea is alluded to in the key verse cited above: "I declare *today* before the Lord your God that I have come to the Land ...." Here the speaker declares: "I am in the system where a full vessel can hold more, and the beautiful charm of the Land is as sweet to me as if I had just come today." Appropriately, the Torah states shortly afterwards (Deuteronomy 26:11): "And you shall rejoice in *all* the good." That is, the pleasure you take in the good Land will not diminish in any way. Your joy will always be complete. When one views the goodness of the Land of Israel in the proper light, mainly in terms of its special spiritual qualities, one will feel the same pleasantness and joy constantly. As our Sages say (*Avos* 6:3, *Berachos* 5a): "There is no [real] good except Torah." Torah is perpetually good: its pleasantness never wears off.

Thus we see that lack of joy comes from a defect in one's service to God. This is why the Torah addresses joy and service together in one verse: "Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and gladness of heart on account of the abundance of everything." A person's lack of joy is a sure sign that he has not really served God properly at all, and has not experienced spiritual pleasure at all.

Jerusalem's downfall came about because we did not serve God with joy. We did not properly value our former state of glory, because we focused too much on the physical blessings, which over time lost their initial appeal. We therefore were forced to serve our enemies in a state of besiegement and distress. This plight led us to recall our former joy, and the memory amplified the agony and sadness that we felt in our hearts. Thus our verse declares: "Jerusalem remembered, in the days of her poverty and degradation, all the treasures she had in former days."<sup>7</sup>

But in the end we will learn to serve God truly. We will then experience eternal joy, whose sweetness never wears off. As it is written (Isaiah 35:10): "Those redeemed by the Lord shall return ... with eternal joy upon their heads." Isaiah is not referring to the joy of physical pleasure, which is a finite joy that comes to an end when the pleasure grows stale. Rather, the eternal joy that Isaiah refers to is spiritual joy. Accordingly (continuing in Isaiah 35:10): "They shall attain gladness and joy, and anguish and groaning shall flee." Even after we attain joy and have experienced it for a long time, nonetheless anguish and groaning will flee. The blaze of joy will continually grow stronger and stronger. As the Gemara put it, the full vessel will hold more.

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<sup>7</sup> In the original text, this paragraph appears earlier. I have it moved here to conclude the piece with a link back to the verse in Lamentations being examined.