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HAPPINESS: A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Happiness has both universal and culturally specific forms. This article describes three sensibilities of happiness in Judaism: the prophetic life of struggle; the happiness of *ashrei*, with its life of simplicity in accordance with the will of God; and *simchah*, the life-lived-in-relationship given supreme expression in Moses's covenantal vision in the book of Deuteronomy. Focusing, in particular, on the social vision of Moses, the article explores how Jewish notions of happiness challenge contemporary conceptions of happiness grounded in materialism and acquisition, and it discusses how a focus on material happiness threatens to undermine relationships and the social fiber that is the thread from which true and lasting happiness is woven.

KEYWORDS: Judaism, happiness, Moses, covenant

Tolstoy was surely striving more for dramatic effect than for accuracy when he wrote the famous opening sentence of Anna Karenina: "All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."[1] Such sentiment conceives of happiness on the model of a problem in mathematics: there are many wrong answers but only one correct one. Happiness is not like that at all.

Happiness takes many forms. There is the happiness of one who is at peace with the world, and the happiness of one who challenges and changes the world. There is the happiness of Mozart, as sweet and natural as a spring breeze, and there is the happiness of the late Beethoven string quartets, carved from the rock by struggle and pain.

So it is with cultures. Each conceives of happiness in its own way. If Aristotle was right to define happiness as the ultimate telos of human activity,[2] that which is sought for its own sake and not as the means of some other and higher aim, then the forms of happiness are as varied as the conceptions different civilizations have given of the *summum bonum*, the ultimate end and purpose of a human life.

The Hebrew language conveys something of this in a graphic and curious way. One of the key words for happiness in the Hebrew Bible is *ashrei*, a plural and construct form of the noun, literally meaning "the happinesses of . . ." That word underscores the reality that happiness is not a single thing, be it a feeling, an emotion, a state of mind, or a judgment upon a life as a whole. It is many things, the sum of which is greater than the parts.

There is no single exclusive view within Judaism as to the nature and form of happiness, though there are many profound meditations on it. Judaism is not a dogma or doctrine. As with Hinduism,

1 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 1.

2 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 1.

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for example, the "ism" is a late and Western abstraction imposed on a living tradition with many strands. Judaism is not an "ism" but an "is," not an abstract system but a way of life. A better way of thinking about it is to conceive of it as a conversation scored for many voices, some priestly, some prophetic, some sapiential, others mystical, yet others legal and jurisprudential. Happiness is inflected differently in these several modes of being, and in the pages that follow I will explore some of the differences as well as the commonalities.

No one tradition can claim a monopoly of wisdom on the subject of happiness. We deal here with genuine incommensurables: the irreducible multiplicity of ways of human flourishing. Judaism does not see itself as the only path to wisdom.[3] It has, however, one feature worth noting: that somehow Jews found happiness in the midst of some of the worst suffering ever endured by a people. Three moments stand out in my mind.

The first was the Babylonian exile. Psalm 137 has preserved as if in aspic the feelings of devastation of the exiles:

> By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept
> when we remembered Zion. . . .
> How can we sing the Lord's song
> in a strange land?[4]

Yet, famously, the prophet Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles:

> Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. . . . Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.[5]

He told them, in effect, not to mourn. Without minimizing the trauma of exile, the loss of home, and the destruction of the Temple, he instructed them to find what happiness they could, even there.

The second, more than a century later, took place when Ezra and Nehemiah summoned the people to the Water Gate in the rebuilt Jerusalem on the first day of the seventh month, the Jewish New Year, as a prelude to a national renewal of the ancient covenant with God. Ezra read from the Torah to the people, having stationed Levites among the crowd to explain what he was saying. As they listened, the people wept, conscious of how far they had drifted from their spiritual mission. Nehemiah, however, stilled them, saying:

> Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.[6]

Kierkegaard wrote in his journal, "It takes moral courage to grieve; it takes religious courage to rejoice."[7] That, I think is what Jeremiah and Nehemiah were exemplifying.

The third arose out of a remark I made in one of my books about the Italian film director Roberto Begnini, who had made a comedy about the Holocaust and called it *Life is Beautiful*.[8]

3 Lam. Rab. 2:13.
4 Ps. 137:1, 4.
5 Jer. 29:5–7.
6 Neh. 8:10.
7 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Soul of Kierkegaard: Selections from His Journal*, ed. Alexander Dru (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 67.

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I wrote that though I understood the thesis of the film, I could not agree with it. In essence, it argued that humor kept people sane. Humor may have kept people sane, I said, but at Auschwitz, sanity was not enough to keep people alive.

"You are wrong," a survivor once said to me, and then, he told me his story. He and another prisoner in Auschwitz had become friends. They reached the conclusion that unless they were able to laugh, they would eventually lose the will to live. So they made an agreement. Each of them would look out, every day, for something about which they could laugh. Each night they would share their findings and laugh together. "A sense of humor," said the survivor, looking me in the eyes, "kept me alive." I cannot say I understand such courage, but I found it awe-inspiring.

If happiness is the refusal to be defeated by tragedy, Judaism is part of its history.

A CRITIQUE OF PURE HAPPINESS

Happiness, though, is not central to the Judaic value system. It is not the telos of human activity. Judaism is the pursuit of holiness, not the pursuit of happiness.[9] Happiness may be the result, but it is not the aim. One who serves God in love, says Maimonides, "does what is right because it is right, and eventually the good [i.e., happiness or blessedness] will follow."[10]

Happiness is not the first word that comes to mind when we think of the heroes and heroines of the Bible. They struggle, they wrestle, they argue, they contend. Four of the biblical prophets—Moses, Elijah, Jonah, and Jeremiah—pray to die, so relentless and difficult is the task they undertake. The figures of the Bible know exile, persecution, failure, and defeat. They encounter happiness all too rarely. This remains a feature of Judaism. One twentieth-century theologian entitled his book about Jewish spirituality *Strife of the Spirit*.[11] Another spoke of Judaism as thesis and antithesis without the mediating synthesis.[12] "Disciples of the wise," says the Talmud, "have no rest, neither in this world nor the next."[13]

The first child of the covenant is named, at God's insistence, Isaac (in Hebrew, *Yitzhak*), meaning, "He will laugh."[14] Yet Isaac's life is not conspicuous for its laughter. Born in Abraham and Sarah's old age, he is almost sacrificed by his father. He sees sibling rivalry between his two sons. Old and blind, he is deceived by Jacob. The only time Isaac is the subject of the verb *tz-ch-k*, "to laugh"—when he is seen "laughing with" his wife Rebekah, a polite circumlocution for physical intimacy—it endangers his life.[15] What God intends by calling Abraham's child "He will laugh" remains unclear throughout the biblical text.

Is there something about Abrahamic monotheism that has the effect of displacing happiness as a central value? Perhaps it is that happiness, conceived of as a state of harmony or being at peace with the world, makes sense if we conceive of God or ultimate reality as immanent within the world. To

8 Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 186. See also Jonathan Sacks, *Future Tense: Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), 254.

9 In particular, see Exod. 19:6; Lev. 19:2.

10 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance* 10:2.

11 Adin Steinsaltz, *The Strife of the Spirit* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1988).

12 Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, "Majesty and Humility," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 25–37.

13 BT Berakoth 64a.

14 Gen. 17:19.

15 Gen. 26:8.

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be at one with God becomes being at one with what is. This is the "oceanic feeling" that Freud identified with religious experience as such.[16]

That harmony, actual or potential, is shattered by the voice, within the human situation, of a transcendental God, a God who stands beyond nature, who created nature, and who is therefore free—that is to say, whose will stands outside the nexus of natural causality. Prophetic consciousness, hearing the call of One who transcends the universe, lives in the cognitive and moral dissonance between the world that is and the world that ought to be.

The loss of the sense of at-oneness with the world is the source of what Herbert Schneidau called the "sacred discontent"[17] that the Hebrew Bible introduced into Western civilization: its constant tendency to self-critique and the restless desire to redeem a less-than-perfect world. Myth vindicates the status quo and maps it onto the structure of the universe. The Hebrew Bible, with its rejection of myth, challenges the status quo in its striving for a perfection that beckons from beyond the visible horizon.

It was precisely this element of Judaism that aroused the wrath of Arthur Schopenhauer. He believed that it was the will itself—central to Judaic existence—that is the source of human suffering. Happiness is to be found, if at all, in the extinction of desire.[18]

There is a genuine incommensurability here between religions of acceptance and those of protest: between, in extremis, the way of the mystic and that of the prophet. Yet it would be wrong to call the great prophetic lives unhappy. It is rather that happiness or the lack of it seems irrelevant to such a life, for two reasons. First, because happiness, at least in its modern sense, has to do with inward states of mind, with the way we feel. That cannot be a primary value in a moral system whose focus is on how we respond to challenge, which has to do with how we act, not how we feel. Second, happiness—*eudaemonia*, *felicitas*—has to do with external circumstance. It involves good fortune. The word happiness is itself connected with "hap" (as in happenstance) meaning "chance" or "luck." Luck has no part to play within the biblical worldview.[19] The commoner can be as righteous as the king, the poor as blessed as the rich.

A different value system is at stake. Consider Abraham: Called to leave his land, birthplace, and father's house, no sooner does he arrive at his destination, the land of Canaan, than famine forces him elsewhere. At least twice, his life is in danger. Promised by God that he would become a great nation, the father of many nations, with as many children as there are stars in the sky or sands on the seashore, he has to wait seemingly endlessly for one child, whom he is then called on to sacrifice. Promised the entire land, he has to bargain with the Hittites and pay an inflated price for a single field with a burial cave. Yet the description of his death—"Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, old and satisfied"[20]—is one of the most serene in the Bible.

We see Jacob, who has told Pharaoh "few and evil have the days of my life been,"[21] reunited at the end with his beloved son Joseph, and blessing his grandchildren, the only such scene in the

16 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, rev. ed. (London: Hogarth Press, Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1930), 12.

17 Herbert N. Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

18 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1883).

19 This was the element of Kantian moral philosophy that Bernard Williams found problematic. See Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality," in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–19.

20 Gen. 25:8.

21 Gen. 47:9.

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Bible: "I never expected to see your face, and behold, God has let me see your children as well."[22] Moses, not permitted to enter the Promised Land, nonetheless sees it from afar and is buried, says the Bible, by God himself.

There is here a kind of fulfillment, for which happiness seems somehow the wrong word, that consists in having taken part in the struggle, of having given one's best, of not having compromised by bowing down to the self-images of the age, of knowing that, in the words of Rabbi Tarfon, "It is not for you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."[23]

This kind of moral heroism, a counterpart of the physical heroism of the ancient Greeks, continues to resonate in Western culture. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was a depressive with anguished self-doubts. Three of his siblings committed suicide. Yet his final words were, "Tell them I have had a wonderful life."[24] Theodore Roosevelt spoke memorably about moral courage in his great address at the Sorbonne:

> The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.[25]

"Happiness" seems too bloodless and tame a word for such a life, yet there is a kind of sublimity in a life lived by high ideals. And the fact that one is doing so in obedience to the Divine word redeems such a life from tragedy on the one hand, egoism on the other. The human condition would be impoverished without this form of prophetic integrity.

HAPPINESS AS BLESSEDNESS

There are, however, two key terms in the Hebrew Bible that belong within the same conceptual territory as happiness. One, already mentioned, is *ashrei*, literally "the happinesses of." The other is *simchah*, "joy."

Ashrei means, roughly, happiness as blessedness. This is the state of one who has lived in accordance with the will of God, a person who is good and does good, who honors God and his or her fellow creatures, who has been blessed in life and who, living among the righteous, is held in high regard. This is the happiness of balance and virtue, of justice and compassion, of living well and faring well. The book of Psalms begins with the portrait of such a life:

> Happy [*Ashrei*] is the one
> who does not walk in step with the wicked
> or stand in the way of sinners
> or sit in the seat of mockers,
> but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
> and on His law he meditates day and night.[26]

22 Gen. 48:11.
23 MT Avot 2:16.
24 Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 81.
25 Theodore Roosevelt, "Citizenship in a Republic" (speech, Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910) transcript, http://www.theodore-roosevelt.com/trsorbonnespeech.html.

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The psalm is brief, a mere six verses. Yet it is built around two poetic images strangely at odds with one another. One is the image of rootedness and fertility:

> He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
> which yields its fruit in season
> and whose leaf does not wither—
> whatever he does prospers.
> Not so the wicked!
> They are like chaff
> that the wind blows away.[27]

Elsewhere, the Psalmist compares the righteous to the slow growth of a tree as opposed to the wicked who "spring up like grass" only to be mown down.[28] The Hebrew word for "secular" or "profane" is *chol*, which means "empty" but also "sand" that can be blown by the wind. "Secular" in Judaism does not mean "worldly" (as in *seculum*), since holiness does not require retreat from but engagement with the world. Rather, secularity is rootlessness. The righteous have roots. They are not driven by the winds of fashion or desire. They stand firm. They grow. They bear fruit. They flourish.

The other and conflicting image is of movement, "the way." Note in the first verse the sequence of verbs from motion to stasis: the wicked first walk, then stand, then sit. The concluding verse contrasts the two "ways":

> The Lord knows the way of the righteous,
> but the way of the wicked shall perish.[29]

The strange juxtaposition of these two images—the rootedness of the tree, the progress of the journey—is in fact implicit in the word *ashrei* itself. Asher—the son of Jacob and Leah's handmaid Zilpah—is so called because, as Leah says, "Happy am I, for the daughters will call me blessed,"[30] which is almost certainly a reference to fertility. Asherah was the Canaanite goddess of fertility, often represented by a tree or sacred grove.[31] The word *Asher* is also related to a verb meaning "to go" or "to advance." The Psalmist says: "My steps [*ashurai*] have held fast to your path."[32]

Embedded, then, in the semantic field of one of the main biblical words for happiness are two key ideas of Jewish existence as defined by the Mosaic books: the journey and the destination, the long walk to freedom and the promised land at journey's end, the quintessential biblical tension between the "now" of the promise and the "not yet" of fulfillment.

The normative image in the Bible is of a people at one with its God—the God, at once, of creation, revelation, and redemption—faithfully following His laws and enjoying the richness of His bounty in flocks and fields:

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26 Ps. 1:1–2.
27 Ps. 1:3–4.
28 Ps. 92.
29 Ps. 1:6.
30 Gen. 30:13.
31 Deut. 16:21.
32 Ps. 17:5.

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> Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways.
> You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy,
> and it shall go well with you.[33]

This, as Darrin McMahon rightly notes, "is the happiness of nomads, shepherds and farmers, the blessings of a people long enslaved and continually at war with hostile enemies and hostile terrain."[34] It is also a profoundly communal happiness, the happiness of *Gemeinschaft* as opposed to *Gesellschaft*, the happiness of small face-to-face communities rather than that of urban anonymity.

ECCLESIASTES ON HAPPINESS

This kind of happiness—the happiness of simplicity, of living by God's will and seeing life as His blessing—eventually encounters crisis when populations become urbanized and pleasures sophisticated. Cities do not get good press in the Hebrew Bible.[35] The first city is built by the first murderer, Cain. Babel, the archetypal city-state, becomes a symbol of self-aggrandizement: "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves."[36] Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities of the plain, represent sexual depravity and violence against strangers.[37] Anticipating the great fourteenth-century Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun, the Hebrew Bible associates urban life with a loss of *asabiyah*, or social solidarity.[38] There is, within the city and its artificial enjoyments, the constant risk of selfishness and corruption, of seeking to find happiness in wealth or power.

This gives rise to one of the supreme meditations on the nature of happiness, the book of Ecclesiastes. Kohelet, the narrator (often translated as "the Preacher"), is the man who has everything—houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, pools, servants, the entire entourage of wealth and success—and finds that they mean nothing:

> "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher,
> "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."[39]

The standard translations of the keyword *hevel*, "vain," "pointless," or "meaningless," mask the fact that it means in fact "a breath." As in many other ancient languages, the Hebrew words for soul or life are all forms of respiration. *Nefesh*, life, comes from the verb meaning "to breathe deeply." *Neshamah*, soul, means "to inhale." *Ruach*, spirit, is also the word for wind. *Hevel* is a part of this family of words. It means, specifically, "a shallow breath."

What Kohelet means in the opening chapters of the book is that seeking refuge in wealth and possessions, or even in books and wisdom, is futile, since life is no more than a fleeting breath. Ecclesiastes is a sustained meditation on the sheer vulnerability of life. Kohelet speaks of *hevel* in

33 Ps. 128.
34 Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 79.
35 See Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trans. Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970).
36 Gen. 11:4.
37 Gen. 18:16–19:29.
38 Ibn Khaldun, *Al Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967).
39 Eccles. 1:2.

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a way that recalls King Lear at the end of Shakespeare's play, as he holds dead Cordelia in his arms and says: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life / And thou no breath at all?"[40]

Hevel, a shallow breath, is all that separates the living from the dead. We live, we die, and it is as if we had never been. We build and others occupy. We accumulate possessions but others enjoy them. The good we do is soon forgotten. The wisdom we acquire is useless, for it merely brings us back to a recognition of our mortality. To seek happiness in objects that endure is a kind of self-deception: they last, we do not. This leads Kohelet to a subversive conclusion:

> Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both. As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over animal. Everything is but a fleeting breath. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.[41]

Surprisingly for a religious text, there is no reference to an afterlife; no moralization of fate, no argument that virtue is its own reward; no alleviation of the stark fact of mortality.

Yet Kohelet refuses to let disillusion have the final word. Once we acknowledge that only God is eternal and human happiness must be sought within the limits of our all-too-brief span of years, then we can find it in the now-ness of time:

> A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work.
> This too, I see, is from the hand of God.[42]

> I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live.[43]

> The sleep of a labourer is sweet, whether he eats little or much.[44]

> Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this fleeting life that God has given you under the sun.[45]

Kohelet, the man of untold wealth and sophistication, ultimately finds pleasure in simple things, in love and work, in eating and drinking, in doing good to others and knowing that there is a time for all things, to be born and to die, to weep and to laugh, to acknowledge the eternity of God and to accept the limits of a human life.

This is the happiness of the great wisdom traditions, within the same general territory as the Stoics and Epicureans, Horace's *Carpe Diem*, Hillel's "If not now, when?," and even Sigmund Freud and Bertrand Russell. This is the happiness at which great minds have arrived from widely differing starting points, often only after experiencing the same disillusionment with which Kohelet began his meditation; it is the "second simplicity" that comes when you recognize that all the things you think bring happiness are, in fact, mere substitutes for it.

40 William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 5, Scene 3.
41 Eccles. 3:19–20.
42 Eccles. 2:24.
43 Eccles. 3:12.
44 Eccles. 5:12.
45 Eccles. 9:9.

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SIMCHAH: HAPPINESS SHARED

There is a second theme in Kohelet that points the way to a more important feature of the biblical tradition as a whole. If we listen carefully to the great litany of wealth the author itemizes, we hear a note unheard elsewhere in the Bible:

> I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines. . . . Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.[46]

What is striking here is the insistent, repeated use of the first person singular. Nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible is it used so relentlessly and repetitively. In the original Hebrew, the effect is doubled because of the chiming of the verbal suffix and the pronoun: *Baniti li*, *asiti li*, *kaniti li*, "I built for myself, I made for myself, I bought for myself." The source of Kohelet's unhappiness becomes immediately clear, and it was spelled out many centuries later by the great sage Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I?"[47]

An aside: When I was an undergraduate student, I visited the great Jewish leader Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneersohn, known as the Lubavitcher Rebbe. As I was waiting to meet him, one of his disciples told me the story of a man who had recently written a letter to the Rebbe that went something like this: "I need the Rebbe's help. I am deeply depressed. I pray and find no comfort. I perform the commands but feel nothing. I find it hard to carry on." The Rebbe had sent a compelling reply without writing a single word. He simply ringed the first word in every sentence of the original letter, the word "I." It was, he was hinting, the man's preoccupation with himself that was at the root of his depression. The door to happiness, psychotherapist Viktor Frankl used to say in the name of Kierkegaard, opens outward.[48]

It is the "I . . . for myself" in Ecclesiastes that alerts the ear to the inevitable futility of the author's search for happiness. In Judaism, happiness is not something we find in solitude, still less in self-gratification. It is something we experience together.

COVENANTAL HAPPINESS

Hence the significance of the second keyword for happiness: the noun *simchah* and the verb *s-m-ch*. This means joy, rejoicing, elation, celebration. It is a mood, but it is also a mode of being, of living in a state of thankfulness. Unlike *osher/ashrei*, which is predicated on the individual as individual, *simchah* is essentially collective. It only exists in virtue of being shared. It is a form of social happiness.

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46 Eccles. 2:4–8, 11.

47 MT Avot 1:14.

48 Viktor E. Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (1955; repr., New York: Knopf, 1963), 46.

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This is the term Ecclesiastes uses, and it appears seventeen times in the course of the book. But the key text about the place of happiness in the religious life is Deuteronomy. There we read that it is something a husband is supposed to create for his wife:

> If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.[49]

It is something to be expressed at festivals or on bringing first fruits to Jerusalem:

> Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household.[50]

It is something to which we invite the people who otherwise are vulnerable and alone:

> And rejoice before the Lord your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the strangers, the fatherless and the widows living among you.[51]

In an astonishing passage, the failure to experience happiness is identified as a cause of national disintegration and the curses of division and defeat:

> Because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and gladly in the abundance of all, therefore in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and dire poverty, you will serve the enemies the Lord sends against you.[52]

Simchah is covenantal happiness, the happiness of an entire people as it gives thanks to God for its land, its freedom, its harvests, and its crops. It is communal, something we only experience when we leave our separate-nesses behind and become part of a covenanted community. *Simchah* tells us that happiness is part of the tenor and texture of our relationships and the way a culture is geared to a sense of gratitude. It belongs to a worldview that has already declared at the start of the human story that "[i]t is not good for man to be alone."[53]

The root *s-m-ch* occurs only once in each of the first four books of the Bible, from Genesis to Numbers, but twelve times in Deuteronomy, where it is central to the text's vision of societal beatitude. Deuteronomy consists of Moses's farewell addresses to the next generation, who will cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. In it he reviews the history of the exodus and the desert years and renews the covenant their parents made at Mount Sinai.

His argument is arresting and unexpected. The forty years of wandering, during which the Israelites had no land, no home, and no physical security, were not the difficult years but the easy ones. The real challenge would come when they had land and homes and affluence. That is when they would risk forgetting where they came from and why they were there. They would forget to give thanks to God, and when a society forgets to give thanks, it loses the art of happiness.

49 Deut. 24:5.
50 Deut. 26:11.
51 Deut. 16:11.
52 Deut. 28:47–48.
53 Gen. 2:18.

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This is one of the great contributions of the Hebrew Bible to the understanding of happiness. We are social animals; therefore we find happiness in society. We are persons-in-relation;[54] therefore our happiness depends on the depth and quality of our relationships. But these are not things that happen automatically. Societies can be unjust, unequal, tyrannical, or anarchic. The good society is that which offers the best chance of enduring happiness for its members, and Deuteronomy is among the classic attempts to describe such a society and the kind of happiness it seeks to enable. These are some of its distinctive features.

HAPPINESS IS OF THIS WORLD

Happiness, in biblical Judaism, is to be found in the here and now, in this universe that God created and seven times pronounced "good," in this embodied life, the mix of "dust of the earth" and "the breath of God."[55] The Hebrew Bible, and Judaism generally, steers clear of those Gnostic, Manichean, or Platonic tendencies that see a sharp separation between body and soul, the physical and spiritual, the world of time and change and that of eternity.

There is surprisingly little reference to the afterlife in the Hebrew Bible, and it is never offered as an answer to the problem of evil: why the wicked prosper and the innocent suffer. Nor is there any reference to original sin or the fallen-ness of the human condition. We sin; we repent; God forgives—collectively and individually. It is here, on Earth and in this life, that justice is to be fought for, compassion practiced, and happiness achieved.

Happiness in Judaism is not seen in contradistinction to physical pleasure. If hedonism is the pursuit of pleasure, and asceticism the renunciation of pleasure, then the intricate structure of Jewish law in relation to food, drink, and sexual relations should be seen as the sanctification of pleasure.

THE REJECTION OF ASCETICISM

There is a corresponding rejection, within the Jewish mainstream, of the voluntary embrace of suffering or poverty. The Qumran sect excepted, there are no monasteries or convents in Judaism, and no virtue of celibacy. There is no tradition of the holy mendicant who gives away his wealth and subsists on charity.

The apparent exception to this rule is the case of the Nazirite[56] who renounces wine and grape products. However, it is just here that we see the extent of the rabbinic transformation of this idea. The biblical text states that at the end of his period of Naziriteship, the Nazirite brings a sin offering.[57] The obvious explanation is that he is ending his period of special holiness and re-entering the everyday world. His "sin" lies in abandoning this higher level of holiness.

However, in a radical rereading, we find this rabbinic statement of the law:

> It has been taught: Eleazar ha-Kappar Berabbi says: What is Scripture referring to when it says [of the Nazirite], "And make atonement for him, because he sinned by reason of the soul." Against which soul

54 The reference is to John Macmurray's fine study, *Persons in Relation* (London: Faber, 1970).
55 Gen. 2:7.
56 Num. 6:1–21.
57 Num. 6:13–14.

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> did he sin? [It must mean that] he denied himself wine. We can now make this inference from minor to major: If this man who denied himself only wine is termed a sinner, how much more so he who denies himself the enjoyment of many things.[58]

According to this interpretation, his sin lay in becoming a Nazirite in the first place! This is a clear polemic against asceticism. In the Jerusalem Talmud, the third-century teacher Rav goes as far as to say that in the world to come, one will have to give an account of every legitimate pleasure one denied oneself in this life.[59]

Maimonides states in *The Guide for the Perplexed*[60] that perfection of the body—securing one's physical needs—takes chronological priority over perfection of the soul. You cannot soar to the highest reaches of spirituality if you are sick, hungry, or homeless. There is a down-to-earth quality about classic Jewish thought on this subject—a refusal to romanticize poverty, or to justify suffering.

THE PRIMACY OF THE PERSONAL OVER THE POLITICAL

The happiness of a society depends on the strength and depth of its relationships. The Hebrew Bible makes this point by the order in which it tells its stories. Genesis—a book about husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings and their rivalries—is the prelude to Exodus—a book about nations and power, slavery and liberation. Both contain a Divine covenant, Genesis with Abraham as an individual, Exodus with the Israelites as a people. Genesis is about the covenantal family, Exodus about the covenantal society.

Similarly, the book of Ruth is the historical prologue to the First Book of Samuel. Samuel tells the story of the birth of Israel as a kingdom. Ruth—a book about the love and loyalty of Ruth for Naomi, and Boaz for Ruth—discloses its purpose at the end when it reveals that Ruth is the great grandmother of David, Israel's second and greatest king.

The effect of these two large literary structures is to establish the primacy of the personal over the political. The Hebrew Bible would largely endorse the view of Oliver Goldsmith:

> How small, of all that human hearts endure,
> That part which laws or kings can cause or cure![61]

Happiness, blessedness, or felicity live in the bonds of loyalty and love that structure the extended family and local community.

The political order, in Judaism, is secondary to the social order, which in turn depends on relationships within the family. The central value of biblical morality is love: love of God, of neighbor, and of the stranger. Around it are the covenantal virtues—*tzedek*, righteousness; *mishpat*, justice; *chessed*, loving-kindness; and *rachamim*, compassion. Service to the state, central to the civic ethics of the Greeks, is in Judaism an instrumental rather than an essential value. It is the quality of our interpersonal relationships that more than anything else shape the nature of our happiness.

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58 BT Taanit 11a (quoting Num. 6:11).

59 JT Kiddushin 4:12.

60 Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, bk. 3, chap. 27.

61 Oliver Goldsmith, "The Traveller," in *Select Poems of Goldsmith*, ed. William J. Rolfe (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1875), 70.

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EQUALITY OF DIGNITY

It is an essential of collective grace that everyone within the society of the covenant has access to the material prerequisites of happiness. The elaborate welfare provisions of biblical law, the corners of the field and the various other parts of the harvest left for the poor, the distribution of tithes, the release of debts in the sabbatical year and the return of ancestral property in the Jubilee, the release of slaves and the regulation of employer-employee relationships: all were designed, as Henry George put it, "to lay the foundation of a social state in which deep poverty and degrading want should be unknown."[62] Norman Gottwald has argued that central to the biblical project was the construction—by the standards of the ancient world—of an egalitarian or non-hierarchical society.[63]

This is an argument recently revived by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in their book *The Spirit Level*, in which they argue that "the scale of income differences has a powerful effect on how we relate to one another."[64] The happiest societies are also the most equal societies. Material prosperity has an effect on health and wellbeing at the most basic level, but once essential needs are satisfied, increasing affluence yields diminishing returns.

It is not so much equality per se that drives biblical legislation but a sense of human dignity and inclusion, especially when it comes to the festivals, the moments of collective celebration, which, as the Bible reiterates, must include lonely and marginal members of society. Maimonides gives this sharp expression in his law code. Writing about festival celebrations, he states:

> While one eats and drinks himself, it is his duty to feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and other poor and unfortunate people, for he who locks the doors to his courtyard and eats and drinks with his wife and family, without giving anything to eat and drink to the poor and the bitter in the soul—his meal is not a rejoicing in a divine commandment but a rejoicing in his own stomach. It is of such persons that Scripture says, "Their sacrifices shall be to them as the bread of mourners, all that eat thereof shall be polluted; for their bread shall be for their own appetite." Rejoicing of this kind is a disgrace to those who indulge in it . . .[65]

We may not be happy, suggests the Bible, while others are deprived of the chance of happiness.

GRATITUDE AND MEMORY

Another systematic insight of Moses's remarks in the course of Deuteronomy is the centrality of gratitude to the maintenance of social happiness over time. He presents this by way of a pointed contrast between blessing and forgetting:

> And you shall eat and be satisfied, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God . . . lest, when you eat and are satisfied, and have built goodly houses and live in them, and your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, your heart will become proud and you forget the Lord your God.[66]

62 Henry George, "Moses" (lecture, National Single Tax League, Cincinnati, OH, 1918).

63 Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979).

64 Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 4–5.

65 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of Festivals* 6:18 (quoting Hosea 9:4).

66 Deut. 8:10–14.

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Forgetfulness begets ingratitude and self-belief: "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.'"[67]

Memory and gratitude, argues Moses, are the only antidotes to the corrupting power of affluence. *Zakhor*, the imperative to remember, is a central theme of Deuteronomy: Remember that you were once slaves in Egypt. Remember the days of old. Remember that what you have—freedom, the land, its produce, life itself—is the gift of God, and give thanks. Many of the great rituals of Deuteronomy, the festivals, the bringing of first fruits, even the public reading of the covenant every seven years,[68] are occasions of collective memory and gratitude. American Thanksgiving is its most conspicuous modern equivalent.

This is a theme central to post-biblical Judaism. The daily morning prayers begin with a litany of thanksgiving, as do the blessings over food, drink, and other enjoyments. Gratitude is an essential element in happiness, for it focuses our attention on what we have, not what we lack; on what we posses, not what others possess. It is the safeguard against the politics of envy.[69]

THE SABBATH

One of the most powerful institutions in the biblical structure of societal happiness is the Sabbath. The Hellenistic writers could not understand the Sabbath at all. They knew, as did every ancient people, the concept of a holy day. What they did not understand was a day whose holiness consisted in not working. They attributed the Jews' observance of it to sheer laziness.[70]

The Sabbath is an unusual institution. It is what I have called elsewhere "utopia in the present,"[71] a weekly rehearsal of the ends of days in which all hierarchies of dominance and power are suspended, in which wealth and power count for nothing, in which no one can compel anyone else to work, in which employer and employee, servant and master, are equally free. The Sabbath is the foretaste of the ideal society which is the opposite of Egypt in which there is a hierarchy of power and in which strangers are enslaved.

Achad Ha-am famously wrote that more than the Jewish people kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept the Jewish people, and there have been few social institutions that have renewed their meaning more often over time.[72] In the biblical era, the Sabbath was a protest against slavery. In the industrial age it was a respite from long working hours. In the information age it has become a blessed release from the tyranny of emails, tweets, and ever-more intrusive social media. The Sabbath is the antidote to the condition Wordsworth was one of the first to diagnose:

67 Deut. 8:17.

68 Deut. 31:10–13.

69 For recent research, see Robert Emmons, *Thanks!: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

70 See, for example, Augustine's discussion of Seneca's views on the Sabbath. Augustine, *City of God*, bk. 6, chap. 11.

71 Jonathan Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World's Oldest Religion* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 136–41, esp. 139.

72 Achad Ha-am, "Al Parshat Derakhim," in *Sefer Hashabbat*, ed. Hayyim Nahman Bialik (Tel Aviv: Agudat Ohel Shem, 1936), 3:516.

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The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.[73]

A happy life needs its pauses and chapter breaks, the moments when we savor our blessings.

HOPE

The final dimension to the Judaic sense of happiness is one that is hard to define yet is perhaps the most consequential of all. There is a fundamental difference between the vision of life as defined by the Greek concepts of *moira* and *ananke*, or inexorable, blind fate, and the Jewish concepts of human repentance and divine forgiveness. These latter mean that there is no fate that is inexorable, no decree that cannot be averted. This forms the subject of the book of Jonah. The prophet is told by God to tell the inhabitants of Nineveh that in forty days the city will be destroyed. Jonah tries and fails to flee the mission. Eventually he delivers the message, the people repent and are forgiven, and the city is saved. Jonah then prays to die.

Jonah fails to understand the difference between a prophecy and a prediction. If a prediction comes to pass, it has succeeded. If a prophecy comes to pass, it has failed. Prophecy exists only within a culture that believes in both human free will and divine forgiveness. Cultures that believe in inexorable fate write tragedies in the manner of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Cultures that believe in freedom and forgiveness produce a literature of hope, of which Isaiah is the poet laureate.

Tragic cultures tend to give rise to Stoic or Epicurean forms of happiness. A key value is *ataraxia*, a kind of immunity against fate through a lowering of the emotional temperature and a reluctance to invest heavily in enduring emotional ties. Hope cultures have a different tonality. They are not afraid to encourage strong emotional bonds of love and loyalty. They do not see the universe as fundamentally hostile or indifferent. They have an attitude of trust toward the future, whatever the straits of the present. This sensibility permeates many of the Psalms, most famously Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd."[74] One of its loveliest expressions is given by the prophet Habakkuk:

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.[75]

THE MANY FACES OF HAPPINESS

I have described three sensibilities in Judaism: the prophetic life of struggle; the happiness of *ashrei*, with its life of simplicity in accordance with the will of God, to be found in the Psalms and reaffirmed after much soul-searching by Ecclesiastes; and *simchah*, the life-lived-in-relationship given supreme expression in Moses's covenantal vision in the book of Deuteronomy.

73 William Wordsworth, "The World is Too Much With Us," in *Select Poems of William Wordsworth*, ed. William J. Rolfe (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1889), 120.

74 Ps. 23.

75 Hab. 3:17–18.

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In the course of Jewish history, many modes would eventually emerge. There was Maimonides' philosophical happiness, the union of human and Divine through the active intellect and the life of contemplation. There was the asceticism and embrace of martyrdom of the twelfth-century North European Jewish pietists, the Hassidei Ashkenaz. There was the *unio mystica* of the Kabbalists and the deep yearning of the mystics of Safed. There was the exuberance of the Hassidim of eighteenth-century Eastern Europe who, more than most, took as central the idea of serving God with joy.

These differences arise because of the dual nature of happiness. On the one hand, it refers to a set of experiences, from joy and exultation to contentment and tranquility, which are universal. This allows us to make cross-cultural comparisons of happiness by asking people questions about their satisfaction with life, hence the concept of a "science" of happiness. But reflective minds in many ages and cultures have identified happiness with the *summum bonum*, that which we seek for its own sake, whose achievement or even pursuit forms the ultimate goal of all our striving. In this sense, happiness is culturally specific. Aristotelian *eudaemonia* is not the Jewish life of blessedness; still less is it Buddhist nirvana. Happiness in this second sense is inconceivable without a culture. It belongs constitutively to how we see the human condition and the highest achievement of a human life. The difference between these forms of happiness is akin to the distinction made by P. F. Strawson between social morality and ethical ideal. Social morality is universal. It is what allows us to live peaceably and graciously together. Ethical ideals are pictures we form of an admirable life, and they are irreducibly particular. They belong to what he calls "the realm of truths rather than truth."[76]

I have spent the most time on the social vision of Moses because it seems to me to represent Judaism's most original contribution to the understanding of human wellbeing. Deuteronomy offers the sharp insight that poverty is not the only threat to happiness. So, too, is affluence. The former robs us of the external conditions of felicity, but the latter can subtly undermine its moral ecology. Millennia would pass before two highly original thinkers, Ibn Khaldun and Giambattista Vico, would recapture this idea and build it into their theories of the rise and fall of civilizations.

Ibn Khaldun focused on the life of cities and the way urban culture gradually erodes social solidarity. Vico argued that all civilizations pass through a sequence of phases: "People first sense what is necessary, then consider what is useful, next attend to comfort, later delight in pleasures, soon grow dissolute in luxury, and finally grow mad squandering their estates." The character of society changes; it is "first crude, then severe, next generous, later delicate, and finally dissolute."[77] What drives the logic of Deuteronomy and its vision of a society built on Divine-human covenant is the challenge of defeating this cycle. How can a culture stay young? How can it survive not only its defeats but also its success? These are the questions we should be asking in the postmodern, late-capitalist, liberal democratic West.

Moses's vision is inherently religious. Similarly, Vico believed that society needed a religious base if it was to survive at all:

> If peoples lose their religion, nothing remains to keep them living in a society. They have no shield for their defence, no basis for their decisions, no foundation for their stability, and no form by which they exist in the world.[78]

76 P. F. Strawson, "Social Morality and Individual Ideal," in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974), 29–49.

77 Giambattista Vico, *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations*, trans. David Marsh, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), 98.

78 Ibid., 490.

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Whether this is so is beyond the parameters of this paper. We can, however, state, without religious terminology, some of Moses's key perceptions. Happiness is social because we are social animals. Social happiness requires a network of strong relationships, of which the family is the first and most basic. This requires an ethic of sexual fidelity as well as parental responsibility. Collective happiness also requires a sense of collective responsibility and a practical concern for the welfare and dignity of others. We need to cultivate the sense of gratitude, which in turn requires collective memory as well as the rituals of thanksgiving. Social happiness requires some functional equivalent of the Sabbath: cultural space within which we focus on the value of things, not their price, and on the important, not just the urgent. Without a Sabbath to place limits on our striving, we will exhaust both ourselves and our environment. Cultures, like individuals, can suffer from burnout. That may be our condition now.

"Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today." So begins Tony Judt's *Ill Fares the Land*, the book he published shortly before his death in 2010. He continued:

> For thirty years we have made a virtue out of the pursuit of material self-interest: indeed, this very pursuit now constitutes whatever remains of our sense of collective purpose. We know what things cost but have no idea what they are worth.[79]

These concerns were widely shared. The financial crisis of 2008 brought to an end the longest sustained period of economic growth in living memory, but even before the collapse, there was a widespread sense that values and virtues were being eroded in the headlong pursuit of material gain. People in the West were getting richer but not measurably happier.

Already in the 1980s Alastair MacIntyre, charting the demise of virtue, spoke of the coming Dark Ages.[80] Robert Bellah and his co-authors, in *Habits of the Heart*, warned darkly of the way in which social ecology is damaged "by the destruction of the subtle ties that bind human beings to one another, leaving them frightened and alone."[81] In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam documented the erosion of social capital as people became more preoccupied with self and less with society and community.[82] Others noted the loss of metanarratives by which people made sense of the human condition.[83]

These phenomena carried a measurable price: the rise, especially among the young, of depressive illness and stress-related syndromes, of drug and alcohol abuse, of violent crime and attempted suicide. Stable families were being replaced by an almost open-ended range of variants, leaving in their wake troubled and disadvantaged children. Fewer people found themselves surrounded by the networks of support traditionally provided by local congregations and communities.

The current preoccupation with happiness testifies to a genuine questioning of whether we may have taken a wrong turn in the unbridled pursuit of economic gain. Constantly alerting us to what we do not have instead of making us thankful for what we do have, the consumer society is a highly efficient system for the production and distribution of unhappiness. Something is wrong with an

79 Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), 1.

80 Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

81 Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 284.

82 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

83 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

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economy predicated on spending money we do not have to buy things we do not need for the sake of a happiness that will not last.

An ancient question returns to haunt us: What does it profit a culture to gain the whole world and forfeit its soul? Moses's vision of a societal beatitude suggests that happiness is found elsewhere than where we have been pursuing it in the acquisitive individualism of our late capitalist, postmodern order. It is the resilience of *simchah*, the joy that exists in virtue of being shared—and that Jews found even in the midst of tragedy—that gives us the ever-renewable promise of hope.

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