

“Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, amid gladness and goodness of heart.” (28:47)

Another year has gone by, and Rosh Hashanah is a few weeks away. Chazal delve into the reason that Parashas Ki Savo, with its ninety-eight curses, is read shortly before the New Year. We suggest that it is a wake-up call, a reminder that whatever has transpired during the course of the past year, whether it was good or bad, happened by design and for a reason. It did not just occur. Retribution and accountability – two concepts that we often tend to ignore – play important roles. We rarely understand the things that happen to us as being directly correlated to the things we do.

The curses which form the major component of Parashas Ki Savo are a sobering reminder that Hashem responds to our actions – both positive and negative. Even our attitude in mitzvah performance – enthusiasm and joy – determine our reward. Indeed, Moshe Rabbeinu admonished the Jewish People and warned them that they would be severely punished if they did not serve Hashem with joy and happiness. This is enigmatic. How can we be enjoined to be happy? One is either a happy person, or he is not. You cannot compel someone to be happy. First, the Torah does not tell us to be happy; it commands us to serve Hashem with joy. One who does not serve Hashem with joy, but rather serves Him as if he must do so, degrades the mitzvah and ridicules the service. What about happiness, however, at times when one is not actively involved in a religious experience? Who says that one must walk around happy all day? We suggest that this question reflects a lack of awareness in regard to a fundamental matter. We serve Hashem all of the time – or, at least, we are supposed to. We have no specific time when we don our “service” hat and act differently than we do during the rest of the day. A Jew serves Hashem every waking moment of the day. This should be reflected in his total demeanor. His attitude towards life should be enthusiastic and exciting, demonstrating zest and vibrance. Life gives him opportunity to serve Hashem, to thank Him for all His beneficence. One who is not happy with life, who is depressed and melancholy, does not appreciate the good Hashem grants him, and, consequently, cannot serve Him properly.

Mitzvah performance should bring joy to our lives. This can occur only if we approach mitzvos with excitement and enthusiasm. For some special mitzvos, joy is an inherent part of the mitzvah. Shabbos is meant to be festive. We sing zemiros, songs, during the meal to express our joy and happiness. In the Friday night zemirah we sing, “Yom zeh l'Yisrael orah v'simchah,” “This (Shabbos) day for Yisrael is one of light and gladness.” Iturei Torah cites a story that illustrates this idea. Horav Simcha Bunim, z.l., m'Peshischa was a chassidic rebbe whose influence over his followers was powerful, yet loving. Hence, it was no wonder that his chassidim flocked to him from all areas just to be in his presence. If they could not manage to be with him during the week, they would make every effort to spend Shabbos in his presence. Because of this, Shabbos in Peshischa became a singular occasion, a time of heightened joy in which everyone came to be with their beloved rebbe.

One particular chassid was a very bitter and critical person. He perceived something negative in every occurrence and on every occasion. This, of course, did not endear him to people. Once, the chassid set out before Shabbos with enough time to make it to Peshischa before Shabbos. This was not to occur. Try as he would, there was always “something” that kept coming up, delaying him and deterring him from his destination. When he finally arrived in Peshischa, he went to the Rebbe and explained that he was detained from arriving there before Shabbos.

The Rebbe listened to the bitter chassid recount his tale and told him the following: “Shabbos is a very kind and gracious host, who treats its guests with dignity. For example, when Rosh Chodesh occurs on Shabbos, Shabbos kindly relinquishes its Mussaf and Maftir. When Yom Tov falls on Shabbos, Shabbos grants Yom Tov not only its Mussaf and Maftir, but the actual Torah reading is also changed to accommodate Yom Tov. When Yom Kippur falls out on Shabbos, not only are the readings, Haftorah and Mussaf changed, the festive Shabbos meals are also deferred in honor of Yom Kippur.

“In contrast, when Tishah B’Av, our national day of mourning, coincides with Shabbos, with its foreboding and accompanying sadness and depression, a different attitude reigns. It is as if Shabbos were to say, ‘No, you cannot come today. It is a time of joy, and you bring sadness and depression. You must come at another time!’”

The Rebbe continued, “It is quite possible that you did not make it for Shabbos, because Shabbos did not want any part of you. You are bitter and disgruntled – the antithesis of Shabbos. Unhappiness and dejection – and those who spawn it – are not welcome guests until the joy that radiates throughout Shabbos is over. When you change your attitude towards life and people, you might receive an invitation.”