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**MENSCH-YISROEL:
PERSPECTIVES ON JUDAISM**

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Jewish Joyfulness

I have always been wary of descriptions of customs, practices, views and religious beliefs of times past or of distant peoples as reported by scholarly experts or travellers. My skepticism concerned mainly descriptions of Jewish customs, practices and religious beliefs as brought to us by non-Jewish authors.

There is nothing that is hidden or obscure in Judaism. Anyone who wishes to obtain a clear view of Jewish thinking and Jewish life can do so without difficulty. Jewish scriptures are not mysterious hieroglyphics; the Jewish Bible is available and accessible to every man, woman and child. There is no need to travel long distances to acquaint oneself with Jewish customs and practices. A visit to a neighbor who observes the Jewish law will enlighten any researcher as to the nature of Jewish living and will certainly save him many hours of nocturnal Judaic studies. Yet almost no subject of scholarly research is less understood and more misinterpreted than Jewish life and thought.

From Tacitus—whose writings usually reflect a clear-thinking, razor-sharp mind but who maintains that Jews worship donkey heads—down to the most recent “experts” on Judaism, almost everything that is said and written about things Jewish amounts to pure caricature. Rarely does the Jew detect a trend that reflects even one aspect of his Jewishness. This is also true for Jewish researchers, who seem to lose their objective approach as soon as they themselves stop observing the Jewish law.

Our Sages put it succinctly many centuries ago (ברכות יז.): שכל טוב, a true understanding of Judaism, will never be gained by לומדיהם, the theoreticians. It is left to עושיהם, to those whose daily thinking and acting is deeply rooted in Judaism. This is true until this very day.

Contemporary thinkers view Judaism as a religion marked by asceticism, gloomy masochism, a stifling ghetto atmosphere where an innocent smile is considered a sin, gratification and worldly pleasures a crime. This view is already reflected in Isaiah’s caustic comment (Ch. 28, 11–13): כי בלעגי שפה ובלשון אחרת ידבר אל העם הזה. . . זאת המנוחה הניתו:

לעיף וזאת המרגעה ולא אבוא שמוע. והיה להם דבר ה' צו לצו צו לקו קו לקו וזעיר שם זעיר שם למען ילכו וכשלו אהור ונשברו ונוקשו ונלכרו "For with irony and a glib tongue shall one preach to this people: Here is tranquility, let the weary rest, here there is the haven of bliss—but they would not listen. For the Word of God is to them nothing but command upon command, precept upon precept, restriction upon restriction, restraint upon restraint, petty details here and there, that they might go and fall backwards and be broken, thwarted and trapped." Yet, just one glance into the Jewish Bible, one glance at the totality of Jewish history should cause the observer to shake his head in wonderment. Is it possible? A religion that promises its loyal adherents earthly paradise, the blessings of rain and dew, of field and meadow, of earth and its fruit, of children, health, prosperity and peace—could such a religion be capable of stifling and restricting the joy of life? A religion that is so positive regarding the enjoyment and benefits of an active, creative and productive life that it often invites the totally unjustified criticism of being overly materialistically inclined—could such a religion frown upon the initiative of a positive, enjoyable and creative activity and favor a lifestyle of resignation and withdrawn meditation?

Witness how this religion and its observance succeeded in equipping the Jew with such fortitude of mind and spirit as to enable him to remain upright and strong throughout the millennia of harsh blows of fate. No other people can boast of a similar resilience, vitality and mental vigor in the face of persecution and suffering. The Jew withstood and overcame oppression, ridicule, privation, imprisonment, torture and the most violent forms of brutal aggression over a thousand years—none of them was able to extinguish the Jewish spark of life. Could any religion achieve this if it were dedicated to the perpetuation of grief and mourning, of pain and suppression?

Pain breaks the spirit, sorrow unnerves, grief demoralizes—only light-hearted serenity and cheerful optimism can provide the inner strength needed to overcome the heaviest blows of naked brutality. Indeed, an all-embracing love of life must be inherent in this disparaged and misunderstood Judaism to be able to arm its adherents against such onslaughts! Judaism must surely possess some wondrous force with which to illuminate with rays of sunny serenity the shabbiest hut serving as a dank hideout for the persecuted Jew! And how he would share his hard-won bread with wife and children in the best of spirits!

Remember the dark and cramped ghetto dwellings of your ancestors? You do know that they lived in such places for long centuries, content, cheerful and happy. And you ought to ask yourselves: What inexhaustible source of joy must there be within Judaism if it can bring courage, hope and joyfulness into the gloomiest abode and in times of unspeakable stress?

Truly, Judaism teaches the importance of happiness. דרשוני וחיו, "seek Me and live!" וחי בהם, "he has life who fulfills My laws." בכל מקום אשר אזכיר את שמי אבוא אליך וברכתך, "to the smallest, narrowest space, wherever you are free to live for My Name, there shall I come and bring you My blessing."

The Jewish Sanctuary did not rise above a graveyard. Death and all that came into contact with death was banned from its premises; grief and mourning did not cross its threshold. Nothing of the occult of the night was to be observed in the Temple. Rather, its doors would open wide every day to let in the bright rays of the morning sun.

God expects to have שלמים at His altar, His table, offered up by men who are not only reconciled to their fate but contentedly and joyfully meet its numerous challenges. תחת אשר לא עבדת את ה' אלקיך בשמחה (Deut. 28,47) "Because you failed to serve your God with joy" was God's severe reproach as He expelled His children from His House.

But how can one lead a happy and fulfilling life with all those constant barriers that frown upon any kind of sensual pleasure and restrict so many of man's actions? Is this really so? In fact, there is an abundance of enjoyments in the active life of the Jew. The very laws which limit his enjoyments and activities enhance and sweeten immeasurably those which are permitted. Actually, only an observant Jew will be able to experience this exhilarating feeling. He will reap the rich benefits of his duty-filled life, compensating him for the alleged losses caused by the so-called restrictions of the Jewish law. Critics of Judaism see only the barriers and are ignorant of the paradise that lies beyond. The law-abiding Jew reaps abundant profit from the satisfaction of having done his God-given duty, a satisfaction that accompanies all his activities and actions and surpasses by far the restrictions.

Inner peace is the cherished prize that accompanies all the seemingly pleasures and Divinely sanctioned actions of the Jew. He is not in the least concerned that his sensual pleasures might adversely affect his spiritual integrity. He is aware that God has eliminated from his sphere

whatever might be detrimental to his body, to his soul. He attends to his work and needs not fear that his efforts will not find approval in the eyes of God. He knows well which actions are not sanctioned by God and will take no step or lift a finger for them. His honestly gained bread and the purity of his marriage—approvingly witnessed by God—cast a warm glow of happiness upon his child.

Cheerfully and purposefully he works at his chosen profession, the happier since the Sabbath-rest vouchsafes God's approval of his activities during the week. The prohibition of certain enjoyments and work serves as a guarantee that his physical enjoyment and labor are never accomplished without the presence of God, that nothing in his earthly existence—as long as it is honest and good—is too insignificant for God, the Omnipotent One, to grant it His approval and blessing.

It is these divinely ordained prohibitions that form the most intimate bond between man and his God. They leave no human life, whether humble or renowned, without the proximity of God that brings with it blessing and joy. The *brachah* pronounced by even the poorest Jew over his honest meal flavors his meager bread with a sweetness which, without it, would be missing from even the richest table.

Judaism goes much further. The categories of enjoyment and work that are not prohibited are not only permitted and approved but they come under the heading of *מצוה* and assume the character of sacred, unselfish, God-serving acts. Not only may the Jew enjoy and work, but it is his *duty* to enjoy and to work. His Divine worship is not confined to the chambers of his synagogue or to the time allotted for prayers. Indeed, the totality of the Jew's existence is one of great service to God, in his place of work, in the circle of his family, in his social activities, in the most mundane and the pettiest details of his life. Even his dishes and cutlery, his pots and pans are tools of his calling (Zechariah 14,21): "Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah must be dedicated to the God of Hosts."

when he sits at home or walks on the road, when he lies down and when he gets up, with each beat of his heart, with every spark of his vitality, with every particle of his belongings the Jew serves his God!

That is what makes Jewish life such a joyous experience. *שומר מצוה* (Ecclesiastes 8,5): He who conceives of his whole life as a succession of *מצוה* does not know sorrow or meanness and evil. God's

word is the miraculous staff that sweetens the bitterest of waters. God's word is the sacred oil that sanctifies and consecrates the most mundane, the most ordinary and trite. The very "law" that the unenlightened labels as a "burden, a yoke, and impediment"—it is this law, with all its "minutiae," that is the most precious jewel in the possession of the Jew. "רצה הקב"ה לזכות את ישראל לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצות" "God desired to bring happiness unto Israel, therefore He gave them so many teachings and laws."

Judaism is not a religion solely for holidays and feast days; it embraces all aspects of life—workdays and festival days. Judaism, the most "religious" of all religions has no word for "religion," has no word for this concept; everything, without exception, is "religion." The seamstress at her needlework, the farmer at his plowshare, the mother at the cradle, the father at his trade, the judge at his bench, the physician at the sickbed, the teacher at the lectern, the priest at the altar—all are actively engaged in the holy service of God. "Be holy" is the Divine summons of Judaism to every age, every generation, every walk of life, to the entire nation.

For the Jew everything is "religion." Even the most painful reversal for him is but a new religious duty, as he goes from one religious experience to the next, *מהיל אל חיל*, and then even life's troubles will have lost their sting for him. There is only one care that truly troubles him, and that is his fear that he might fail to recognize his duty in every situation of life. But once he does recognize it, he is happy to be doing what God demands of him. His joy is not diminished by the awareness of his limited insight, his lack of ability and his human frailty. Whatever his station in life, that is where God has placed him; whatever his limitations, those have been meted out to him by his God. He stands in His service; it is to His hands that the Jew must deliver up his handiwork. Once he has done his best, once he has carried out his mundane day's work, he is content and satisfied, for the consummation of his labors are, after all, indeed in the hands of God.

And since for the Jew everything is "religion"—and consequently "religion" is everything!—the happy moments in his life do not distance the Jew from his God. Truly, the real joy, the Jewish joy is to him the most exalted nearness of God; Jewish joy is the most untroubled. His heaven is not inhabited by heathen gods who envy the happiness of mortals, his God is not a god who frowns upon the happiness of man.

The Jew is not embarrassed to be happy before his God. While his religion condemns any excess and immorality, it stresses the positive values of any form of pure moral joy. Its ideal is not the person who constantly worries and wallows in grief but the person who joyfully carries out his work before God and joyfully partakes of the pleasures of life before God.

Every man, so the Jew's Rabbis teach him, will one day have to give an account of any innocent pleasure of which he may have deprived himself out of ignorance. For just as his religion teaches him the "idea of God" as the fundamental concept of his thinking, so "justice" is to be the root motivation of his life. Justice, as the term implies, affirms as well as denies, taking into account every situation in life. It does not condemn God-given dispositions, impulses or urges in themselves but measures them in their relation to what is good and moral. Thus, the neglect or suppression of any normal sensual desire is as wicked as the misuse or waste of one's physical and sensual inclinations which are God-given and which must remain hallowed to Him.

לא תהו בראה לשבת יצרה (Isaiah 45,18): God created the earth not as a wasteland but to serve as a dwelling place for cheerful, happy human beings.

The Jew knows only one cause for bitterness, one enemy of his serene joyfulness—it is the awareness of sin, of guilt, of having forfeited his life's purity. And even here, too, the incomparable majesty of Divine teachings comes to the rescue. Even the seasoned sinner will not be deprived of life's serenity forever. Judaism knows not only death but also redemption from sin. The seasoned sinner must earnestly declare his willingness to free himself from the shackles of sin once he has tasted the bitter cup of iniquity—and then God will be near to him, will meet him halfway, will help him overcome the antagonist within him. And God will be ready at any moment to take back the sinner in a warm embrace and grant him renewed happiness in life, cleansed of all the dreadful wrongs of his past.

The Jew needs no intermediary between himself and his God. His transformation and return to God occur in the seclusion of his own heart. Within his own heart there may be shadows of darkness, yet his own heart will once again radiate with the beams of daylight. Even if he had lost his God on his own volition, he will find his God once again on his own initiative, and at every moment, at every turn he can find

Him (Isaiah 55,6): **דרשו ה' בהמצאו קראוהו בהיותו קרוב יעזב רשע דרכו ואיש** אוֹן מחשבתי וישב אל ה' וירחמנו ואל אלקינו כי ירבה לטלוח. "Seek God for He desires to be found; call Him for He is so close. Let the sinner change his ways and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return to our God; and God will show him mercy, He never tires to forgive." God has spoken—the Jew hears it, and he turns back and stands upon the most glorious heights in unexpected joy!

"And you wonder why the Jewish Bible contains so few references to the concept of happiness in the world to come?" Thus one of our Sages poses the question after painting a picture of Jewish bliss (*Yalkut*, Psalms 31,2—**מה רב טובך אשר צפנת ליראיך**). Do you really believe that the Torah, which teaches you to find God's proximity and inner contentment despite man's transcendence and mortality, needs to reassure you that the Divine Presence and Divine bliss await you only when the body disintegrates and the soul is freed from its earthly bonds? Consider the Jewish joy brought to you by the daily times of prayer, by the weekly Sabbath rest, by the monthly atonement of the New Moon and the annual succession of festival days. These are all reviving waters for the soul, cleansing away the unseemly dust that covered those removed from God and returning the soul to the source of all joy and true life, to bathe the soul in the fountain of Divine nearness. And now, with this nearness to God, the sanctification and bliss of all manner of life on earth will be renewed and refreshed.

All Jewish festivals are **ימים טובים**, days of joyfulness. The Jewish Day of Atonement, **יום הכפורים**, is the day of greatest joy: "No greater day of joy has Israel than the Day of Atonement." Joy is to ripen on the tree of Jewish devotion. The observance of the Jewish festivals is designed to bring the spirit of joy to the celebrant and to lift his entire life into the realm of the Godly! Not the Jewish Temple but rather the Jewish home is to be the site where the festival is to be fully celebrated. Into the circle of his domestic life the Jew brings the Sabbath as his bride, the festival as his companion. At his table and at his meal, surrounded by his loved ones, with his wife at his side, he raises his cup of salvation in the spirit of serene joy and dedicates his marriage, his children and himself to God Whose blessed nearness encompasses all.

This warm sense of delight is felt by every Jew when, after a busy and productive work week, he gathers his wife and children around

him, raises his cup to God and welcomes the Sabbath. No lips, no pen have been able to put it into words, מתן שכרה דלא עבירא לאגלויי, *this is Israel*, בנינו ובין בני ישראל, only God and the sensitive Jewish heart know it.

Thus, all aspects of Jewish life, without exception, are an inexhaustible source of joy. If you couple Jewish learning and study with this rich Jewish life, and especially if the Word of God, if the songs of our Singers, if the sermons of our Prophets and the sayings of our Sages are accessible to you—what an additional treasure, another source of inner joy is opened to the Jewish soul with these teachings!

Jewish learning has manifested as glorious a development as has Jewish life. Over the darkest nights of our millennia-long history, Jewish learning has proved itself in all its glory just as Jewish life has done. A people that was oppressed, persecuted and scorned was compensated by the joy of learning, which kept its hearts and minds vibrant and awake.

The underlying spirit of learning is the joyfully reviving spirit of God. Jewish teachings, Jewish study require a serene clarity: שמעתתא בעיא צילותא. Their subjects embrace the living, real world. The method of research produces constantly new, original and spiritual initiatives which draw ever renewed strength from the continual exchange of concepts and thoughts. The process of Jewish learning, unlike any other, revives, refreshes and brings joy to every heart and mind.

This never-ending spiritual and intellectual exchange is not the private domain of scholars. It is the sacred treasure of all our people, open to all, loved by all. Thus it has been in the past, thus it shall always be: מורשה קהלת יעקב an entire nation sharing the blossoms and fruit of its spiritual heritage. Every new find, every new thought, every new word is accessible to the ears and eyes of all the people; a beautiful *d'var Torah* is a privilege accorded to any resident, whether residing in a palace or the humblest abode.

Alas, those who have deprived our youth of this cherished source of joy—like Acher—have gone into our schools to sell their petty wares, exclaiming: “What good is Torah for them! This one will become a merchant, this one a craftsman!” And that is how they try to lure away the students from their teachers, and the teachers away from Torah!

נעשה ונשמע—Jewish living, Jewish teachings are and will forever remain the sole irreplaceable source of life’s eternal joyfulness. To this day the words out of David’s harp intone for us the innermost emotions of every thinking Jew:

God's teaching embraces all of life,
therefore it quickens the soul.
God's testimony accompanies us everywhere in truth,
that is why it makes wise even the most inexperienced.

God's mandates fit so well in life's pattern,
therefore they gladden the heart.
God's commandment is so clear and flawless
that it enlightens the eyes.

The fear of God is pure
and therefore eternally firm.
God's ordinances are truth; altogether, Justice!

They are the treasures to be sought,
more than gold and abundance of gems—
And are at the same time sweeter than honey and its
finest nectar.

Your servant also found in them at first
only solemn warnings,
But when he fulfilled them—the richest of rewards.

(Psalms 19, 8–12)