CHAPTER 8

Odes to Joy in Sonnets and Psalms

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For centuries, the Psalms have served as a touchstone for exploring the texture, edges, and impediments of pleasure, happiness, and joy as meaning-seeking and connection-craving beings. While the Hebrew Bible conveys God's desire for a relationship with us, it also "contains words of human search and concern" for Him, most notably in the *mizmorim*, *shirim*, *pesukei d'zimra*, and collected compositions of the authors of *Tehillim*, in which "the spontaneity of the Biblical man found its expression."[1]

"Let all those who take refuge in You rejoice," King David intones, "let them ever sing for joy as You shelter them" (Ps. 5:12).[2] And yet, such lyrics of delight both follow and precede various verses of pain, angst, self-doubt, and suffering all the way through the collection. For the casual reader of *Tehillim*, David's majestic range and rapid tone shifts are enough to induce a type of emotional whiplash.

Although the pain of feeling distanced from the Divine resounds throughout *Tehillim*, heartache is not its main melody. As Rabbi Sacks writes, "King David in the Psalms spoke of danger, fear, dejection,

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sometimes even despair, but his songs usually end in the major key."[3] Gratitude, praise, contentment, joy, and hope find full-throated expression in this "lexicon of the Jewish soul."[4] And if *Tehillim* offers a soundtrack for life, then its leitmotif is *Ashrei*.

Variously translated as happy, blessed, or fortunate, the word *Ashrei* appears thirty-one times throughout the Psalms (nearly as many as all its other uses in *Tanach* combined) and bookends the score.

> Happy (*Ashrei*) is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, who does not stand on the path of sinners, who does not sit among the jeering cynics—instead, the Lord's teachings is all his desire, and he contemplates that teaching day and night. (Ps. 1:1–2)

Like the opening note of an opus, the first word of *Tehillim* invites curiosity. Happiness—how it is achieved, maintained, and protected—has universal appeal. As Rabbi Sacks reminds us in his reading of this verse, for Aristotle, happiness (in Greek *eudaemonia*) "is the ultimate purpose of human existence."[5] Yet *Tehillim* resists a teleological conception of the good life and hints at its countercultural vision by defining happiness through negation. Despite popular practice, *Ashrei* is not achieved by pursuing our heart's desires. This approach often begets self-centered, self-sabotaging, and transgressive behaviors, which (as the Psalmist shows through nature metaphors) yield volatility and detachment. Rather, desiring what God desires from and for us leads to tranquility and stability, though this path is not without its challenges.

The emotional modulation of *Tehillim* reveals we rarely experience one feeling at a time and resists the harmful notion that we can incrementally work toward a happiness that is realized when all other sensations and obstacles are removed. Instead, the "Sweet Singer of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1) and his collaborators embrace a more nuanced, complicated joy that emerges within a network of darker emotions yet is ever-available throughout life's ups and downs. And it is the poets who have turned to *Tehillim*'s teaching against the decontextualization of joy who have found the most success and resonance in their own explorations and articulations of the human condition.

In the fourteenth century, Francesco Petrarch fostered Renaissance humanism with meditations on the nature of love and religion, the virtuosity of verse, and the impulse to glean sacred insight from secular wisdom. Yet the devout Catholic struggled to justify the joy he found in the

aureate language of antiquity and prove that the arts serve a spiritual purpose. Taking evidence from the "Old Testament fathers," Petrarch argued, "one may almost say that theology actually is poetry, poetry concerning God" arising from humankind's innate drive to seek truth and "win the favour of the deity by lofty words."[6] Although Petrarch placed Greco-Roman writers at the apex of artistic achievement, throughout his career he studied the Psalms in Hebrew. Their stylistic influence is palpable in the language of longing and other poetic features that have come to constitute Petrarchism and the sonnet form he popularized. In memorializing his unrequited love for Laura (which incites his greatest joy and deepest anguish), Petrarch repeatedly pulls from Psalms. To offer just one of many examples, in the poet's sigh, "Sorrow and tears, I feed my weary heart,"[7] we hear murmurs of David's despondence, "My tears have been my fare day and night" (Ps. 42:4). Though Petrarch and David's objectives cannot be compared, the former repeatedly looked to the lyrics of the Israelite king as a guide for gauging joy in relation to pain on both a visceral and spiritual scale. Though Petrarch often confessed to loving Plato, Homer, Cicero, and Virgil, in his later years he resolved, "my philosopher shall be Paul, my poet David … I want to have his Psalter always at hand [and] beneath my pillow when I sleep and when I come to die."[8]

During the Renaissance and Reformation, David captured the imagination of early modern English monarchs, ecclesiastics, and artists as a biblical figure who skillfully navigated the fields of diplomacy, religion, and literary invention.[9] The most prominent Renaissance poets—including but not limited to Wyatt, Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, and Milton—"translated, paraphrased, or alluded to the Psalms in their major works"[10] which infused Renaissance England with the lyricism and wisdom of ancient Israel that has profoundly shaped Western literature and culture to this day.

Although Shakespeare's sonnets are more secular than spiritual, the bard engaged with the Bible throughout his career and acknowledged the "force of heaven-bred poesy" in his plays and poetry.[11] Echoes of Psalm 23 ("though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death") are heard in Sonnet 18 when the speaker claims his verse will immortalize his beloved such that death shall not "brag that thou wander'st in his shade." In Sonnet 91, after cataloging sources of "delight" that still speak to our modern moment—"birth," "skill," "wealth," "bodies' force," even fashion and animal companions—the poet certifies the subjectivity of satisfaction, granting that "every humor hath his adjunct pleasure / Wherein it

finds a joy above the rest." But "Thy love," the speaker tells his beloved, surpasses all these "measures" and is "better" than every "best," a superlative sentiment that strikes a chord similar to Asaf's estimation of a relationship with the divine. After pondering the "revelers" pursuing "fancies" and amassing wealth, the composer concludes "With You, I desire nothing else on earth" for the "nearness of God is my good" (Ps. 73:25—28).

The metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century vigorously explored God's presence and proximity in a style blending rational meditation, religious fervor, and witty wordplay. George Herbert, who played the lute and studied the Psalms, enjoyed a successful academic career at Cambridge and spent the last few years of his short life as an Anglican priest. In "Man's Medley," Herbert contemplates how the nature of human beings—"With th' one hand touching heav'n, with th' other earth"—affects their experience of happiness. Like John Donne in his Anniversary poems, Herbert advises those suffering the "griefs" of mortality—whether emotional or physical—to find solace in the knowledge that "in flesh he dies" but in "soul he mounts and flies," and achieve a degree of "relief" by alchemizing pain into purpose with poetry: "Happy is he, whose heart / Hath found the art / To turn his double pains to double praise." In these lines, I hear the steady beat of *Tehillim*, in which praising God becomes a universal imperative and panacea: "Happy are the people who know the joyful shout, Lord, they walk in the light of your presence. They rejoice in Your name all day long, raised up through Your righteousness" (Ps. 89:16–17). Underpinned by a Protestant perspective on Cartesian mind–body dualism, Herbert offers his Christian audience the familiar faith tenet that only after death can one convene with godliness and fully experience bliss. We might "taste of the cheer" here, the poet asserts, "Yet if we rightly measure, Man's joy and pleasure, Rather hereafter, than in present, is."

In Jewish tradition, happiness is not a dream deferred to the World to Come. By divine design, it is achieved by engaging with the material aspects of living.

> A song of ascents. Happy are all who fear the Lord, who *walk* in His ways. You shall eat the fruit of your *labor;* You shall be happy and thriving. (Ps. 128:1–2)

As Rabbi Sacks observes in the first verb of Psalms and repeatedly throughout *Tanach*, Jewish identity calls for forward momentum in the here and now.[12] "This principle of 'walk on ahead,' the idea that the Creator wants

us, His greatest creation, to be creative, is what makes Judaism unique in the high value it places on the human person and the human condition."[13] The Mishnaic concept of *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world) and the Midrashic notion of *Dirah Bitachtonim* (building a dwelling for God in the lower realms) endorse the centrality of virtuous behavior in Jewish life and practice. But it is the Psalms that suggest generative work is essential for *Ashrei*—a happy and good life. As Rabbi Sacks has shown, Judaism has much to offer positive psychology:

> The ancient Hebrew word for hard work is *avoda*. It is also the word that means 'serving God.' What applies in the arts, sciences, business, and industry, applies equally to the life of the spirit … *Halakha* (Jewish law) involves a set of routines that—like those of the great creative minds—reconfigures the brain, giving discipline to our lives and changing the way we feel, think, and act … Judaism is about changing us so that we become creative artists whose greatest creation is our own life.[14]

Imagine the impact of recontextualizing happiness as the product of effort and ingenuity, as spoken about in the Psalms. *Tehillim* hits its highest and most evocative notes when David channels his energy, expertise, and spiritual insight into composing a *shir chadash*, a *new* song.[15]

Simcha (joy), another term in *Tanach* aligned with *avoda*, further expands our understanding of human flourishing and offers artists another avenue for exploration.

> *Serve* the Lord with *joy*; come before Him in glad song. (Ps. 100:2)

For Rabbeynu Bahya, exhibiting *Simcha* "is considered as fulfillment of a commandment by itself, meriting additional reward."[16] The Lubavitcher Rebbe spoke about *Simcha* as necessary to break "through barriers, including the barriers of exile."[17] Though *Ashrei* and *Simcha* are obtained through observance of God's commandments, the difference, Rabbi Sacks explains, is that while individuals can achieve *Ashrei* independently, *Simcha* "is better defined as 'the happiness we share, or better still, the happiness we make by sharing.'"[18] If *Ashrei* is an aria, *Simcha* is a symphony. King David declares, "*Happy* are those who give thought to the weak" and "make the Lord their trust" (Ps. 40:2–5); though worthy endeavors, these are solo performances. Joy, however, requires a collective: "Let Israel rejoice in his Maker; let the children of Zion be joyful in their King" (Ps.

149:2). And as Rabbi Sacks notes, *Simcha* appears almost ten times as often as *Ashrei* in *Tanach*, underscoring its centrality in Jewish life as the "supreme religious emotion" that creates connection, community, and partnership.[19] While joy "lies at the heart of the Mosaic vision of life in the land of Israel," it is also a universal social emotion that enacts the "redemption of solitude."[20]

In opposition to the widespread alienation and political strife that emerged from the Enlightenment, the redemption of the individual is precisely what the Romantic poets of the late eighteenth century hoped to achieve. English poet laureate William Wordsworth, orphaned by the age of thirteen and predeceased by three of his children, spent much of his career contending with loneliness and reflecting on the emotional complexities and "deep power of joy."[21] One of his most poignant sonnets, written as an elegy for his three-year-old daughter Catherine, begins with a startling sensation:

> Surprised by joy—impatient as the Wind
> I turned to share the transport—Oh! with whom
> But Thee, long buried in the silent Tomb

The poet's elevation of joy is infused with the impulse to connect, but sadly, it dissipates quickly. The speaker is left "forlorn," reliving the "worst pang that sorrow ever bore" when he recalls the loss of his daughter that "time, nor years unborn" can restore. Although the poem springs from "faithful love" befitting a sonnet, its metrical breaks and disruptions to the Petrarchan structure remind us that bereavement does not obey boundaries. While there is much wisdom to be mined from Wordsworth, this sonnet ends with the mournful assertation that although joy and grief emanate from a shared urge to unite souls, they are mutually exclusive emotions. However, just a generation later and an ocean away, Transcendentalist poet Walt Whitman draws inspiration from the wonders of the natural world wrought by "God's beautiful eternal right hand"[22] and the subtlety of the Psalms to proclaim, "I contain multitudes."[23]

In his spiritual autobiography, which takes its title from Wordsworth's sonnet, C.S. Lewis reflects on the writers who shaped his early life and his discovery that joy is not the satisfaction of a desire, but a *longing* for what is most desirable: "we yearn, rightly, for that unity which we can never reach except by ceasing to be the separate phenomenal beings called 'we.'"[24] For Lewis, who reflected on the Psalms throughout his lifetime,

joy is the "[ache] for that impossible reunion" which pulls us closer to God. For Rabbi Sacks, the Hebrew term for the Divine Presence, *Shekhina* (etymologically linked to *shakhen* meaning neighbor) bespeaks this belief.[25] And for David, this yearning leads to his discovery that pleasing the Lord *is* pleasing, and he shares his hard-won wisdom through song.

In his decades of writing, Rabbi Sacks attuned us to the range of human emotions. He drew inspiration and wisdom from the eloquence and elevated thoughts of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Lewis, and countless others. But David was his poet and philosopher, whose "soul thirst[ed] for God" (Ps. 42:3, 62:2). With the words of *Tehillim* on hand and in heart, he taught us that we can hold grief in one hand and joy in the other. We can feel good will toward someone who becomes pregnant while struggling with fertility. We can celebrate the marriage of a sibling while longing for companionship. We can embrace a complicated joy. Happiness "is not the absence of suffering but the ability to take its fractured discords and turn them into music that rescues from the darkest regions of the soul a haunting yet humanizing beauty—surely the supreme achievement down here on earth. Some of the greatest Psalms come from this realm of pain, as do the finest works of art."[26]

If poetry "begins in delight and ends in wisdom," as Robert Frost wrote, then we are blessed indeed by the poetic Torah of Rabbi Sacks, who saw Judaism itself is "an ode to joy."[27] If we want to feel close to those who have walked ahead, we can study their teachings—in word or deed—and they accompany us. And if we want to experience the highest levels of joy, we must utilize our unique strengths and gifts to collaboratively transform the world around us as illustrated in the crescendo of *Tehillim*, in which "every living soul" (Ps. 150:6) is called upon to express gratitude to God and partner in the ongoing process of creation and redemption.

Notes

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 26.
2. All Psalms quotations from *The Koren Illustrated Tehillim*, trans. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and Sara Daniel (Koren, 2021).
3. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Studies in Spirituality* (Koren, 2021), 256.
4. *Studies in Spirituality,* xx.
5. *Studies in Spirituality,* 257.

6. Petrarch, *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, trans. James H. Robinson (Knickerbocker Press, 1914), 261.
7. Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa (Indiana University Press, 1996), 342.
8. Petrarch, *Letters From Petrarch*, trans. Morris Bishop (Indiana University Press, 1966), 191–92.
9. See Debora Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible* (University of California Press, 1998); Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Heather Dubrow, *The Challenges of Orpheus: Lyric Poetry and Early Modern England* (Johns Hopkins, 2011).
10. Hamlin, *Psalm Culture*, 1.
11. William Shakespeare, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Folger), 3.2.71.
12. *Studies in Spirituality*, 115–18. In his commentary on the *Tehillim*, Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch explains that root of the word *Ashrei* is *ashur* ("strive forward").
13. *Studies in Spirituality*, 12.
14. *Studies in Spirituality*, 101–02.
15. See Ps. 33:3, 40:4, 96:1, 98:1, 103:5, 144:9, 149:1. The term poetry is derived from the ancient Greek *poiesis* meaning to create or make something that did not exist before.
16. In his commentary on Deu. 28:47, Rabbeynu Bahya also notes that "The Torah also makes a point of underlining the joy in Aaron's heart when he saw his brother Moses again after so many years. Had he known that his feelings would be commented upon favorably (Exodus 4:14), he would have gone out to meet his brother accompanied by an orchestra of many different musical instruments." Other commentaries on this verse, including Yalkut Shimoni and Torah Temimah, also identify joyful service as *shira* (song) modeled by the Leviim.
17. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Sichas Shabbos Parshas Ki Seitzei 5748.
18. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* (Schocken, 2007), 5.
19. *Studies in Spirituality*, 258.
20. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Essays on Ethics* (Koren, 2016), 314.
21. "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abby, On Revisiting the Bands of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798." Rabbi Sacks draws on Wordsworth's thinking and uses this phrase as the title for his essay on Parsha Re'eh in (5776) and the relationship between *Simcha* and covenant.
22. Walt Whitman, "Death's Valley," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, April 1892.
23. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass, Song of Myself, 51.* On the influence of the Hebrew Bible on Whitman see Gay Wilson Allen's "Biblical Echoes in Whitman's Works," *American Literature VI* (1934): 302–15.

24. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1995), 271.
25. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. October 18, 2010. "Happiness in the Jewish Perspective." Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2S_rqcJnvpE (5:40 and following).
26. *To Heal a Fractured World*, 232.
27. *Essays on Ethics*, 315.