

Parshat Ki Tova

IT IS A GREAT MITZVAH TO BE HAPPY!

AUGUST 23RD, 2013

Parshat Ki Tavo is a difficult one because it contains a list of curses with which G-d used to show the people the consequences of not observing the commandments and not being faithful with Him. The curses are so hard that there are different traditions about how to read them in the Synagogue. Some Jews read the list quickly, others very low, and others take care of who will be the one chosen for that Aliya, so she/he won't be offended.

Probably the explanation of the curses is that Moses is concerned the Israelites abandoning the laws of God, and he uses that method to persuade them to obey. He was an old person, was close to his death, and was very worried.

There is something very interesting that we find in the Torah in the middle of these curses: "Because you did not serve God, your Master, with happiness and a good heart" (Deut. 28:47).

The Torah could have said only "because you did not serve the Lord", meaning "If you don't follow the commandments you will be punished". But we learn from this that for Judaism is not only important that we fulfill the commandments, we also must do it with Joy, enjoying what it means to be Jew.

Judaism is not a cold and formal system of rules that we have to follow, it is a tradition that teaches us that we must follow G-d's will but through joy, happiness, understanding that life is beautiful and we have to enjoy it. We know about other religious traditions that observe their rituals through with fear, silence and restrictions. And we also know that inside Judaism the same trend exists too. There are Jews that understand that G-d wants from us "Issurim" – restrictions and pain in life – , and they fear that joy can maybe lead us to a life without control.

The Hassidic movement came to Judaism in times when observance was connected with lack of happiness and enjoyment, and also with elitism. But actually in this Parsha we realize that Jasidism didn't invented a "happy religion", they revitalized something that was already written in Torah!

All our Holidays are connected with joy. The Torah says "Vesamachta vechagueka", "And you will enjoy your festivals". Sukkot is called "the time of happiness", and even Yom Kipur is a solemn day but it's not sad.

I think that sometimes Jews we tend to be too much attached to sad events of our history. Sometimes we give more importance to remembering tragedies than to celebrate and enjoy our holidays, and in consequence there are fellow Jews that they transmit a message of frustration that shows a sad side of Judaism.

Rabi Nachman of Bratzlav, an important Hassidic Rabbi of the 19th Century, used to say "Mitzvah gedola liyiot besimcha tamid" – "It is a great Mitzvah to be always happy". So let's try to enjoy more of being a Jew, let's see prayer and observance not as a routine but as something fun and happy, not as a burden but as something that enrich our lives.

Shabbat Shalom!
Rabbi Claudio