

“Ode to Joy”

D’var Torah for Shabbat *Pinchas*, July 2 2021

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Our immediate world is reopening after the worst of the pandemic. Much of the planet writhes in sickness, much of it due to lack of access to vaccines and oxygen. And we must not forget our human brothers and sisters and their need. But here, we are opening our doors and venturing out.

No one finds it surprising if we are now daring to ask one another “what are you doing for the Fourth?” The Fourth is the centerpiece of the American celebratory calendar. Both its lofty commemorations and its playful traditions are part of our national character. The combination of ceremony and celebration bring us collective joy. We are free and independent. We stand for something as a nation. We mark whatever that is by telling the tale, by shooting fireworks, by parading firetrucks and old jalopies down Main Street, and by barbecuing in our backyards. Red-letter Simchah. Calendared joy.

Likewise, we Jews are noting that if the three weeks of historical mourning are upon us, then Tisha b’Av is two weeks away, and thus Rosh Hashanah comes only seven weeks after that. Do we dare to plan a Rosh Hashanah, a Yom Kippur, a Sukkot, a Simchat Torah like the ones we know and love? Do we dare not?

A year ago we had no “Fourth.” We had no Rosh Hashanah, except virtually. Our sukkot were modest and private. We did not dance for joy with our Torah scrolls. And all in all, those deprivations brought us sadness. For some, depression and despair.

How is it, then, that we instinctively know how to kick into gear and begin to celebrate and commemorate all over again? Because just as we have traditions about what to do in order to invoke joy, we also have traditions about how to remember what to do in order to invoke joy, and how to tell stories about our joyous traditions until such time as we can put them back into practice.

Our parashah of the week, Pinchas, calls to mind for most of us the story of the scion of the high priest who acts zealously and impetuously to cut down Zimri and Cozbi in the midst of their orgiastic act, for which God rewards him with the *b'rit shalom*, the covenant of peace, and the right to the priesthood for all time. Upon which Moses laments that his successor, presumably Pinchas, will be a hotheaded zealot and not someone “of the people,” *achad ha'am.*”

This parashah continues a series of disappointingly tragic episodes as the Israelites exhibit impatience, irresponsibility, and faithlessness all the way to the fortieth year of wandering.

Fitting, then, that this portion is almost always read during the Three Weeks leading up to our Black Letter day, Tisha b'Av, when we recount a litany of destructions and exiles throughout our painful history as a people.

Says our teacher, the B'nai Yissasschar: not so fast. B'nai Yissasschar is an important early Chassidic work – a masterpiece – commenting on the festivals and seasons of the Jewish year. Its author is Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Spira of Dinov, Galicia, southern Poland. The work dates from about 1820-1840.

He points out something that all Torah readers know, even though they might not pay much attention to it. He reminds us that the entire second of half of this parashah is a record book of the special sacrificial offerings for each and every Red-Letter day in the Jewish year. From the daily offering (the *tamid*) to the Shabbat sacrifice, to Rosh Chodesh, to Pesach, Shavu'ot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, every day of Sukkot, and Sh'mini Atzeret, this portion tells the story of how we once – and could once again – bring collective joy by celebrating what is ours to celebrate: Our heritage of Simcha.

At every holy day, when we take out a second sefer Torah to read the paragraph reminding us of how once we commemorated by bringing a korban/offering and getting karov/close to the essential source of all joy, that extra reading comes from Par'shat Pinchas.

And when we read the parashah as a whole, it is in the midst of our calendric nadir. As if to say, and I'll say it in the B'nai Yissasschar's words, “We therefore read Par'shat Pinchas in the Three

Weeks of sadness *precisely because* it is the portion of festivals and special seasons, and for which it contains the very spirit of *simcha*/joy, so that joy and hope might prevail in our hearts.”

So may it be for us as we dare to remember what it was like to be joyful, and how to make that joyfulness come about, and how to pick ourselves up from sadness and despair so that we might live again.