



The Work of Joy • Parshat Yitro

Upon hearing the Exodus story from Moses, “Jethro rejoiced over all the kindness that God had shown Israel when delivering them from the Egyptians” (Exodus 18:9). Curiously, instead of using the more popular term “*שמח*,” for “rejoiced” in the verse, the Torah uses the uncommon term “*שׂמח*.” After first acknowledging the simple meaning of the word, Rashi quotes a *gemara* reading of the Talmud, that this word choice alludes to a physiological manifestation of Jethro’s emotional reaction. His flesh became “prickly,” as he was aggrieved over the destruction of Egypt (*Shabbat* 94a).

While Rashi’s two explanations can be interpreted as two distinct emotional reactions, psychoanalytically inclined interpreters assume that both emotions were experienced concurrently. In his chapter on “The Use of the Unconscious in Bible Interpretation,” Dr. Aaron Rabinowitz writes that the two explanations “relate to two different levels of Jethro’s psyche. Each level expresses a different truth and reflects one part of the complex human personality.” Also pointing to the unconscious, Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg writes that Jethro’s “involuntary nervous reaction betrays his visceral loyalties. Against his conscious intent... his flesh expresses” his connection to Egyptian culture. These dual, simultaneous responses underlie the psychological reality that “joy and pain coexist within him.”

Already in the 19th century, Malbim suggested a reading rooted in a split between Jethro’s conscious and subconscious reactions. According

to Malbim, *שׂמח*

שמח *שמח*, made the exact opposite suggestion. According to Rabbi Trunk, *שמח* conveys an external expression of happiness, though, internally, Jethro felt sadness for the downfall of Egypt. Knowing that the socially and perhaps religiously correct response was to show signs of joy, he strengthened his emotional control, conveyed happiness to Moses, and blessed God for His deliverance of the Israelites. Rabbi Trunk’s message echoes what sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild later termed “emotion work,” which she defined as the ability to regulate one’s emotions for the sake of personal relationships. This would include acting cheerful, even when internally sad, for the sake of a child who needs encouragement.

To support his idea that *שמח* entails emotion work, Rabbi Trunk pointed to Ezra the Scribe, who after the rebuilding of the Second Temple implored the people to “not mourn, or weep... for the joy (*שמחה*) of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:9-10). Rabbi Trunk posited that those who returned to the land were sad that the Second Temple was not as glorious as the First Temple. Their hopes for full redemption were

