

Sheaves, Shouts, and Shavuot: Reflections on Joy

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Long before the Spirit swept through the house as a mighty wind and fiery tongues settled on the disciples, Pentecost or the Festival of Weeks (*Hag-Shavuot*) was all about joy (Deut 16:9-12; cf. Exod 34:22).¹ Known also as the Feast of the Harvest (Exod 23:16), the second great celebration in Israel's liturgical calendar evokes summer heat, fields reaped of ripe barley and wheat, stalks bundled into sheaves and piled at the threshing floor, iron sickles with wooden handles dulled from use, heaps of clean grain stored underground or in storehouses, water jars, and winnowing forks.² Whereas Israel associated plowing and sowing with tears and hardship, they deemed harvest the time to rejoice: "Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves" (Ps 126:6). Indeed, harvest joy was the embodiment and expression of great joy, a measure of surpassing delight: "You have increased [the nation's] joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest" (Isa 9:3).

To consider joy, I therefore turn to Moses' instructions for *Shavuot* in Deut 16:9-12. On the heels of more extensive and solemn directions for Passover (16:1-8), Moses' description of *Shavuot* is a brief four verses in length and centers on the call to rejoice (v. 11). Continuing to address the whole community in the second person singular—which makes the instructions simultaneously corporate and personal—Moses identifies four key elements of the festival: Count. Give. Rejoice. Remember. What follows are reflections about what each of these elements suggests about Israelite understandings of joy, and how, taken together, *Shavuot* may inform present-day notions of joy.

Count

Deuteronomy's naming of the Feast of the Harvest as "Weeks" makes explicit that the community should deliberately mark time from the beginning of barley harvest in late spring to the end of wheat harvest in early summer. Seven days per week. Seven weeks from the moment they first put the sickle to the standing grain until the harvest's conclusion. (The concentric ring pattern of v. 9 emphasizes the counting, "seven/count/begin to...begin to/count/seven.") Counting seven sevenfold doubly anchors the harvest season in the rhythms of God's creation, the cadences of work and rest, ordinary days and Sabbath (Gen 1:1-2:4). Counting sets the annual harvest days of difficult labor for the community's survival, for their daily bread, within the ancient and enduring arc of time circumscribed by God's creative work, rest, and delight. Every day and every week of the harvest season anticipates festival joy. In turn, the anticipation pierces the season with slivers and glimpses of delight, including shouts and songs rising from fruitful fields (Isa 16:10).

The counting of *Shavuot* suggests the capacity of joy to be both a situational and background emotion. Situational emotions are episodic, called into being and expression by particular events (e.g., "on that day...let us be glad and rejoice," Isa 25:9). In contrast, background emotions are pervasive and persistent; they spring from recognition that we depend for our wellbeing on something or someone ultimately

beyond our control: the love for a child or life partner, for example, or anger at an unrelenting wrong, or joy that God provides fruitful soil that year after year produces grain.³ Background emotions are robust and resilient, enduring through changing circumstances and shaping our actions, even when we are unaware of it. By instructing Israel to count seven sevenfold in *Shavuot*, Moses charges the community to daily and weekly call into awareness their background joy—joy that sees God’s creation and provision, joy that weathers the heat and hardship, back-breaking toil and broken tools, thirst and exhaustion, pain and sorrow. Neither fickle nor faint, background joy proves to be a deep and life-giving current that, at festival time, surfaces and overflows in waves of communal joy and celebration.

Give

Harvest gathered and grain stored, Moses identifies the second movement of *Shavuot* to be giving from the bounty in gratitude for God’s blessing. The gift of harvest inspires, indeed calls for, a grateful response to the creator God who yet again made possible the heaps of wheat and barley. While admittedly Moses stipulates the response, he invites a “freewill offering from your hand” (v. 10), namely, a gift that is prompted by the heart of the giver. Freewill offerings were ideally voluntary and spontaneous—not commanded or coerced, not made to satisfy promises or obligations, not performed to receive certain calculated returns. Exodus recounts how every Israelite “whose heart was stirred and...whose spirit was willing” (35:21) brought freewill offerings of gold and silver, yarns and linen, skins and leather, wood and oil, spices and stones until there were more than enough materials to build the tabernacle (Exod 35-36). Likewise, freewill offerings of precious metals and stones made possible the construction of the first Temple (1 Chr 29:5-9). Moses further prescribes that the freewill gifts of *Shavuot* be “in proportion to” God’s blessing in the harvest (v. 10), neither more nor less. Presumably an out-of-proportion offering signals some motivation other than thankfulness, such as the aim to curry favor or gain prestige (e.g., Amos 4:5).

By urging people to give back from the blessing they receive, Moses ritualizes the interplay between joy and generosity. Israel and its neighbors recognized and practiced the connection, as when Nehemiah commands the returned exiles to rejoice, eat and drink, and send portions of the feast to those who were without (Neh 8:10, 12); similarly, the book of Esther describes the festival of Purim as “days of feasting and joy, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor” (Esth 9:22).⁴ Joy can prompt grateful generosity, even as generosity may enliven personal and communal joy.

Rejoice

The heart of *Shavuot* is the communal embodiment and expression of joy. Moses not only sanctions the public celebration, he commends the festivities as the fitting complement to the community’s hard work: harvest *and* joy are vital to the community’s flourishing. As people together performed their joy, the community experienced and learned or relearned enjoyment—performance, that is, helped to form a joyful people of God. The celebrations featured movement and noise, shouting, singing, dancing, clapping, and feasting (e.g., 1 Sam 18:6; Ps 47:1). Several texts suggest that the occasions were so boisterous—cacophonies of songs, tambourines,

trumpets, and pipes—that Israel’s joy “was heard far away” (Neh 12:43; cf. Ezra 3:13), and “the earth quaked at their noise” (1 Kgs 1:40). The din was known even to draw people from surrounding lands, as when, at the appointment of David as king, Israel’s neighbors from Issachar, Zebulun, and Naphtali streamed to Hebron, “bringing food on donkeys, camels, mules, and oxen—abundant provisions of meal, cakes of figs, clusters of raisins, wine, oil, oxen and sheep, for there was joy in Israel” (1 Chr 12:40). To heighten the clamor of public celebrations, David purportedly appointed Levites as singers and musicians of harps, cymbals, and lyres to raise “loud sounds of joy” (1 Chr 15:16).

Israel understood their joy to participate in a vast and ongoing cosmic celebration. Perhaps the tumult of their noise was, at least in part, so they might be heard within creation’s jubilant roar. The community’s joy mirrored God’s own joy, God’s delight in creation and in the faithfulness and wellbeing of God’s people (e.g., Pss 104:31-34; 147:11; Deut 30:9). God also gives joy, filling mouths with laughter, turning mourning to dancing (Job 8:21; Ps 30:11). And Israel’s elation swelled the chorus of morning stars and the sprinting sun, forest trees and mountains, roaring seas and blossoming deserts—all creation singing before God (e.g., Job 38:7; Pss 19:5; 96:11-12). Creator and creation alike proclaim their joy.

Whereas Moses does not say a word about which instruments or songs or dances should animate *Shavuot*, he is clear that everyone participates. Harvest joy is not celebrated solely by landowners and farmers, foremen and reapers. Harvest joy is not some form of compensation, measured and due as reward for hours, labor, or yield. Rather, *Shavuot* is a gift to the whole community—its enjoyment never at the expense or exclusion of a neighbor. Moses underlines this with instruction that is personal, local, and radically inclusive: “Rejoice... you and *your* sons and daughters, *your* male and female slaves, the Levites resident in *your* towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among *you*” (v. 11). Moses’ fivefold repetition of the second person possessive suffix leaves no doubt that the people of Israel, especially the most fortunate, share the moral responsibility for ensuring that everyone is able to rejoice before God and share in God’s blessings. *Shavuot* is a good for all.

Just as no one may restrict who participates in the festival, no one but God decrees where the celebration happens. Moses leaves that open with the imperfect aspect: “at the place that YHWH your God *will choose*” (v. 11). Moses is certain there will be a place appropriate for the community’s worship and joy—a location that is neither arbitrary nor just anywhere. At the same time, God’s choice for the place of joy remains open, and God’s choice may change.⁵ So the community must wait and anticipate, alert and ready to move.

Remember

Finally, Moses roots *Shavuot* in the memory of Exodus, of God’s liberation of Israel—of *you*—from captivity in Egypt (v. 12). Moses reminds the community that today they are able to put their sickles to the standing grain, offer freewill offerings, rejoice together loudly, and enjoy dwelling in *your* towns with *your* children, because God once heard their guttural cry, took notice of their bitter oppression and suffering, and came down to set them free (Exod 2:23-25). Celebration of festival joy and the entirety of their lives spring from a freedom wrenched and worked by God.

Israel proclaims again and again that their joy rises from God’s redemption and

protection. Delight, in the end, is not Israel's own doing—not something they purchase or will for themselves, not something they achieve through determination and resourcefulness. Israel shouts with gladness because they see and know the great things that YHWH has done and continues to do for them (Ps 126: 1-3; cf. Isa 48:20). So the psalmist declares:

I always put the LORD in front of me;
I will not stumble because God is on my right side.
That is why my heart celebrates and my mood is joyous...
You teach me the way of life,
In your presence is total celebration” (Ps 16:8-11, CEB).

Conclusion

As we anticipate the Christian holiday of Pentecost this year, Moses' four brief instructions for the Jewish festival of Pentecost, or *Shavuot*, invite fresh consideration about joy and its expression in ancient Israel and our own contexts. Taken together, the instructions suggest that:

- 1) Joy is a background emotion, a persistent and resilient way of viewing the world that anticipates and is alert to God's goodness, even and especially in the midst of difficult and painful work. This is joy that does not shirk from grief or deny hard realities, but toils within them, trusting that God can and does sprout fields of barley and wheat out of dirt.
- 2) Joy and generosity are mutually reinforcing.
- 3) Joy is not solely the concern of individuals. Joy is performed and formed in communities. Physically. Loudly. Joy is the complement to hard work, and both are necessary for human flourishing.
- 4) The people of God, particularly the most fortunate, have a moral responsibility to ensure that everyone is able to worship and rejoice.
- 5) Joy is a gift. Joy emerges from the deep memory of God's works and wonders wrought for the sake of the world, and joy testifies to divine wonders ongoing.

Count. Give. Rejoice. Remember.

Notes

1 At various times in its history, Israel used three different dating systems for its festivals: Exodus 23 and 34 records the earliest; Deuteronomy 16 was likely introduced as part of Josiah's reforms in the late seventh century BCE; and Leviticus 23 was developed during the exilic or early post-exilic periods: Oded Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 38-40.

2 For more on the agriculture in ancient Israel, see Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel*, and Carey Ellen Walsh, *The Fruit of the Vine: Viticulture in Ancient Israel* (HSM 60; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000).

3 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 69-75.

4 For further examples and discussion, see Eunhy P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet's Theological Rhetoric* (BZAW 353; Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2005), 70-71.

5 Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 131-32.