

There are activities that humans perform with delight, passion and fire. In contrast, acts of ritual and worship can sometimes be carried out without zest, without relish. There are people who pray absentmindedly and often act as if the service of God consisted of manual labor. Obedience is holy. But does God ask for only automatic conformity?

The *Baal Shem Tov* (18<sup>th</sup> century founder of Hasidism) was one of those souls who thought that to love God was the natural state of humans. He believed that people were prone to love God as the seed was to grow. It was the most delightful act and without it man was stifled, a burden to himself.

The *Baal Shem Tov* thought of the Jew's relationship to God as a romance and it disturbed him to see how many rituals had become routine rather than rapturous acts, exercises in repetition rather than gestures of surprise—a hand without a heart. Faith was fire, not sediment. Did not a pillar of fire serve as a guide when the people Israel roamed in the wilderness? And fire was the beginning of light.

The *Baal Shem Tov* stirred the fervor that slumbered in the ashes and, as a result of his inspiration, a new feeling of potency flowed into communities and drew people along in a stream of enthusiasm.

One of his contributions was to awaken a zest for spiritual living, expressed in *hitlahavut*, which literally means 'being aflame'—the experience of moments during which the soul is ablaze with an insatiate craving for God, when the memory of all other interests and the fear of misery and persecution are forgotten. In such instances a man seeks to give himself to God and delights in his being a gift of God.

[Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel from *A Passion for Truth*, p. 45]

Wow, now there's a concept that is both powerful and almost impossible for us to imagine. We all certainly appreciate Judaism and follow its tenets as much as we can. But the fire and passion that Rabbi Heschel and the *Baal Shem Tov* describe seem so far beyond our grasp that we are tempted to dismiss them, thinking them impossible in our lives.

It's clear that we can't easily go from not understanding or feeling the fire of Judaism to being filled with it. We have to build up to it in our intentions and in our actions. By approaching it slowly but consistently, we are able to develop our ability to find and feel joyful exuberance in God and in our Jewish celebrations.

I have already watched that happen here at CSI. Before last Shabbat, as I would lead the service, I would hear my voice above all the other voices. Sometimes I would hear only my voice. I would look out at the congregation and see people's mouths moving but the volume of their voices would be so low I literally couldn't hear them. I would wonder why they didn't sing louder.

By singing together, by hearing our voices intertwine, we can experience our connections to each other in a way that we can't when we are silent or softly mumbled words to ourselves. Music is a path to the soul, to feeling joy. Music lifts us up and is a way to feel the holiness that both Heschel and the *Baal Shem Tov* knew was naturally inside of us.

It's because of this that I was excited to experience that connectedness at our first *Tefilat Lev Shaleyem*, our one hour Service of the Whole Heart. It was during that service that I heard people's voices get stronger and stronger as the service went on.

It was very different from my experience of a regular service. As I thought about it later, I understood that in a regular service, we alternate singing with silent prayer. I realized that the silences stop our voices and our joy from building. During our one hour service, without the silences, we were able to continue building and to experience a deeper and more profound connection with our individual and collective joyfulness. I think this is why so many people enjoyed the service. There was a momentum that was built from beginning to end.

It is from this experience that I have two requests. First, please come to the next *Tefilat Lev Shaleym* on November 14<sup>th</sup> at 10:30am and experience the joy that we create together.

And second, bring this understanding of lifting our voices to achieve joy to our regular Shabbat morning services. Just because we have silences, we don't have to lose the momentum that we create when we do sing. If we can be more conscious about that momentum, we can create joy in every service that we have.

We also know that singing isn't the only way to feel our joy with God and our community. We can feel it in other ways, at other times as well. Through nature, through the smiles of people we encounter, through doing mitzvot for our fellows. Most importantly we can learn from Rabbi Heschel and the *Baal Shem Tov* that we have the ability to create the kind of joy that brings us closer to God, closer to our own souls and closer to each other. Let's make a commitment to do that.

*Shabbat Shalom.*