

THE JOY OF THE ALMIGHTY IS OUR STRENGTH

Moving Forward Together

Rosh Hashanah / Yom Teruah 5787 Lesson

Primary Text: Nehemiah 8:1–12

Supporting Texts: Leviticus 23:23–25; Psalm 30:5; Psalm 133:1; Ecclesiastes 4:9–10

Leviticus 23:23–25 (NASB95) — ²³ Again the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²⁴ “Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘In the seventh month on the first of the month you shall have a rest, a reminder by blowing *of trumpets*, a holy convocation. ²⁵ ‘You shall not do any laborious work, but you shall present an offering by fire to the LORD.’ ”

Psalm 30:5 (NASB95) — ⁵ For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime; Weeping may last for the night, But a shout of joy *comes* in the morning.

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 (NASB95) — ⁹ Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. ¹⁰ For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up.

CENTRAL THOUGHT

There are times when we need to acknowledge what has happened, learn from it, and make whatever corrections are necessary.

But there is also a time to stop looking backward and begin moving forward.

On the first day of the seventh month, the people of Israel gathered together, heard the Torah, and became deeply aware of where they had fallen short. Yet they were told:

“Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

— Nehemiah 8:10, NASB95

As we enter another year together, we can learn from yesterday without allowing yesterday to define tomorrow.

I. THEY GATHERED TOGETHER AS ONE PEOPLE

Nehemiah 8:1 — And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel.

“And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate...”

The setting of Nehemiah 8 is significant.

The people had experienced a difficult season.

Jerusalem had been devastated. Its walls had been destroyed. Its people had experienced displacement, opposition, uncertainty, and tremendous hardship.

Yet now they were gathering again.

And notice the description:

“All the people gathered as one man.”

They were many individuals.

They had different backgrounds.

They had experienced different things.

Yet when they gathered before The Almighty, they gathered as **one people**.

That is an important reminder for us.

A congregation does not cease to be a family simply because it experiences difficulties.

We may sometimes disagree.

We may sometimes misunderstand one another.

We may disappoint one another.

There may even be times when difficult matters must be addressed.

But our goal should always be restoration, strengthening, and moving forward together according to Torah.

Psalm 133:1 — “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!”

Unity does not mean that problems never occur.

Unity means that when problems occur, we remain committed to The Almighty, to His Torah, and to one another.

II. THEY RETURNED THEIR ATTENTION TO TORAH

Nehemiah 8:2–3 — ² Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who *could* listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

Ezra brought the Torah before the assembly and read from it.

The people did not gather merely to discuss their difficulties.

They gathered around **Torah**.

This is important because difficult seasons can easily cause us to focus primarily upon:

- what happened,
- who said what,
- who was right,
- who was wrong,
- what should have happened,
- or what we wish had happened differently.

There may be a proper time to deal with those matters.

But eventually our attention must return to something greater than ourselves.

What does The Almighty say?

Torah gives us something solid upon which to stand when our emotions, experiences, and opinions may pull us in different directions.

It reminds us:

We do not determine our path merely by how we feel.

We determine our path by the instructions of The Almighty.

That is what brought Israel together in Nehemiah 8.

And that is what must continue to bring us together.

III. HEARING TORAH PRODUCED A RESPONSE

Nehemiah 8:8–9 — ⁸ They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. ⁹ Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest *and* scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law.

“They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.”

The people were not simply hearing words.

They **understood** what they were hearing.

And when they understood Torah, something happened.

They began to weep.

Why?

Apparently, as they heard the Torah, they recognized ways in which they had failed to live according to it.

This is one of the purposes of Torah.

Torah does not merely inform us.

Torah examines us.

It causes us to ask:

- Where am I walking faithfully?
- Where have I fallen short?
- Is there something I need to change?
- Is there someone I need to forgive?
- Is there someone from whom I need to seek forgiveness?
- Is there something I need to do differently?

Rosh Hashanah begins a season in which Jewish tradition emphasizes reflection and repentance.

That reflection can be valuable.

But repentance is not intended to leave us permanently looking backward.

Repentance should change the direction in which we are walking.

Once we recognize something that needs correction, make the correction, and learn from it, we must continue walking.

IV. THERE IS A TIME TO STOP MOURNING

Nehemiah 8:9–10 — ⁹ Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest *and* scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites told the people:

“This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.”

Then Nehemiah said:

“Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

This may seem surprising.

The people were convicted.

They were grieving.

And yet their leaders told them:

Do not remain there.

There is a time for mourning.

There is a time for repentance.

There is a time for examining ourselves.

There is a time for correcting what needs to be corrected.

But there is also a time to move forward.

The Almighty did not intend His people to spend this holy day overwhelmed by what had gone wrong.

He wanted them to recognize what He was doing among them **now**.

The walls were standing again.

The people were gathering again.

Torah was being heard again.

The community was being restored.

There was reason for joy.

V. “THE JOY OF THE ALMIGHTY IS YOUR STRENGTH”

This is probably the best-known statement from this chapter.

But notice the context.

The people had not experienced an easy life.

Their joy did not come from pretending that nothing difficult had happened.

Their joy came from knowing that despite everything that had happened:

The Almighty was still with them.

Torah was still before them.

They were still His people.

They were still standing.

And they still had a future.

That is where their strength came from.

The same principle applies to us.

Our strength as a congregation does not come from never having difficulties.

Our strength comes from knowing where to turn when difficulties occur.

We turn to The Almighty.

We turn to Torah.

And we continue walking together.

Psalm 30:5

“Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning.”

A difficult season does not have to become our permanent condition.

VI. THEIR JOY CAUSED THEM TO CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER

There is another detail in Nehemiah 8:10 that we should not overlook.

They were told:

“...send portions to him who has nothing prepared...”

Their celebration was not merely individual.

They were told to make sure that **everyone could participate**.

Those who had something were instructed to remember those who did not.

That teaches us something important about congregational life.

When we are walking together, we should be looking around and asking:

Who needs encouragement?

Who needs someone to listen?

Who needs someone beside them?

Who needs to know that they are still part of the family?

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 tells us:

“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion.”

One of the greatest strengths of a congregation should be that **we help one another get back up.**

VII. THE PEOPLE CHOSE JOY

Nehemiah 8:12 — All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.

Notice what changed.

At first they heard Torah and wept.

Then they understood Torah more fully.

And they rejoiced.

The Torah that initially convicted them ultimately became the source of their joy.

That is an important lesson.

The instructions of The Almighty are not intended to crush His people.

They show us how to walk.

They show us how to repair what is broken.

They show us how to treat one another.

And they show us the road forward.

VIII. MOVING FORWARD INTO A NEW YEAR

As we hear the sound of the shofar this Rosh Hashanah, perhaps we can hear in it a call to move forward.

We cannot change yesterday.

We cannot unsay every word.

We cannot undo every mistake.

We cannot erase every disappointment.

But we can learn.

We can repent where repentance is needed.

We can forgive.

We can grow.

We can strengthen one another.

And we can determine how we will walk from this day forward.

The question before us is not simply:

“What happened last year?”

A better question is:

“How will we walk together in the year ahead?”

IX. FOUR THINGS TO CARRY INTO THE NEW YEAR

As we enter this new year, may we determine to:

1. Gather as one people.

Remember that our relationships with one another are worth protecting.

2. Keep Torah at the center.

Let the instructions of The Almighty—not personalities, emotions, or disagreements—determine how we walk.

3. Learn from yesterday without living in yesterday.

Make corrections where necessary, but do not allow past difficulties to define our future.

4. Strengthen one another with joy.

Look around. Encourage one another. Help one another. Lift one another when we stumble.

CONCLUSION

The people standing before Ezra could have defined themselves by everything they had been through.

Instead, they were reminded of who they still were.

They were the people of The Almighty.

Torah was still among them.

The Almighty had not abandoned them.

And their story was not finished.

Neither is ours.

Whatever difficulties may lie behind us, we stand together today at the beginning of another year.

We still have Torah.

We still have one another.

We still have work to do.

We still have people to encourage.

We still have opportunities to serve.

And we still have every reason to trust The Almighty with what lies ahead.

So as the shofar sounds, let it remind us:

We have learned from yesterday.

We are standing together today.

And with the help of The Almighty, we will walk faithfully into tomorrow.

“Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

— Nehemiah 8:10, NASB95