



Crescas and Rabbi Sacks on Happiness and Joy

Samuel Lebens

To the extent that happiness and joy were a preoccupation for Rabbi Sacks, it might be fruitful to curate a conversation between him and the great medieval philosopher of joy, Ḥasdai Crescas. In what follows, I seek to lay the foundation for just such an encounter between these two thinkers.

FROM MAIMONIDES TO CRESCAS

Medieval philosophers tended to view our emotional life as a function of our animality. Positive emotions would be associated with the satisfaction of our appetite and imagination, and negative emotions with their frustration. This conception of our emotional life is ultimately credited to Aristotle.¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, Maimonides adopted this Aristotelian view without question, even though it entails that God, being pure intellect, and possessing no animal soul, and having no need for anything, and, therefore, having no appetite, could have no emotional life. But doesn't the Bible describe God as having all sorts of emotions?

S. Lebens (✉)
University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

Here's how Maimonides resolves the problem. Whenever the Bible says that "God has emotion X", it *really* means that God's causal imprint on the world around us corresponds to the causal imprint that *our* actions tend to have when *we* are motivated by X.² In other words, given the causal imprint that God leaves on the world, we experience Him *as if* He experiences changing emotional states. Sometimes we experience Him as if He's angry, and sometimes as if He's happy or sad. Nevertheless, and despite these appearances, there are no emotions in the mental life of God Himself.

In a sense, Maimonides was being more Aristotelian than Aristotle. In his book, the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle describes God as the object of the *eros* of the world (in other words, as the Being that all creatures desire to approach),³ but he also claims that God experiences pleasure (in Greek: *hedone*).⁴ In other words, according to Aristotle, God somehow enjoys being God! But Maimonides would have none of it. Pure intellect, with no appetite, can experience no emotion.

Many other influential Aristotelians in the Middle Ages were somewhat less austere than Maimonides when it came to Divine emotions. Following Aristotle's lead, they were happy to say that there is one exception to the emotional vacuum in the Divine mind. The one emotion that God constantly experiences, they claim, is joy. In the Christian tradition, this position is advanced by Aquinas (among others).⁵ In the Jewish Aristotelian tradition, it is advanced, most famously, by Gersonides.

Gersonides accepts that God is pure intellect and that he has neither appetite nor passion. But there is one form of joy that Gersonides (like Aquinas) would insist we should relate to, not as animalistic but as an *intellectual emotion*, and that emotion is "intellectual pleasure." In actual fact, even Maimonides was committed to the existence of this phenomenon (if only in the case of human intellects). Afterall, Maimonides endorsed a conception of the afterlife as a blissful *disembodied* experience in which only the intellect survives and *enjoys* an uninterrupted beatific vision (i.e., a Divine revelation).⁶ In other words, the intellect in heaven, without any bodily form, and without any appetite, can still enjoy itself. But what does it enjoy? Well, it enjoys thinking. The better the thing it's thinking about, the more it enjoys itself. It was with this sort of intellectual joy in mind that Aquinas and Gersonides attribute joy to God. Gersonides writes:

It may be demonstrated that His pleasure and joy in His apprehension is the most perfect possible, as the philosopher [i.e., Aristotle] has made clear. For

apprehension is pleasurable to those who apprehend, and the more numerous and noble the objects of apprehension, the greater the pleasure and joy. Accordingly, His joy and pleasure in what He apprehends is the ultimate of what is possible, for He apprehends all things, and apprehends them in the most noble way possible.⁷

Crescas was unimpressed by this attempt to introduce joy into the mental life of God. In fact, he thinks it would be wholly inappropriate to predicate intellectual joy of God. That sort of joy would be an appropriate response either to the *surprise* of discovering a new fact or to overcoming an intellectual obstacle. But God never transitions from ignorance to knowledge. Accordingly, He's never surprised. Moreover, there are no intellectual obstacles in His way. For these reasons, God would never have the sort of experience that gives rise to intellectual joy.⁸

In order to make sense of the claim that God experiences joy, Crescas would have us distinguish between two *types* of joy. The first is a *passion* that we human beings experience as we "transition from potentiality to actuality in the attainment of a desired goal."⁹ The greater the transition, or the greater the challenge, the greater the joy. But, as we've seen, God doesn't face any challenges. God is also unchanging since He never has any *need* to change. After all, He's totally independent and self-sufficient. Accordingly, He never undergoes transition, from ignorance to knowledge, or from hunger to satiation, or from any one state to another. Without transition and without challenge, God can't experience the passion of joy.

Once we rule out joy as a passion, we can move over to the notion of joy as an *action*. According to Crescas, God's joy is nothing more than the action of creation. He enjoys giving being to others.¹⁰ As Warren Zev Harvey memorably puts the point:

When [Crescas] attributes joy and love to God, he attributes them to Him not as *passions*, but as *actions*. In Crescas' Hebrew terminology, God, in His joy, is *po'el* (Agent, Maker, Efficient Cause), not *mitpa'el* (suffering passion or emotion). *Our* joy and love are effects and are affective, but *God's* joy and love are causes and not affective. *Our* joy and love are in our being actualized, *God's* is in His actualizing.¹¹

God's joy is not a passion because it isn't *passive*. That doesn't mean joy as an action feels like nothing. If God were feeling nothing on the inside,

after all, we'd be back to the Maimonidean God of pure intellect. We've come a long way from there. For Maimonides, it is God's intellectual activity that is the cause of the universe. For Crescas, by contrast, the ultimate cause of the universe is nothing other than God's infinite joy and love.¹² Moreover, as far as Crescas is concerned, the very same joy that we experience as passive recipients is what God experiences, so to speak, from the other side, as its cause. It is joy that we share.¹³

CRESCAS AND RABBI SACKS

On one crucial issue, there is a great lacuna between the thought of Crescas and the thought of Rabbi Sacks. As far as Rabbi Sacks is concerned, the belief in the radically free will of human beings is a fundamental principle of Judaism as a religion. Indeed, he went so far as to call it the "fourteenth principle of faith."¹⁴ Crescas, by contrast, is famous for being the main rabbinic philosopher to have believed in a rigid determinism and to have thought that, at best, we have a so-called compatibilist freedom (that is to say: a species of freedom that's compatible with the fact that all of our thoughts and actions are determined by prior causes), and at worst, to have thought that our free will is nothing more than an illusion.

But, when it comes to the study of joy, it seems that Crescas and Rabbi Sacks would have made especially good *chevrutot* (study partners). I say this because each of them held views about the nature of joy that shed light upon, or offered interesting support to, the views of the other.

Rabbi Sacks was keen on the distinction between zero-sum goods and social goods. Zero-sum goods are those goods that get distributed by the market and the State, such as money and power. They are zero-sum because the more that you share them, the less you end up with:

That is why governments and markets are arenas of conflict, mediated on the one hand by democratic elections and on the other by monetary exchange. We need such institutions. Without them, as Hobbes said, life would be nasty, brutish and short.¹⁵

Social goods, by contrast, are an almost magical commodity in that the more you share them, the more you have:

[I]magine that you have a certain quantum of love, or friendship, or influence, or loyalty, and then you share it with nine others. Do you have less than when you started? In fact, you have more.

Rabbi Sacks—who wasn't yet making any distinction between joy and happiness (a distinction that would become important to him later)—was clear that true happiness is a social good.¹⁶ True happiness, when shared, is multiplied, and not diminished.

In addition to situating happiness (or true happiness) among social goods, Rabbi Sacks also argued that the key to true happiness is to seek the happiness of others. This, he dubbed, “the paradox of volunteering” since:

the more we give, the more we are given. I lose count of the number of times I have thanked people for their voluntary work, only to be told: ‘It is I who want to give thanks for the chance to serve.’ Lifting others, we ourselves are lifted. Happiness—the sense of a life well lived—is born in the blessing we bestow on others. Bringing hope to someone else’s life brings meaning to our own.¹⁷

There are a number of ways in which Rabbi Sacks’ observations about happiness are elevated in light of Crescas’ philosophy. The idea that happiness is a social good finds a number of resonances in the world of Crescas: first of all, joy is, for Crescas, an experience that even God couldn’t have on His own, since true joy, as we human beings passively receive it, is—at root—the creative activity of a God of love, loving His creations into being. It is something that emerges only in the context of more than one being—a *po’el* and a *mitpa’el*.

Secondly, the notion that happiness is ampliative—that the more you give the more you have—is given a new force when joy is thought to be the very thing that brings the creation into being; the very power that emanates from a single God, only to give rise to the dazzling multiplicity that is this universe, with all of its gigantic stars, and minute atoms, is ampliative indeed.

Finally, the notion that lifting others is the key to a life well lived, and, therefore, to human happiness, when transposed into a Crescian key, becomes the claim that making others happy is the ultimate form of *imitatio Dei* (walking in the path of God). To experience joy, not merely as a passive recipient but as the creator of the joy of others, is to attain Divinity.

In his later work, Rabbi Sacks came to draw a key distinction between joy and happiness. Joy, he associates with the Hebrew word, *simḥa*; happiness, with *ashrei*.¹⁸ Rabbi Sacks recognizes that happiness is a virtue in Judaism. A person can only be described as *ashrei* if he is “doing well and faring well.”¹⁹ Such a person is:

blessed with a good marriage, children, a reputation for integrity (“the crown of a good name”—(*Avot* 4:17), an honoured place within the community, and the feeling of a life well lived. He or she sleeps well at night, knowing they have done nothing of which to be ashamed.²⁰

Ideally, happiness should be the automatic “outcome of a moral life,” but in actual fact, it is too dependent upon external circumstances beyond our control, however moral we may be.

What of the poor, the exploited, the unemployed? What, asks the Torah repeatedly, of the orphan, the widow, and the stranger within the gates? What, asks Kohelet [in Ecclesiastes], of the tears of the oppressed who have no comforter? What of the wise man who saved the city only to be unthanked, ignored, forgotten? What, we might ask nowadays, of the victims of terror, or those who live under tyranny? To speak of happiness under such circumstances is almost to mock the afflicted.²¹

Joy, by contrast, as Rabbi Sacks came to understand it, depends upon nothing more than the experience, in the present, of being alive, of having being.

The Talmud says that each Sunday, Shammai, the great sage of the late Second Temple period, was already preparing for Shabbat. Hillel, however, lived by a different principle: “Blessed be God day by day” (*Beitza* 16a). Joy blesses God day by day. It celebrates the mere fact of being here, now, existing when we might not have done, inhaling to the full this day, this hour, this eternity-in-a-moment that was not before and will not be again ... It is a state of radical thankfulness for the gift of being. Even in an age too fraught for happiness, there can still be joy.²²

Indeed, as Rabbi Sacks pointed out, the notion that joy, unlike happiness, isn’t contingent upon things going well, is expressed by Habakkuk in a beautiful passage of the Bible:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
 and no fruit is on the vines;
 though the produce of the olive fails
 and the fields yield no food;
 though the flock is cut off from the fold
 and there is no herd in the stalls,
 yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
 I will exult in the God of my salvation.²³

Rabbi Sacks makes clear—in his later work and armed with his new distinction—that it is joy, rather than happiness, which is truly reliant upon being shared. Perhaps you can be happy alone. But “*simḥa* only exists in virtue of being shared.”²⁴

This distinction between happiness and joy, is once again, lifted by Crescas. In Crescas’ view, the joy in which God is active, and of which we are His passive recipients, is manifest in nothing more (and nothing less) than our continued existence from moment to moment. Giving us our being, from second to second, is the joy of God. And thus, of course, there *must* be a crucial notion of joy in which the substance of our joy is nothing more (and nothing less) than our mere existence in the moment. To experience that moment as joy, is, in a sense, to experience an aspect of God’s own joy in that moment. Happiness can have all sorts of objects—a full belly, a nice car, a comfortable home, and so on. Joy, by contrast, is simply to be, and to recognize that our very being is a joyful expression of God’s infinite love.

Rabbi Sacks’ distinction between *simḥa* and *ashrei* helps, in turn, to strengthen Crescas’ point. The Hebrew Bible never describes God as *ashrei*, but it does describe Him in terms of *simḥa* (Psalms 104:31). This is just as we should expect. The notion of *ashrei* only makes sense for someone who has desires that can be fulfilled or an appetite to satiate. *Simḥa*, by contrast, requires no such limitation. Likewise in the classical Rabbinic texts, it’s almost unheard of for God to be described as *ashrei*.²⁵ By comparison, God is regularly described as being in a state of *simḥa*.²⁶ Moreover, the Talmud teaches that a prophet who isn’t in a state of *simḥa* isn’t able to receive the Divine word.²⁷ Paying attention to the distinction between *simḥa* and *ashrei* and the association between God and the former, rather than the latter, helps to bolster Crescas’ distinction between happiness as a human passion (i.e., *ashrei*) and joy as a Divine activity of which we can be the recipients (i.e., *simḥa*).

In these ways and more, Rabbi Sacks' and Crescas' meditations on the nature of joy shed light upon one another and upon the Jewish tradition from which they both emerged, and to which they both contribute so much.

NOTES

1. Aristotle, *De Anima*, III, 10, 433a.
2. Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* 1:54, trans. S. Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).
3. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 7, 1072b 3.
4. *Ibid.*, 1072b 16.
5. E.g., Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II Q. 28, article 3.
6. See Maimonides' introduction to Chapter 10 of Tractate Sanhedrin, in his commentary to the Mishna.
7. Gersonides, *Wars of the Lord*, 5:3:12, as translated by (Harvey, 1998, 102–3).
8. Hasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord*, 1:3:5.
9. Warren Zev Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1998), 106.
10. Crescas, *Light of the Lord*, 1:3:5.
11. Harvey, 1998, 106–7.
12. Crescas, *Light of the Lord*, 2:5:5, and Harvey, 1998, 118.
13. Crescas, *Light of the Lord*, 2:5:5, and Harvey, 1998, 107.
14. Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible; Deuteronomy: Renewal of the Sinai Covenant* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2019), 283–87.
15. Jonathan Sacks, *The Politics of Hope* (London: Vintage, 2000), xv.
16. *Ibid.*, 202–9.
17. From an article first published in 2005, reprinted in Sacks, *The Power of Ideas: Words of Faith and Wisdom* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 2021), 78.
18. Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Sukkot Mahzor* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2016), xlvii.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, p. xlviii.
23. Hab. 3:17–18.
24. Sacks, 2016, p. xlix.

25. All I could find in the classical Rabbinic texts was (1) a case in which God likens himself to a king who is *ashrei*, which is hardly a direct predication of the term (Tractate Brachot 3a, repeated in *Otzar Mizrashim*, *Pirkei Rabeinu Hakadosh* 1:18); (2) a case in which a Roman Caesar, who can hardly be described as an authority on matters of theology, describes God as *ashrei* (*Tanna debei Eliyahu Zuta*, *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 5); and (3) a very obscure Midrash in which the wicked in hell, who also cannot be described as great authorities on matters of theology, describe God as *ashrei* (*Otzar Midrashim*, *Gan Eden*, *Gehinom*, *Seudat Levyatan*).
26. A non-exhaustive list of examples: *Tosefta Sanhedrin* 14:2; *Tractate Derech Eretz Zuta*, *Perek Shalom* 3; *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael* 23:15; *Mekhilta DeRabbi Shimon Bar Yochai* 17, s.v., *Vayiven Moshe*; *Sifra*, *Shimmini*, *Mekhilta d'Miluim* 15; *Sifrei Bamidbar*, *Korach*, 117; *Sifrei Devarim* 326; *Bereshit Rabba* 3:3; *Shemot Rabba* 20:14; and *Bamidbar Rabba* 2:19. Less explicit, but more influential, is the blessing formulated in *Tractate Ketubot* 8a, which refers to God, "in whose habitation there is joy."
27. *Tractate Pesachim* 117a, and *Tractate Shabbat* 30b. The *simḥa* in question has to be the *simḥa* associated with observing the commandments, although the proof-text used in *Tractate Pesachim* would seem to indicate that the simple *simḥa* of listening to music could suffice.