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Bringing Joy to God

By The Rev. Deacon Sam Sheridan

There is a story in the Talmud that has long captured my imagination. This story frames how I think about the many ways we seem unable to get along with one another.

The Talmud – which means “study” in Hebrew and is a comprehensive written version of Jewish oral law and commentaries on it – is one of the central works of the Jewish people. These rabbinic teachings span six hundred years after the destruction of the second Temple by the Romans in AD 70.

In the story from Bava Metzia 59a-b, a new type of oven is brought before the Sanhedrin, the assembly of rabbis. This new oven is made of cut stone mortared together. Stone can be ritualistically pure, so Ben Eliezer decrees the whole oven can be pure. The mortar *might* not be pure, so Ben Joshua disagrees and rules that the oven *cannot* be pure.

Eliezer says the carob tree agrees with him, and the carob tree uproots itself, but Joshua is not swayed. Eliezer says the river agrees with him, and the river reverses its course, but Joshua is not swayed. Eliezer says the books of the law agree with him and the bookshelves fall, but Joshua is still not persuaded by these miraculous happenings.

Finally, Eliezer asks the heavens to support his position and a heavenly voice speaks on Eliezer's behalf. *Even God agrees with Eliezer.* But Joshua argues the decision of those who interpret the Torah outweighs even a Divine Voice of the heavens in how they are to shape their lives.

Upon hearing this, God smiles and laughs.

Rabbis over hundreds of years have written what this story is about. I am only a guest to this story and do not presume to interpret it. Yet, I come to it again and again for how much I love God's response of smiling and laughing. I come to it also for how Ben Eliezer is so right that the very heavens agree with him. And still, he loses the argument.

What can we learn from this story?

- How would my conversations be different if I remembered that winning an argument does not actually mean I am right?
- How would my relationships be different if I could see *at least some* of the people I disagree with are earnestly trying to live out God's dream for the world?
- How would I see myself differently if I were not measured by whether or not I am right?

In Job 42, God ultimately says some of Job's ranting is righteous. In Genesis 32, Jacob is renamed "Israel" for wrestling with God and man. In the Gospels, Jesus again and again finds faith in people like the Samaritan woman (John 4), the blind beggar (Luke 18), and even a Roman Centurion (Matthew 8). All of these individuals are on the margins – of at least Jesus' community – and still somehow grappling with the divine.

Again and again, the disciples are baffled...confounded...flummoxed... because they've been following this Holy Man around, and they're

really sure it will lead them to victory, to righteousness, to everlasting life.

And it does.

Following Jesus is the path to victory; is the path to righteousness; is the path to even Eternal Life. Yet these things are different in God's eyes than either what we or the disciples have been taught to expect.

Victory isn't lording it over others.
Righteousness isn't looking down on someone else.
Salvation isn't bought with someone else's damnation.

It is oh, so easy to be exhausted and exasperated in *partisan, polarized, and divided* times; frustrated and confused in a fractured Church; disheartened by our private arguments and disagreements.

But some of that exhaustion comes from our expectation that we should just be able to snap our fingers, live right, and know all the answers.

God simply does not ask that of us. Christ did not die because of how deserving we all are. The Holy Spirit is not bored for lack of things to do to make our lives more whole and more loving.

When we strive to live well, earnestly try to grow, work at being better than we were yesterday, *these* are the things that bring joy – smiles and laughter – to God.