

The Jewish Year is a Year of Joy

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We are a wilderness people – our covenant was crafted at Sinai, a mountain in the desert, and our sense of peoplehood has been sculpted by years of homelessness. Most of our history has led us away from home, often as refugees.

We are a people who worry about our security.

We tell stories of our loved ones who keep bags packed, just in case. We worry if we have enough, or if we do enough – for ourselves, for our families, for our communities, for the world.

And now, in the face of all of our concerns, I am going to ask us to do something differently. I would like us to celebrate Rosh HaShanah, the Jewish New Year, as a real holiday of joy.

Even more than that, I will suggest that this season that leads to Rosh HaShanah, and emerges from it, can be one focused on bringing more celebration into our lives.

Now, I realize that this may be a tall order. The Jewish New Year is not a typical celebration. We don't pop any bottles of champagne, and we have no festive countdown.

In fact, our encounters with Judaism at this season of Days of Awe can seem grim. Apologies, confessions, the lifting of our vows from the past year, God as merciful ruler accepting our transgressing selves back into God's favor after prayer and fasting – a little apples and honey and the sounding of the shofar hardly make up for all of these serious and somber themes.

And who could blame us?

Our calendar feels like we go from tragedy to tragedy – we jest that the general Jewish holiday can be described most succinctly as: “They tried to kill us, God saved us, let’s eat.”

With all of our running and fleeing, and then thriving, we always hope, that for just a little while, we may have finally reached a place of safety. Maybe this time we won’t have to pack up our families. Maybe this time we are proven to be too nervous when we always have our passports up to date.

Let’s admit that while our tradition insists on calling this a celebration – this New Year’s Party that we have all shown up to this evening – this Rosh HaShanah – we have resisted its call to be joyful. A couple of millennia of homelessness, some truly unspeakable centuries of oppression, and then the last decades of unbelievable turnaround, about which we feel admittedly a little guilty – this history has led us to experience this holy day as darker than it was originally intended.

Embracing this journey – constantly living on the road – is all about finding the little sources of joy around us. We Jewish people have been coping with our sense of permanent exile for two thousand years, during which we have created a whole year’s worth of holidays and countless daily and personal practices that are meant to offer us ways of emphasizing the rhythm between a low point and a high point. We descendants of Israel who grapple with loss on the scale of generations and continents must also figure out how to highlight the good times.

Let’s start with the basics – our lives and the world are miraculous. Jewish tradition as represented by the great Nachmanides reminds us that we must not rely on miracles in our everyday life, and we must acknowledge that we are constantly surrounded by the miraculous.

We are the people who notice small miracles in the littlest of things. We must

be. How else could we have survived the last two thousand years with a sense of hope that things will turn out better? When we look closely at the world, we can immerse ourselves in an ocean of reasons to wonder.

To look at the world through thoughtful, Jewish eyes, is to stare with awe and gratitude, and indeed joy, at creation.

To awaken to the morning in a Jewish manner is to begin with words of thanks.

I aim to follow a rhythm of life that brings little pieces of joy into my consciousness every day. Each morning I gather our family together to sing the Hebrew words of gratitude as a way of starting the day with thanks. Some days it works really well. Last week all four of us were up in time to gather together. Jude, our seven-year-old, and I sang our morning song, and Sadie, our almost ten-month old, crawled from Ginny's lap towards Jude and me, adding her voice to our song. We were all singing, in our own way, and definitely feeling grateful. It was wondrous. Even though the morning still had its struggles, the memory of those moments of grace is still sustaining a week later.

Many of you may have noticed that I share my regular runs via social media. Let me tell you, I do not have an easy time dragging myself out for a run in the morning: no matter how good it is for me, no matter how much better I will feel about life, the universe, and everything, afterwards. So I make sure that I get my mind into a grateful place when I am done. I am grateful that I managed to do it. I am grateful that Ginny took care of Sadie while I was gone. And then I am grateful no matter what my times and distances were. Maybe I was supposed to run ten miles and I only had time for six – doesn't matter! I got to run, and that was a blessing, even a source of joy.

All of this reminds us that Jewish traditions ask us to act in a way that we may not feel, so as to create the emotion we hope to have. Judaism recognizes that the mind-body connection works both ways – when we force ourselves to do something

we create some momentum towards feeling differently too. Even more simply, it is a life-practice of “fake it ‘til you make it”. The system of Jewish practices, applied, experimented on, reinterpreted, and reapplied in our own lives and in our own ways aims to help us find regular moments of little joy.

Some days I can’t fake it so well. Some days I am too, whatever, and usually the ones who suffer the most are those closest to me. On those days we can take a little advice from a non-Jewish thinker, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, who talks about non-toothache days. Non-toothache days. We must always be grateful that today is a non-toothache day. Happiness is enjoying what we have.

We try to see the small miracle even when a whole host of things cloud our vision of the wonder of the normal.

As we find our own ways to acknowledge and celebrate all of those daily blessings, so we can find high points in our weeks and seasons.

We are a people who come together regularly to enjoy a good nosh, and a little prayer service.

Every week we have an excuse to create “delight” – to practice Shabbat is to remember to find some joy at least once a week. Think of Shabbat as a reminder that if the week has dragged us down, sapped our “fake it ‘til we make it” batteries, that we have an excuse to recharge our celebratory engines. When we accept Shabbat as an opportunity for that stop, that necessary break, then we can embrace it as joyful.

Shabbat happens when we make it happen. In our household, some weeks we get to make Shabbat at 3:30 on Friday afternoon. My break in the week happens on Thursday, or on Saturday night, or for an hour or two on a Sunday afternoon, maybe, if I’m lucky during a Panthers game. Find a time, make Shabbat – when we can. It definitely works better when we do it with our family and with our community at the time when we all try to make Shabbat.

Let's aim to find the time, once a week, to inject a little "delight" into our lives, and take a break from the normal.

Now, this may come as a surprise to us all – our traditions teach us that the joy in the observance counts more than the observance itself.

Really – joy counts more than the details.

In Deuteronomy we find words that seem to say the opposite:

(Deut. 27:26) Cursed be the one that does not fulfill the words of this Torah, to observe them!

From this, we could get the idea that observance is all that counts. And yet here is a Hasidic teaching about this very verse in Deuteronomy.

[From Arthur Green, *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from around the Maggid's Table*, Volume 2, pp. 128-129]

Fulfilling all of the commandments, which the Torah seems to say we must do in order to avoid getting cursed, only seems like an impossible task. First, everyone knows that no one can fulfill all of the commandments. The Hasidic teaching goes further, and says that each commandment can be viewed as containing all of the commandments.

So, if this teaching is true, then why does the Torah read that we get cursed for not fulfilling all of them? The curse is there to remind us that joy is the key to fulfilling the commandments – to achieve one commandment that fulfills all of them, we must start with joy.

The teaching continues: "Prayer without inner direction is like a body without a soul.' The letters of Torah and prayer, as well as the fulfilled commandment, are all the body; the soul is the inner direction and the joyous thought we have in doing God's will."

All of the commandments are separate when we do them physically – when we

do a commandment with a joyous thought all the commandments become united. This is why later on in Deuteronomy it reads that we will be cursed:

(Deut. 28:47) because you did not serve Adonai your God in joy and in good-feeling of heart out of the abundance of everything.

Don't worry about the details of the commandments for Shabbat. Find a place and time to do a bit of Shabbat with joy.

We are a people with a lot of holidays.

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld writes about the journey through our holiday year:

"...the key to a successful journey is not reaching the promised destination, but rather being aware of every moment on the journey. To be successful [we] need to rejoice, to travel with *simcha*, 'joy'." [*A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice*, pp. 275-276]

We are not a people who arrive at final destinations, we are a people who journey.

As we plot our course through our holy days we also do not reach an ending place.

There are at least four different new years – Rosh HaShanah, the celebration of the creation of the world; Simchat Torah, the celebration of the completion and restarting of the cycle of reading the Torah; Tu biShvat, the New Year of the trees; and the first of Nisan, the first month of the year, the month of Passover, when the natural world is renewed in Spring.

With all these festival beginnings we have many starts, and no finishes!

Regularly, people say to me, "You Jewish people – what's with all the holidays?"

I need to start responding: "You bet – we are a people who love to have an excuse to have a celebration. These holidays are reminders to bring joy into our everyday lives every month of the year."

We celebrate AND we apologize.

We take a full month before Rosh HaShanah to work on repenting. What's the connection between apologies and a New Year celebration?

Our son Jude once asked: "Why don't people apologize? It makes it stop hurting."

Apologies clear the way for celebrating.

When we apologize, when we make amends, we put down the burden of needing to know everything, of being in control.

When the High Holy Day season asks us to do *tshuvah*, to make amends, we can let go of the burden of having done wrong, once we apologize, make it right, then rejoice in the liberation.

We didn't know better, we didn't mean it, we thought it would be better, we didn't think enough, we're doing what we can to make it better, forgive me, now let's have a Happy New Year.

This celebration that we arrive at may not be stereotypical – we may not find the joy that we see depicted in a movie or an advertisement. Joy happens amid all the other things going on – we find it on the upside of our rhythms. We must have non-joy in order to fully experience joy. We must notice and celebrate the difference in order to fully celebrate at all.

This means finding some authentic joy, not manufacturing it. This won't be Madison Avenue's joy. It's our own thing: personal joy from self-knowledge and self-exploration, which we found by clearing the way with apologies.

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, said that the worst thing we can do, is to worry too much about our mistakes. Too much guilt keeps us far from God. In joy and wholeness, we fully feel God's Presence, the miraculous nature of our existence. As long as we are at war with ourselves, we have no room in us to make a

dwelling place for God. We need to cultivate greater self-acceptance. We must always keep our eyes on the big picture. The main focus is on loving God, sharing that love with God's creatures, doing it through joy and celebration of life.

[Prof. Arthur Green, Ehyeh, A Kabbalah for Tomorrow, p. 125]

Our God and God of all ages, please be mindful of Your People Israel on this Day of Remembrance, and renew in us love and compassion, goodness, life, joy, and peace.

This day remember us for well-being.

This day bless us with Your nearness.

This day help us to live, and live with joy and celebration.

Let us join together in joy for this New Year.

Celebrate more, and find ways to do it that are more authentically us.

May our voices be acceptable to You as we joyfully sing out our worship to You.