

Don't Worry, Be . . . Joyful - Yom Kippur 5783

Rabbi Hazzan Rachel Hersh

Over many years of trying to understand the core teachings of our tradition, and of these holy days, I'm often drawn back to the basic notion that Rosh HaShana is the holiday of extroverted optimism and celebration, and Yom Kippur, today, is a day of solemn introspection. That wouldn't be wrong. Today is a day of facing truths we might rather not see. But there is an uncanny paradox to Yom Kippur, and that is that it is also a day of great joy, of *simchah*. This year especially, I'm drawn to this uncanny idea. Like many or maybe all of you, I've become so overwhelmed with concern, oftentimes really despair, for so much in our world. Some days it is just too much even to read the newspaper or even my daily checkin in with the brilliant Heather Cox Richardson. In fact it takes moral courage to summon a joyful outlook, whether because of personal, communal, national or global challenges. In asking us to focus towards joy today, let me directly address those in our community facing truly catastrophic, life-changing events in your personal lives. Would that we could wave a magic wand and remove those harsh decrees - I would have done it already by now. But as mere mortals, we have no choice but to address what is, as we continue to strive for what can be, and what must be. We all want the freedom and well-being to live the lives to which we aspire. I believe that cannot be accomplished without joy, the joy that is not contingent on our life circumstances but rather transcends them.

The possibility that this day of intense personal introspection, of self-denial and even self-flagellation could also be one of joy, of *simchah*, is a welcome one, an important one. Today, I invite us to seek the unique joy of Yom Kippur, not by ignoring the difficult truths of our lives, but by fully embracing them.

Practicing joy from the outside is said to have a salutary effect on us. Meditation teachers sometimes will encourage practitioners to simply turn the corners of their mouths up and watch what that external cue does to their consciousness. Try it for a

minute – try smiling just a little and notice how you feel inside. Smiling makes us more attractive to others as well. Even our dog, not an animal, shall we say, headed for Harvard, has figured out that if he can make himself smile, we're likely to offer an extra treat. But of course there's more to this than just a smile. On Yom Kippur, we find our way to joy through three distinct themes: through our shared history, through our heightened awareness of our mortality and through the cathartic release of our repentance and forgiveness.

First theme - our shared mythic history:

The sages of the Talmud say the two most joyful days of the year in the Jewish calendar are the 15th of Av and Yom Kippur. In Tractate Ta'anit, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: "There were no days as happy for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of Av and as Yom Kippur." Why? Because the 15th of Av was designated as a day for shidduchim – for loving matches between partners. The 15th of Av comes just six days after Tisha B'Av, when we commemorate the destruction of the Temple and of the holy city of Jerusalem. The 15th of Av, Tu B'Av, was a day for starting over after that national catastrophe, for reaffirming life, rebuilding the future one marriage at a time, one household at a time.

Why is Yom Kippur designated by the sages as a most joyful day? As usual, the sages base their teaching on the rhythm of the Jewish calendar. They teach that the first set of tablets – the ones on which Moses inscribed the 10 commandments, then he smashed them in anger at the appearance of the golden calf – this angry outburst happened on Tisha B'Av, that day of mourning the destruction of Jerusalem. And the second set of tablets? They were given on Yom Kippur. The second set of tablets, the ones that powerfully symbolize a fresh start, a second chance, faith in the future, and above all the capacity for repentance and forgiveness, were given on this day. A folk legend says that when the 2nd set of tablets were given, all of Mt. Sinai blossomed in a joyful profusion of flowers. That second set of tablets would travel with the people during all their years of wandering. It was a symbol of God's protection in the face of

enemies and of God's watchfulness in the face of their own iniquity, but always a symbol of joyful connection with God. By this account, here we are at Sinai once again, reliving the promise of that covenant of Life. In this way, today is like a warm up for Simchat Torah. Some teach that the whole month of Tishrei is a ladder from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur to Sukkot and the highest rung is Simchat Torah. Yom Kippur is our day for - with apologies to Marie Kondo - for sparking joy by clearing away the detritus of our egos, so that we can ascend to that higher place, which is a place of joy.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, the Kedushat Levi, drives this home in a story about an aspiring Tzadik, a righteous person, on the eve of Yom Kippur. Wanting desperately to help a poor family who had been evicted from their home for failure to pay their rent, and locked in a storehouse until that rent is paid, the Tzadik goes to a nearby town where there are a larger number of wealthy residents. These wealthier people, who already have plenty, are busy making money as the evening of Yom Kippur approaches. The Tzadik goes through a series of interactions in which he reluctantly agrees to drink with them until they agree to provide the needed funds to redeem the hostage family. Stumbling drunk, the Tzadik arrives back in his village, pays the rent to the landlord, redeems the hostages just in time for the holiday, and finally passes out on the floor of the synagogue, just as Kol Nidre is beginning. The people in the shul are scandalized and call for his removal. But, as the story goes, Levi Yitzchak says in fact, because of his selflessness, the Tzadik has simply skipped over Yom Kippur to the higher place – which is Simchat Torah, a day on which we are commanded to rejoice, simply “drunk” with joy.

The Rambam, Maimonides, who played a crucial role in the development of Jewish law with the publication of his Mishneh Torah, emphasizes that a joyful outlook is an essential quality for successful prophecy. As he says: “All the prophets do not prophesy whenever they desire. Instead, they must concentrate their attention [upon spiritual concepts] and seclude themselves, [waiting] in a happy, joyous mood. According to the

Rambam, prophecy cannot rest upon a person when he is sad or languid, but only when he is happy.” (Foundations of Torah, 7:4) *Lo mitoch atzvut, elah mitoch simchah.*

We may not be aspiring prophets, but we all need to be able to envision the future, to dream forward, and we can't do so wearing lenses of despair. Rav Kook:

“In the depths of the human soul the voice of God calls ceaselessly. The tumult of life can confuse the person so that most of the time they will not hear this voice.”

(Maamarei HaRayah, p.113) Kook student Yitzchak Marmorstein adds, “Yom HaKippurim-The Day of Atonement is our best yearly opportunity to hear this inner prophetic voice.” We have so many urgent problems to address as a society. Unless we can summon a joyful outlook, at least sometimes, at least today, our capacity to address those problems is weakened. We can't take that chance for ourselves and our descendants.

Second theme - mortal joy

Of course, much has been made about the relationship between Purim, a day we usually think of for rejoicing, and Yom Kippur, which is also Yom HaKippurim, or Yom K'Purim a word play that says Yom Kippur is really “like Purim”. On Purim, Esther goes before the royal court, which is filled with booty from the Jerusalem Temple, and pleads before the human king for her people. On Yom Kippur, the Temple priest would go before the Holy of Holies and plead before the King of Kings for his people. In both cases, the stakes are quite high – Esther is risking her life in approaching the king, and likewise, the high priest is risking his life in entering the Holy of Holies. In both cases, the royal decree of salvation is a source of enormous joy for the people. In our case, dressed as we are in our funereal white clothing, deprived of all physical sustenance, we also face the truth of our mortality, and we also emerge with renewed joy for the lives we've been given.

“Face each day as if it was your last and every day will be a . . . blast” This is the unique psychology of Yom Kippur. We get up close and personal with our mortality, all

for the purpose of the urgent gift of being alive. Now more than ever, we may need this practice to keep ourselves from slipping into the abyss of despair, a place from which nothing good can emerge. We cannot make decisions, we cannot connect with our loved ones, nor try to understand our adversaries. We cannot create anything since that creative impulse itself is animated by the joy of being alive. Even in the worst of times, we are often surprised to find that our capacity for joy is still intact. Sometimes, in fact, it is strengthened by adversity. I can't help but think of our longtime member, Anne Mazonson, of blessed memory, who seemed to get more joyful as her illness progressed. As her own death drew near, she understood how precious every moment was. For her, it would be a true sin to waste a moment wringing her hands, to throw away an opportunity for joy. Even in my own moments of deepest sadness, I could only open my mouth to sing or teach when I found that one thread of optimism. No doubt, we want to be whole humans and that means feeling the full palette of emotions, including sadness, fear, anger. The brilliant Pixar film "Inside Out" emphasizes this point, when the main character "Joy", who is the leader of all the emotions, must herself learn the importance of integrating the others, especially sadness. But joy is at the center, the lighthouse that shows us the way forward, even in a storm.

Third theme - the cathartic joy of repentance and forgiveness

"Empty, empty, empty, happy, happy, happy." I know, it sounds like an ad for a digestive remedy, but it's actually a quote from one of the greatest yoga masters of the 20th century. Pattabhi Jois' English may have been somewhat limited, but his insight is deep. On Yom Kippur, we are joyful because we have the opportunity to empty ourselves of the burden of our resentments, of those we've held in contempt – indeed we've *held* them and they weigh heavily on us. We are joyful because we are freed of the burden of our own shame and regret for all the many ways we've stepped in it this year. What a joy for us to feel free, to forgive and to be forgiven. It doesn't mean we don't feel sorry for what we've done wrong, or that we can suddenly pretend those transgressions never happened. But this annual deep cleaning gives us the chance to

reset our internal barometer, which we need to do in order to make good on the promise of this release.

This is what the priest, in the days when the Temple still stood, was doing in his annual visit to the Holy of Holies – emptying himself, laying down his burden before God and hoping for a positive reply. When he emerged to greet the community, his face shining like Moses' coming down from Mt. Sinai, his joy is clear and taken up by the community. Listen to this short excerpt of the traditional liturgy describing the completion of his ritual: "The appearance of his face was like the brilliance of a sunrise. With great joy, he put on his own clothes. The [community] accompanied its faithful [leader] home. They rejoiced in the news that the [ritual of communal repentance had been successful]. . . A great joy burst forth, happiness and rejoicing rang out. The clouds above dripped, and showered forth their dew."

Classical priesthood died with the destruction of the Temple, and with that fatality, we say that the essence of the priesthood was integrated into all of us. We are all, as the Torah says, *mamlechet kohanim*, part of the holy kingdom of priests. We retell the ancient Yom Kippur priestly ritual to awaken that potential for joy within ourselves. In this emptying, we all become *kley kodesh*, the Hebrew phrase which means 'clergy' but literally means holy vessel. Holy because it is empty. The outer container is strengthened by learning and by spiritual practice, regular Torah study and prayer, *tzedakah* and *g'milut chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness. All those qualities are part of the strong and beautiful outer vessel. But by definition, the true holiness of the vessel is its empty-ness. Empty of ego, empty of erroneous anxiety, leaving space for joy. I've experienced this myself many times in this room with you all. Invariably, I arrive with many distractions, worries, self-doubt, full of all kinds of spiritual *chazerai* and must begin again to empty out. That's what we do for one another in community especially today, make space for one another, tend to one another as priests. Each of us here today is carrying some kind of burden, some way in which we've been unable to forgive: to forgive another person, to forgive God, or to forgive ourselves. And each of

us is also here to help each other to unburden ourselves, and to find our way to the special joy that comes with cathartic repentance and forgiveness. We do that just by our presence, and also through the prism of the priestly ritual we retell on this day. When the priest emerges from the Holy of Holies, the community affirms God's eternal name: *Baruch Shem kavod malchuto l'olam va'ed* (Blessed is God's Name - whose glorious kingdom is eternal) and then joins in proclaiming their joy: *Ashrei ha'am she'kacha lo, ashrei ha'am she'Adonai elohav* (Happy is that nation that dwells in the presence of God - Ps. 145) A modern telling of this ritual by the Israeli composer Yishai Ribo follows:

(let's put the text in here)