

THE SEASON OF OUR REJOICING?

YOM KIPPUR AND SUKKOT: FINDING JOY IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

In her sermon, Rabbi Buchdahl refers to the following statement in the Talmud (Ta'anit 4:8):

The mishna states: Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: There were no days as happy for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of Av and as Yom Kippur. The Gemara states: Granted, Yom Kippur is a day of joy because it has the elements of pardon and forgiveness, and moreover, it is the day on which the last pair of tablets were given.

In Abby Pogrebin's *My Jewish Year*, Rabbi Elie Kaunfer also relies on this text, stating:

I remember the first time I saw people dancing on Yom Kippur. The fast had ended, the final shofar blast had sounded, but instead of running for the exits, everyone broke out in spirited dancing. They were communicating with their feet: "The break-fast can wait." It was time to feel the joy. This was quite different from how I had previously experienced Yom Kippur as a solemn day filled with apologies, existential questions and acute experiences of mortality. The only joy, in fact, was in making it to the break-fast.

Yom Kippur as a day of joy dates back to the earliest rabbinic legal text, the Mishnah (Ta'anit 4:8): "R. Shimon Ben Gamliel said: Isaral had no better days than the 15th of Av and Yom Kippur." There is so much joy at the section of the service known as the Avodah. It is the reenactment of the High Priest's encounter with God. It is also a moment when people sing and dance, remembering the way in which we used to be so much closer to the Divine. Yom Kippur offers a glimpse of a pathway to return. It is a moment to enact – with joy – the possibility of a deeper connection with all that is holy. Isn't that reason to dance?

Rabbi Buchdahl explains that for her, the "experience of mortality" that Kaunfer mentions is integral to finding joy in the holiday:

Our ancestors intentionally fashioned Yom Kippur as a dress rehearsal for our own deaths; we deny ourselves food and drink, we refrain from sexual relations, and we recite the Viddui, our deathbed confession of sins. On Yom Kippur, we contemplate whether we will be written in the Book of Life and actually chant a litany of the many ways we could die: "who by fire, who by water." Traditional Jews even dress in a white kittel, or burial shroud, for Yom Kippur services.

But the purpose of all of this is to come out of the holiday with a feeling of intense joy. Because, after facing the undeniable reality that we are all dying— we are more fully aware that we're not dead yet. We get another chance. Not just to live, but to live better. Facing death urges us to heal relationships, to make amends, to be more grateful— to truly live the life we want to live. And Yom Kippur gives us the opportunity to restart, to repent and repair and this leads us to profound joy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What are the reasons offered in each of these texts (the Talmud, Rabbi Kaunfer's essay, and Rabbi Buchdahl's sermon) for considering Yom Kippur a day of Joy? Which of these (if any) do you find the most compelling?
- (b) Can you imagine joyful dancing on Yom Kippur, as Rabbi Kaunfer describes? Can you imagine seeing that kind of joyous expression here at the end of ne'ilah?
- (c) Rabbi Kaunfer seems to suggest that experiencing Yom Kippur as a day of joy is in some way inconsistent with the holiday's focus on death and mortality. Rabbi Buchdahl considers the focus on mortality to be essential to the experience of joy that follows. What do you think?
- (d) When, if ever, have you experienced joy on Yom Kippur?

In *My Jewish Year*, Rabbi Shai Held speaks to Abby Pogrebin about the connection between facing one's death and atonement:

I think it's hard – to the point of being impossible . . . to do what rabbis often say in High Holy sermons: "We should live all the time with the realization that we might be killed in an hour." You know what? I'll speak for myself: I would never get out of bed again. I mean that seriously. And by the way, if I thought that way about my *children*, I would lock my son and daughter in my apartment and they would never go outside. But, if we ignore that idea *all* the time, we do so at our peril. And in some ways, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are about that: at least sometimes, we have to stop and realize we might not live until tonight. And what happens then? That's the tension, right? You can't live like that *all* the time. But you've got to live like that *some* of the time.

"Live like you might die *some of the time*," writes Pogrebin. "That's my new Yom Kippur."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What does it mean to live like you might die some of the time? How do we know when to ignore our mortality, and when to acknowledge it?
- (b) Is it useful to set times of year, like the lead up to the High Holy Days and the days themselves, as a time to live like we might die? Do you experience the holidays that way?

In her sermon, Rabbi Buchdahl introduces the idea that the holiday of Sukkot, which follows immediately on the heels of Yom Kippur is considered “z’man simchateinu” – the season of our rejoicing, when we are literally commanded to rejoice. She describes what kind of “joy” she is talking about as follows:

I want to clarify that when I speak of joy, I’m not talking about that temporary, ego-gratifying happiness you might feel when you, say— find street parking. I am talking about *simcha*— the kind of deep soulful uplift and connection, which I will translate as “joy.” It is striking that the word *simcha* in the Torah is never about individuals. It is always about something we share—like a wedding which is considered the ultimate *simcha*. The experience of coming together in an authentic and loving way with another person or people, or even nature or God, generates *simcha*.

Rabbi Rachel Barenblat (also known through her blog as the “Velveteen Rabbi”) elaborates upon the distinction between happiness and joy in the context of Sukkot:

Happiness comes and goes. We may have a sense for what conditions are likeliest to bring it about, but I’m not sure we can entirely trust that sense. (Haven’t you known people who pursued things they thought would make them happy, but discovered that what they were seeking wasn’t actually enough?) And besides, the conditions aren’t usually within our control. I may perceive that I’m happiest when I’m surrounded by people I love, eating great food, experiencing wonderful live music, traveling to exciting new places, immersing in an amazing experience of prayer -- but even though I’m fortunate to have a lot of those moments in my life, life isn’t like that all the time. I can’t count on that experience to sustain me. . . .

. . .

Joy is deeper than happiness. When I anticipate the early months of parenthood, it’s hard to know how happy we will be. Sleep deprivation, diaper changes, late-night feedings, the complete disruption of the life to which we’re accustomed, the near complete cessation of the intellectual work which has been one of my greatest pleasures -- that might not be a recipe for happiness. But I’m betting there will be a lot of joy: deep upwellings of connection, satisfaction, awareness that we’re embarking on the holy task of shaping a new person’s life in the world. And, sure, frustration and sadness too. But those can coexist with joy.

When our sages confirmed the importance of rejoicing in the sukkah, they were talking not about ephemeral (and uncontrollable) happiness, but about joy. Cultivating an attitude of joy is within our control. Regular prayer is one of the primary ways that I cultivate joy. So are the mindfulness and gratitude practices I’ve taken on. I recite the

modah ani blessing for gratitude each morning in the shower, and the asher yatzar blessing for having a body which (mostly) works each morning while I give myself my blood thinner injection. Practices like these don't inoculate me against bumping into painful realities -- but they cushion me, and I think they change how I relate to those realities.

Sitting in the sukkah is a chance to make the conscious choice of inhabiting joy. Joy at having reached another Sukkot. Joy at the many kinds of harvest which have been brought in over recent weeks, from the chard and squash of our CSA to the emotional and spiritual work of teshuvah I spent the Days of Awe trying to do. Joy at feeling occasional squirms and kicks within my belly. And even if that joy is tempered with anxieties -- the days are darkening, parenthood is on the horizon, my to-do list is ridiculous -- joy is still the existential state I'm making the choice to try to inhabit, during Sukkot and the days that follow.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) When you think of times of joy in your life, are they generally communal, as Rabbi Buchdahl suggests? Or private?
- (b) Does the distinction that Rabbi Buchdahl and Rabbi Barenblat draw between happiness and joy make sense to you?
- (c) Can you think of times in your life that were not necessarily “happy” but that brought you joy?

In her sermon, Rabbi Buchdahl speaks about the 18th century Hassidic master Rabbi Nachman of Brezlav:

Nachman was a charismatic leader with thousands of students who followed his every teaching. But he also endured bouts of debilitating depression. This brilliant leader wrote about his challenge to seek out joy when he despaired, and he instructed: “If you don’t feel happy, pretend to be. Even if you are depressed, put on a smile. Act happy. Genuine joy will follow.” Rabbi Nachman, despite his struggle with depression, understood simcha as the ultimate religious obligation. He knew that joyfulness was not just a discretionary emotion, but a daily choice: a decision to actively rejoice in the face of our suffering, with faith—that joy will come.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What does it mean to Rabbi Nachman to heed the command to rejoice?
- (b) Does his prescription make sense to you?
- (c) Have you ever experienced a time when you engaged in joyful behavior (even grudgingly) which led to authentic joy?