

Yom Kippur Morning 2020/5781
Rabbi Lev Meirowitz Nelson
Flatbush Jewish Center

This morning, I want to spend time together on a topic that at first may seem quite counterintuitive to you, but I hope by the end of this d'var Torah you won't feel that way. I want to talk about joy. With the world feeling as chaotic and dismal as it does, now more than ever we need to reach for our inner reserves of joy and bring it forth into the world. And Yom Kippur is the perfect day to reflect on that.

Why, you may ask? You may have heard the old rabbinic canard that Yom Kippur is one of the happiest days of the calendar. The Mishnah says so, at the very end of Masechet Ta'anit. In the old rabbinic theology, because all our sins are forgiven on Yom Kippur, because we are so close to God today, it is the happiest day of the year.

Fine, a good starting point. But if, like me, you're not so sure about a theology where God punishes us for our sins, getting a clean slate only gets you so far in the joy department. So how else can we understand *toda* as a joyful day?

I propose to you that we can explore that question by looking at some of our other happy times of year and seeing what pattern emerges.

The other happiest day of the year, according to that text from the Mishnah, is Tu B'Av, when the maidens of ancient Israel would go out in borrowed white dresses to dance in the vineyards, and the men would go out to court them. They wore borrowed dresses to level the economic playing field, so a potential suitor couldn't tell the difference between a wealthy woman and a poor one. Six days after Tisha B'Av, our saddest, most mournful day, we completely reverse the emotional polarity and celebrate love and what I might call radical inclusivity. That ability to shift emotional registers so rapidly is an important feature of our Jewish way of life. We'll come back to it more in a bit.

There are two other times in the Jewish calendar when we are deliberately instructed to be happy. The perhaps more obvious one is Purim, where we go out of our way to be silly. We say "*mishenichnas Adar marbim besimcha*," from the time the month of Adar enters, our joy increases." I stood here before you two years ago and gave a d'var Torah that included the midrashic reading of Yom HaKippurim, this holiday's full name, as Yom Ke-Purim, a day like Purim. So something about today is connected, at a very deep level and despite their seeming oppositeness, to the wild, comedic, over-the-top joy of Purim. How? We'll come back to that too.

The other explicitly joyful time is Sukkot, which we refer to as *z'man simchateinu*, the time of our joy. We sing "*vesamachta bechagecha*," you shall be joyful in your holiday, a direct quotation from Deuteronomy (16:14). Sukkot starts in just four days, and I've always been tickled by the links the rabbis instituted between Yom Kippur and Sukkot. When we read the Book of Jonah

this afternoon, chapter four is the denouement they likely didn't teach you in Hebrew School. It takes place when Jonah leaves the city of Nineveh and builds a **sukkah** in which to sit and await the city's destruction. Then there's the minhag of going out and putting the first nail in your sukkah tonight, after the fast ends but before you break your fast. So the rabbis are not-so-subtly reminding us that the time of our joy and the solemn day of repentance are also linked.

Yom Kippur, Tu B'Av, Purim, Sukkot. What weaves these holidays together? What's the common thread?

About six years ago, my teacher Rabbi Art Green published a small mass-market book called *Judaism's Ten Best Ideas*, the idea being to introduce people who were just starting to explore Judaism to some of our greatest innovations. Number three in his top-ten list is joy--the idea that being joyful is not just a nice side-effect of Judaism but is actually an essential principle of our religion. Drawing heavily on Chasidic sources, Rabbi Green writes that sadness distances us from God and, correspondingly, joy brings us close.

So here you have a fantastic inversion of the text we started off with. In the Chasidic rendering, it's not that we are joyful on Yom Kippur **because** we are close to God. Just the opposite: our joy at being forgiven **brings us** close to God.

Green also reflects on a uniquely Jewish brand of joy called *simchat mitzvah*, the joy of performing a mitzvah. For instance, when you have a wonderful Passover seder with beloved family or close friends, you are not just happy for all the reasons you would expect--there is an additional joy that comes from fulfilling God's commandments. And even when the commandment is disturbing, unpleasant, or boring--fasting on Yom Kippur, say, or circumcising a baby boy--there is supposed to be a certain kind of joy that comes from the act.

This reminds me of what Abraham Joshua Heschel writes about prayer--perhaps unsurprising because Rabbi Green was one of Rabbi Heschel's students. Heschel says that sometimes we pray because we feel moved to, out of an overflowing spiritual feeling within. Other times, we don't feel at all moved, so we pour ourselves into the fixed text and rely on the words to move us--to stir up our joy.

By the same token, I might suggest that sometimes we come to Yom Kippur with an innate feeling of wanting to do teshuvah and turn over a new leaf, which leaves us feeling joyful and relieved. Other times, that feeling isn't there, and we rely on the rituals and liturgy of Yom Kippur to awaken that feeling in us.

If I've convinced you that joy has a place on Yom Kippur, it still leaves us staring down the emotional contours of this particular Yom Kippur 2020 with some perplexity. In the midst of a pandemic that has killed millions worldwide and disrupted all our lives. In the midst of a

recession that has decimated jobs across the country. Five weeks before a nasty election that could have who-knows-what consequences. Now, we should be joyful?

Yes. Absolutely. 100%. More than at any previous time in our lives, now is the moment to summon joy. If you can get it naturally--from the people in your life, from a good book, from an online comedy special, wherever--do it. If you can't, think of it as *simchat mitzvah*, the joy of fulfilling a commandment, and doggedly do the things you have to do, searching for the joy that comes from them. In this moment that feels so stuck, so desperate, we need joy in our lives as the antidote to fear, despair, isolation, and anger.

And the holidays we've been reflecting on this morning, in their constellation of associations around Yom Kippur, give us some pointers on how to find joy even in this moment.

From Tu B'Av, the ancient day for finding a life-partner, we take the quality of hope. Six days after our saddest day, when we wallowed purposefully in all the tragedies of Jewish history, even a woman who was no longer young, who perhaps had spent years searching in vain for a partner, could join the others out in the fields. Because you never know when the right person will come along and the stars will align.

And those borrowed dresses on Tu B'Av teach us about the joy of giving and receiving help, rather than feeling embarrassed or indebted or like we're transgressing a boundary. Help is something we all need and all like to give when we can; Tu B'Av reminds us that it's just part and parcel of the fabric of community.

From Purim, more than any other time of our year, we take the quality of absurdity. You thought it couldn't possibly get any worse? You thought this was ridiculous? Just you wait, Purim's got an app for that.

And from Sukkot, when we leave our comfortable homes to take our chances with wind and rain, heat or cold, mosquitoes and bees, we take an awareness that joy is an internal state of being, not a summation of our external circumstances. Sukkot, as the fall harvest holiday, is a celebration of all we have, but it is suffused with an awareness of fragility: Some years we might not have all we want--and still we are joyful.

And let's face it, this is one of those years. Many of us like to leave the City for Sukkot to get out someplace more rural, where there's a sukkah in the backyard and more peace and quiet. Speaking for myself, we always go away to either my family or Eliana's, except we're not this year, because of Covid. And I'm sad about that. But I'm still going to try and reach for joy on Sukkot, because joy in spite of what we lack is part of the spiritual lesson Sukkot tries to teach us.

And maybe that brings us back to Yom Kippur. Today, we've removed pretty much all of our external sources of joy. Even if we cannot fast, we typically avoid our favorite foods and extra

treats. We spend hours in shul--or, this year, on Zoom--and it's not the fun kind of shul. We deny ourselves various other pleasures. Without those inputs, what's left is the emotional core we cultivate. If we can attune that core to joy today, we hopefully will be able to maintain that joy when it has supports to prop it up, no matter what outside forces batter at it.

Now, we're about to turn to Yizkor, which is a sad time in our service. But I invite you, if you are staying for Yizkor, to try and find an element of joy amidst the sadness in these next few minutes of remembrance. And if you're stepping outside, or away from your computer, I encourage you not to just take it as a minute outside of services--particularly since you should be at least six feet apart from the other people who are also not staying for Yizkor--but to reflect on the joy of not yet having to say Yizkor,. And whichever category you're in, I hope you think of a way for that joy--and all the other joys in our life--to sustain you through the rest of today, tomorrow, this month, and the year ahead.

Shanah tovah.