

Rabbi Shoshana Leis
Rosh Hashanah 5782
September 2021

Rosh Hashanah
sermon on joy.

I opened with singing “ivdu et hashem bsimcha, serve your inner spirit” and asked people to bring to mind someone who taught them to live life with joy. Since the veils are thin on Rosh Hashanah perhaps there is someone who wants to dance with you...

Continuing the storytelling theme from last night...

During her tenure as poet laureate, Tracy Smith, a woman of color, spent a lot of time traveling to lead poetry readings and discussions in rural towns across the country. “I felt oddly fortunate to have a reason to go out into different parts of America, where people didn’t automatically agree with my perspective on things, and use poems as a way of coming together and listening to one another,” she said. Poetry, she noted, can bypass what she sees as surface-level ideological barriers and open up avenues for genuine connections. “To be able to have these really thoughtful, vulnerable, quiet conversations was kind of miraculous . . . I think it helped stave off a certain despair...”

And my story..

This past spring, the UJA gathered a group of NY rabbis at isabella freedman jewish retreat center. All vaccinated, no masks. After 15 months of covid, we felt a new world was upon us and we were ready to lead our congregations through a process of repair and renewal. We caught a glimpse of the world Post-covid: there was hope, numbers were low. We knew things would never be the same, but we felt inspired by the concept of post-traumatic growth brought by a psychologist Dr. Betsy Stone. She shared with us that a vaccine wasn’t going to be the easy answer for recovery from the psycho-spiritual trauma of a fellow human we encounter, possibly becoming a lethal weapon. I didn’t believe her that the shot wouldn’t be enough.

I thought - like many of you- that as terrible as this chapter was, it was one with a beginning, a middle and an end.

A few weeks ago, Ben and I biked from Nyack to Haverstraw on the west side of the Hudson it's interesting that this 4-5 mile trip has markers neatly placed ½ mile apart; only the distance is marked from the origin and not to the next town/destination. Distance from Haverstraw, or distance from Nyack- your origin is all you really know. Distance from March 7, when we closed the building... this is all we know.

Trauma is when your world becomes incomprehensible - if trauma is something that happens when we have experiences we can't understand, that's something we can probably all relate to.

Meanwhile, our spiritual home- our place of refuge -remains for now potentially not safe for us all to gather in. This is core.

No one expected us to be back on zoom for high holidays.

There are moments when I grow weary.

On a shabbat in early August, my fail-safe tools for inspiration -Torah + Shabbat + community- didn't work. I was despairing over the latest wave of Covid, the latest wave of fires... I don't remember which...but I couldn't glean my usual inspiration from Torah. Without meaningful Torah to give to the congregation, what could I give? Torah is life. Torah is water for the soul, like our beautiful sanctuary and community, Torah is core.

What do we do when our tool kit fails us? What do we do when we face despair?

Just before I left for shul, I listened to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l, who taught that the word simcha - joy - appears 12 times in Deuteronomy, the book that is Moses's words to each of us- emphasizes joy as an obligation. That was the message for me, and now it's my message for you.

Just even the thought of joy was the medicine I needed. My soul knows the groove to return to and has prepared itself for inevitable times when despair and sadness arise. I hadn't actually considered joy to be a spiritual practice. The tiniest homeopathic dose was enough to access the hum of the universe that is joy.

I felt renewed leaving shul that week, transformed not only by the message of the Torah but also by the power of communal prayer to transform my inner state.

But more important was the tap on my soul's shoulder, and the whisper that followed:

Remember, joy. Remind them, joy.

When I asked myself what the focus would be for High Holidays this year, with hands literally shaking and tears streaming down my face. I typed the words

"NONETHELESS, JOY"

This season is built to raise our awareness to beauty, goodness, even though it is fleeting, falling, dying away, impermanent.

"Halleluyah, anyway" the title of Anne Lamont's book is indeed our way of walking in the world as evidenced from our extensive liturgy of psalms and praise, far outnumbering the prayers that ask for something. Halleluyah, anyway. Joy, anyway.

Then Afghanistan happened.

I was deflated.

Joy was deflated.

But my sermon coach Eden wouldn't let me off the hook.

I fought her tooth and nail and tried to veer from the joy theme.

Recalling the Talmudic debate about whether the world should even have been created...

It would have been better had this sermon never have been created! It's not the right theme for a world gone so wrong. Look at how we have turned the point of no return with climate. And now, Texas... and Covid numbers.

The year many of us have endured, forced inside, four year children online for preschool...so much uncertainty.

Trauma happens when your world becomes incomprehensible.

We thought we were moving towards life! And now, more death, more Covid, 1500 people - more fear, more isolation, more zoom... look.... at ... everything.

Look at this image, does that about sum it up?

A communal call for JOY? Hubris.

But I was coming from a definition of joy that was limited. Joy actually is more than. "Joy, anyway."

Society has taught us in many ways through messages and advertising that joy is a fleeting feeling and we need to have something and then something else (for my kids often something new, costing money) to keep having it.

But joy isn't just a bandaid or a temporary state. Joy is loving life when your heart is breaking open. It is heart medicine, which is what so many of us need. Joy is being on the inside of life, entering all the way,

staying in the room, rising to meet yourself where you are, fully and completely. Joy is being real and staying awake.

Joy is a state of consciousness, more vital than we realize and also maybe more accessible than we realize.

Rabbi Sacks teaches that the biblical word for happiness, ashrei, is the first word of the book of Psalms and a keyword in our daily prayers. But far more often, Tanach, the Hebrew bible speaks about simchah, joy – and they are different things. In his view, we can't experience it alone. Simcha is what happens when we are more than the separations we experience in life. Our closeness to the source, the well deep within, is more powerful than our distance.

"In one of the most extraordinary lines in the Torah, Moses says that curses will befall the nation not because they served idols or abandoned God but "Because you did not serve God with joy."

(Deuteronomy 28:47). A failure to rejoice is the first sign of decay. In Judaism, joy is the supreme religious emotion. Because pain, sadness, fear, anger, envy, resentment, these are things that cloud your vision and separate you from others and from God. Kierkegaard once wrote: "It takes moral courage to grieve. It takes religious courage to rejoice." (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks)

According to the Talmud, one is forbidden to stand for prayer except out of "simcha shel mitzvah" Joy in doing a mitzvah. We must stand before God in joy.

The Chassidic masters emphasized this, and Reb Nachman of Breslov made joy a value in itself. He understood that joy is loving life when your heart is breaking open.

Rebbe Nachman was born 1772 in the town of Miedzybóz, which is in the then Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, now Ukraine. In the same year, the First Partition of Poland was agreed on, and the region and surrounding ones were taken over by the Russian Empire.

Reb Nachman was the great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidic Judaism, a pietistic movement that emphasized returning to the heart and expressing joy.

For Reb Nachman: Joy is not merely incidental to our spiritual quest. It is vital. Nothing is as liberating as joy, and a person should transform their gloom and all suffering into joy.

[In Likutei Moharan, a collection of his teachings, (Part II 23:1:4-6): Yet greater still is to gather courage to actually pursue gloom, and to introduce it into the joy, such that the gloom itself turns into joy. It is like a person who comes to a celebration. The abundant joy and happiness then transforms all his worries, depression and gloom into joy.]

About a century later, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira the Grand Rabbi of Piaseczno, Poland wrote a compilation of weekly sermons for his students while in the Warsaw Ghetto. It contends with complex questions of faith in the face of the mounting suffering of the Jews in the ghetto. When it became apparent to Rabbi Shapira that the end of the ghetto and all its inhabitants was near, the book was buried with other documents in a large milk canister which was found by a construction worker after the end of the war.

The book was published in Israel in 1960 under the title Esh Kodesh ("Sacred Fire"). The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was crushed in 1943, Rabbi Shapira was taken to the Trawniki work camp. On November 3, 1943, all remaining Jews in Trawniki including Rabbi Shapira, were shot to death. (Wikipedia)

In 1940. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira wrote:

In the face of death and bereavement, I have found the strength to rejoice and have inspired others to do as well. When others observed my self-possession and joy, they too found inner strength in the face of their own troubles, through my example. This inner strengthening will itself have the effect of turning evil into good.

Reb Nachman and the Piezeztner rebbe, each lived through extraordinarily difficult times. Joy was their spiritual medicine. Joy is loving life when your heart is breaking open.

This doesn't preclude experiencing truth, pain, or authenticity in fact we can't be b'simcha without these.

Maybe simcha is something that we can each still access together. We tasted it at the Havdalah the other night at Jesse and Gale's. How sweet it is to just be together. (and with roberta's desserts again for the first time in 18 months!!) There will be more of these gatherings, God-willing.

Maybe there is something we can access in ourselves, anytime, anywhere, alone and together, no matter what is happening.

We won't get to this expanded joy without discernment, grappling, reflecting...we won't skip over what's real, and without growing in response-ability. In fact, practicing responding instead of reacting is one of the cornerstones of living a joyful life.

25 years ago, I found (or re-found) a deep well of joy in response to facing my sorrow. It is generative, and births new life at every turn.

Doreen Virtue writes: "Whether in sadness or in brightness, refresh yourself often as you drink from your inner well." Joy is both reflective and rooted, ecstatic and leaping. It will fuel us to do the spiritual work - including facing grief, loss, fear and uncertainty and to do the work of racial and environmental justice.

Poet Laureate Tracy Smith, whom I mentioned in the opening of this talk, was commissioned by Carnegie Hall to write a poem for the global Ode to Joy project in honor of Beethoven's 250th birthday. For Smith, joy means more than elation.

"I think that joy is about acknowledging the largeness and beauty of others. Joy is about doing that work in order to create harmony."

Let's read together Smith's Ode to Joy.

"Ode to Joy"
O friend, my heart has tired
Of such darkness.
Now it vies for joy.
Joy, bright God-spark born of Ever
Daughter of fresh paradise—
Where you walked once now walk rancor,
Greed, suspicion, anger, fright.
Joy, the breeze off all that's holy,
Pure with terror, wild as flame.
Make us brothers, give us comfort,
Bid us past such fear and hate.
If you've loved another's beauty
If you've craved the warmth of flesh,
If your spirit is invested
In another's sense of worth,
Lift your voice to touch my voice now,
Let our song bring joy to earth.
Lift your voice to touch my voice now,
Let our song bring joy to earth.
Joy like water, milk of mothers.
Kind and wicked all deserve
Joy's compassion freely given,
Joy which can't be sold or earned.
In the depths of blackest soil
In the lightless atmosphere
In the atom and the ether,
Animating all that is.
Let us feel it, let us heed it,
Let us seek its deepest kiss.
Let us live our brief lives mining

That which joy alone can give.
Battered planet, home of billions,
Our long shadow stalks your face.
All we've fractured, all we've stolen,
All we've sought blind to your grace.
Earth, forgive us, claim us, let us
Live in humble thanks and joy.
Let our hearts wake from our stupor,
Let us praise you in one voice.
Shana maleh simcha, a year full of joy.

Shana maleh simcha
A year full of joy