

## “Joy”

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon

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On this first of the year, as we think about our deeds, I want to start with a question. Which profession is most likely to get into the world to come? No, this is not a joke, there is an actual Talmud text (Ta’anit 22a if you are interested) that talks about this very subject. Take a moment to type your answers in the chat box as I give the beginning of the story.

Rabbi Beroka goes to Elijah the prophet and asks him who is worthy of the world to come. Elijah points out two brothers and Rabbi Beroka asks them what they do. It turns out they were jesters. They cheer up the depressed and strive to make peace when people fight. Jestors make us laugh, they make us feel better, they bring joy.

In that spirit, I introduce to you modern-day jester Mallory Palmer who has brought laughter to us all when she posted this video.<sup>1</sup> What I love about this video, even more than the actual seal sounds, is how happy Mallory herself is. She is cracking herself up, which makes it even better.

Not only does joy feel good, but it is a Jewish value. In Rabbi Arthur Green’s book, *Judaism’s 10 Best Ideas*, Simchah (Joy) is #1, the first idea he discusses. Green writes that happiness is a religious precept. “We are called upon to rejoice in the gift of knowing God, of loving God’s creation, and of attesting to the divine presence that fills the world, both within us and around us.”<sup>2</sup> Today, as we begin 5781, we need joy more than ever. 5780 has been difficult, challenging, tragic, chaotic... take your pick of horrible adjectives. The next year will surely have its share of disappointments and tragedies (though let’s hope not quite as many!) That makes it even more important that we begin our year with joy.

You know those twinkle lights that flash on and off? Those little lights, Dr. Brene Brown writes, are “the perfect metaphor for joy. Joy is not a constant. It comes to us in moments—often ordinary moments.”<sup>3</sup> The problem is that we often miss these bursts of joy. We are too busy trying to find extraordinary moments or too wrapped up in what is going wrong in our lives. The key is to notice the joyful moments when they come. The gratitude practice of Judaism, where we say 100 blessings a day, is designed to build in our recognition of these joyful moments.

So let’s experience some joy. We can often find it when we open our eyes to the possibility of humor. Freelance sports commentator Andrew Cotter, who usually covers golf, rugby and tennis for the BBC, found himself with a lot of free time on his hands after the lockdown. He made some videos of his two dogs, Mable and Olive, including this one where he puts his sports commentary skills to work.<sup>4</sup> Something ordinary turned into something joyful. One commenter wrote, “after experiencing the rush of joy at seeing Olive and Mabel pop up, the pleasure of the watch and the continuing smile that I know will linger, I feel it only fair to let you know the positive consequences of your wit.”<sup>5</sup> If you have not seen this series of videos which include a Zoom performance review, I recommend you watch them all.

Ingrid Fetell Lee, in her Ted Talk on joy, shares that when asking people what gives them joy, there were some things that kept coming up again and again. Any guesses? Bubbles, tree houses, swimming pools, ice cream, fireworks and rainbows. Everyone seemed to like these, regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity.<sup>6</sup>

During this pandemic, many of us have experienced some joy through watching videos of ordinary people. A personal favorite of mine is this video<sup>7</sup>

There is a difference between joyful and funny. There are a lot of funny videos out there, but most involve someone else's unhappiness. We laugh at people, not with them as we did with Mallory and the sea lions. But that is not what joy in Judaism is about. Judaism tells us that joy is meant to be communal. It is happiness shared. In the Torah, Moses tells us that the festivals are joyous occasions that must be experienced by everyone--adults and children, those in the center of society and those on the margins (Deuteronomy 12:4-7). Midrash Tanchumah (Bereshit 4) teaches us that we were given the holidays so that we could enjoy ourselves. That joy will keep us coming back, year after year, to celebrate the festivals again, despite all the work it can be. Similarly, joy keeps us coming back to community as well.

So we find joy in this different High Holidays. Twinkle lights of joy. Moments. Our first time in the completed building. The smells of a holiday meal. Seeing one another in person for tashlich and shofar. Hearing a familiar melody. Learning something new. Dipping the apples in the honey.

Our greeting during this time is chag sameach. May you have a joyful holiday. Not a good holiday, or a happy or kosher holiday. A joyful holiday. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said, "Judaism is about taking life in both hands and making a blessing over it. It is as if God had said to us: I made all this for you. This is my gift. Enjoy it and help others to enjoy it also."<sup>8</sup> And so this Rosh Hashanah, that is what we will do, together.

We will start with the joy of seeing one another's faces and hearing New Year's greetings from our community.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.tiktok.com/@malloryypalmer/video/6862096996258286854?source=h5\\_m](https://www.tiktok.com/@malloryypalmer/video/6862096996258286854?source=h5_m)

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Green, *Judaism's 10 Best Ideas: A Brief Guide for Seekers*, 2016, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Brene Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*, 2010, pp. 80-1.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkppDS8AGW>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtzdGVR65Lo>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/ingrid\\_fetell\\_lee\\_where\\_joy\\_hides\\_and\\_how\\_to\\_find\\_it/transcript?language=en#t-279963](https://www.ted.com/talks/ingrid_fetell_lee_where_joy_hides_and_how_to_find_it/transcript?language=en#t-279963)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0ci5EYb9qA>

<sup>8</sup> <https://rabbisacks.org/deep-power-joy-reeh-5776/>