

## “The Juicy Joy of Jewish Jubilation”<sup>1</sup>

Yom Kippur Sermon

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This Sunday, our Hebrew school kids and parents helped set up the chairs you are all sitting on now. One asked if this was more people they we get on a regular Shabbat. I assured, them that yes, there would be more on Yom Kippur. This caused perhaps a little confusion, because all the Hebrew School kids know Shabbat is the most important holiday in Judaism. That’s right we have a principle that a more common occurrence takes precedence over a less common occurrence.<sup>2</sup> Shabbat occurs every week, while Yom Kippur, the DAY of atonement is only today. Now don’t get me wrong, Yom Kippur is pretty special. have a special service tonight, *Ne’ilah*, that occurs only on Yom Kippur. Tonight is the only night we wear a *tallit*. We have six *aliyot*, or Torah blessings, today. That’s more than any day other than Shabbat, which gets seven blessings.

So if Shabbat is so important, why is it that we have so many people here on Yom Kippur, maybe seven times what we have on a normal Friday or Saturday? I can offer a lot of speculation—observing for one day is way easier for us, even if we must take off work or school, than observing something every week. We did it as kids. We learned about the importance of this day as we studied for conversion. But I also think there is something about the nature of this holiday—focusing on what we did wrong, asking for forgiveness, and then, perhaps, feeling forgiven. We are drawn to the idea of afflicting our bodies by fasting and afflicting our souls as we beat on our chests. Even though we are not a religion prioritizes self-flagellation, it feels good, every so often, to focus on how we could do better. This day is weighty and heavy. So many services. So many confessions.

Yet, this singular focus is a slight misreading of our liturgy. Yom Kippur is really a coda on our entire year. It is on Rosh Hashanah that our fate written, and that writing on Rosh Hashanah is based on not just that day, but on the entire previous year. It is our everyday our that are examined on Rosh Hashanah. Coming to synagogue today is not a substitute for the rest of the year. Much like rehearsing for a big presentation, or studying for a final exam, or training for an important race, the real work is in the preparation. If you come to that test not having studied, there is nothing you can do when you look at that paper in front of you. But, if you have really practiced then presenting your work or running your race is fun, not stressful. The hard work is over; this is your victory lap.

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<sup>1</sup> Alden Solovy, [This Joyous Soul: A New Voice for Ancient Yearnings](#), (Central Conference of American Rabbis: New York, 2019), 13

<sup>2</sup> Talmud Berachot 51b. A constant or more regular duty has the precedence. Here the discussion between Hillel and Shammai is about the Shabbat kiddush when we recite the blessing over the wine (*borei p’rei hagafen*) before the longer paragraph about the day. This principle is also used when deciding the order of sacrifices (daily offering before the musaf offering, Shabbat offering before the new moon offering).

Yom Kippur is not necessarily a somber and solemn commemoration. Today is a chance to reflect, yes, but it is also a cause for satisfaction at the work we have done and, dare I say, some joy at the ways we have grown. This is particularly true on Yom Kippur afternoon. For example the trope, the way we sing Torah this morning has the same haunting tune as Rosh Hashanah. This afternoon, we return to the major key of Shabbat when we chant the Torah.

In ancient times, they didn't need trope to tell them Yom Kippur afternoon was one of the most joyous of the year. They embraced the day as a celebration! Young women would don white clothes and process excitedly towards the vineyards, where they danced together, giggling joyfully.<sup>3</sup>

Joy is a part of our Jewish tradition. And even this day can be joyous—not gleeful but fulfilling. The first Yom Kippur certainly was.

To figure out when our first Yom Kippur occurred as a Jewish people, you have to do a close reading of the Torah text. If you count correctly, you'll see that Moses ascended Mount Sinai for the second time on the first of Elul. We won't dwell too much on his first trip which ended with two golden calves and some smashed tablets. Moses remained at the top of that cloud covered mountain for forty days and forty nights. As the people awaited his return there was a quiet anticipation in the air—if Moses came down with another set of tablets, then they would be forgiven. Suddenly, a whisper went through the crowd. It grew louder as people started pointing. "There he is." "I see him." Moses appeared with another set of tablets. On top of the mountain, God had said to Moses, "*Salachti k'dvarecha*, I have forgiven as you have spoken." That day was the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei; the very first Yom Kippur as a Jewish people. One can imagine the excitement and rejoicing!<sup>4</sup>

Hopefully in my preacher mode I've convinced you that today does not have to be all doom and gloom. Today could even carry with it joy, *simcha*, which is important for us not just today, but all year long.

Rabbi Jason Fenster, a congregational rabbi in Chicago, writes, "Joy is not superfluous or extra or selfish or only what we can make time for once the work is done...joy is not reserved for our children or for our childhoods gone by...God, the spiritual power of the universe, the voice and spark of holiness inside you, requires your joy." We are, he argues, most ourselves not when we are worried or depleted. Not when we are doing laundry or dishes. Not when we are at our computers or on social media. We are most ourselves when we are joyful. Reveling in reading a good book. Celebrating the success of our favorite baseball team (Go Padres!) Catching up with a friend. Enjoying the beauty of nature. We are our true selves when we are joyful.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mishna Taanit 4:8

<sup>4</sup> Midrash Tanchuma 31, Seder Olam chapter 6:2.

<sup>5</sup> You can watch all of Rabbi Fenster's wonderful (and joyful) sermon here, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnQ9tUEFEyY>.

Our psalms are replete with this idea. Psalm 118

יְהִי הַיּוֹם עֲשֵׂה יְהוָה נִגִּילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בּוֹ :

This is the day Adonai has made, let us exult and rejoice in it (Psalm 118:24).

Famously, Psalm 150 which we sang this morning depicts a chorus of praise for God with the shofar, harp, and even cymbals. As Rev. Dr. Gilkes taught us on *Selichot*, it begs the question, why are you not shouting with joy?

Modern day liturgist Alden Solovy pokes fun at our own seriousness in his poem, *Sacred Silly*:

“Wouldn’t it be fun,

Just one time,

To secretly slip a goofy prayer

Inside the siddur,

Say, in the middle of the *Amidah*,

Where an unsuspecting Yid

Like you or me

Might just crack up

In sacred silliness,

Holy happiness,

Loving laughter,

As a testimony

To the juicy joy

Of Jewish jubilation?

So serious

These liturgists,

These poets and *paytanim*.

Let’s g’faw for God.

Let’s laugh out loud in praise.

Let’s giggle in thanksgiving.

עֲבֹדוּ אֶת־יְהוָה בְּשִׂמְחָה בְּאוֹ לִפְנֵי בְּרִנָּה :

*Iv’du et Adonai b’shimchah, bo-u le’fanav birnanah* (Psalm 100:2)

Serve Adonai with gladness, come before G-d’s presence with singing.

Let joy rise up to the gates of prayer.

Let laughter shake the highest heavens.”<sup>6</sup>

*Ivdu et Adonai b’simcha*. Serve God with the juicy joy of Jewish jubilation. Not with prayers said only at the right times, or self-flagellation, or utter seriousness about our task, but with *simcha*—joy.

The Talmud tells the story of Rabbi Beroka goes to Elijah the prophet and asks him who is worthy of the world to come. Elijah points out two brothers who are jesters. They cheer up the

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<sup>6</sup> Solovy, 13.

depressed and strive to make peace when people fight.<sup>7</sup> Jesters make us laugh, they make us feel better, they bring joy. They are doing God's work.

While the book of Ecclesiastes tells us there is a time for everything, we might spend too much time in the realms of wailing and weeping rather than laughing and dancing. We read in chapter 8, "I celebrate joy! For under the sun there is nothing better than to eat, drink and rejoice. Joy is the companion we earn with our toil in the days God gives us life."<sup>8</sup>

We toil so we can enjoy.

We work the rest of the week so we can delight in *oneg* Shabbat, the joy of Shabbat.

We fast today so we can appreciate the gift of food tonight.

We take time to appreciate the holidays we wish each other a *chag sameach*, a joyous holiday.

We read in the Talmud that the divine presence rests with those who are joyful.<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Chizkiyah said in the name of Rav, "you will one day give a reckoning for everything your eyes saw that you did not enjoy."<sup>10</sup> (Just to be clear, they are talking only about permitted things so lobster is still out!).

Famously, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who wrote about Jewish joyfulness, decided to travel from Germany to Switzerland at the end of his life. His followers were aghast at him making such a long trip. He said, "When I stand shortly before the Almighty, I will be held accountable to many questions...but what will I say when...I'm sure to be asked. 'Shimshon, did you see my Alps?'"<sup>11</sup>

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the late chief rabbi of Great Britain, explains that while happiness is individual, joy, *simcha*, is communal. That is what makes joy so special. Our most joyous times of the year, the festivals of Sukkot, Passover and Shavuot were collective celebrations.

Everyone came to Jerusalem—children, servants, strangers, widows, the orphans (Deuteronomy 16:11)."<sup>12</sup> Our search for awe this week was solitary. Blessing upon awaking. Experiencing nature. Looking at a beautiful piece of art. But joy is a communal experience.

Rev. Dr. Gilkes taught us this at *selichot*. She focused on the story from Nehemiah 8. The people have returned from exile in Babylon. They gather together to hear Ezra read the laws and they despair. They have not been properly celebrating the festivals. But Ezra tells them not to worry. He says go—"eat the fat, drink the sweet wine and send portions to those for whom nothing is

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<sup>7</sup> Taanit, 22a

<sup>8</sup> Ecclesiastes 8:15, Translation in *Mishkan HaNefesh: A Machzor for the Days of Awe (Yom Kippur)*, (Central Conference of American Rabbis Press: New York, 2015) 502.

<sup>9</sup> Shabbat 30a/

<sup>10</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushim 4:12

<sup>11</sup> This story is quoted in many places including Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Wisdom: Ethical, Spiritual, and Historical Lessons from Great Works and Thinkers* (William Morrow and Company, Inc.: New York, 1994), 230-1 and *Mishkan HaNefesh: A Machzor for the Days of Awe (Yom Kippur)*, (Central Conference of American Rabbis Press: New York, 2015), 503.

<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l, "The Pursuit of Joy: Ki Tavo 5775, 5782," The Jewish Link, September 14, 2022, <https://thejewishlink.com/rabbi-lord-jonathan-sacks-ztl-the-pursuit-of-joy-ki-tavo-5775-5782/>.

prepared; for *this day is* holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”<sup>13</sup> Eat the fat. Drink the sweet wine. Invite others to your table. Joy is meant to be shared. We cannot rejoice alone. And in joy is our strength. Don’t worry about the mistakes you made in the past. Go forward in joy.

Joy is meant to be shared. In the book of Leviticus we read an exhaustive list of the sacrifices. Most are given at certain times—on certain days or for particular sins. Those were totally burned on the altar or split between the person who brought them and the priests. There was a lot of meat, so people could feed themselves and their families for a long time. However, the *zevach sh’lamim*, the sacrifice of well-being or the peace offering was different. It was not offered at set times, it is given after a *simcha*, a joyful event. Moreover, all the meat from this offering had to be eaten within two days. This ensured that this individual offering the sacrifice invites the community to enjoy the meal.<sup>14</sup> Joy is meant to be shared.

While it can be tempting to think of Yom Kippur as a solitary holiday, focusing on individual ways we have fallen short, our tradition brings us back again and again to the communal. We confess in the plural. We need a minyan to recite prayers and read Torah. Our Torah readings emphasize the presence of the entire community—not just the well connected.<sup>15</sup>

It is good and fitting that we take this day seriously. But we lose out on so much of Jewish tradition if this day is how we experience our Judaism; if this is the only day we are in community. We miss the joy of Sukkot, celebrating the end of the harvest. We miss the silliness of Purim, of celebrating despite the topsy-turvy nature of the world. As Rabbi Fenster asks, What if our synagogue was as full for Purim as it was for Yom Kippur? He teaches, “Our tradition offers to us that our quest for joy can be just as sacred as work toward teshuvah. What if we lived that? What if we truly believed joy to be sacred obligation? What if we took Purim as seriously as we take Yom haKippurim? What if we took our joy as seriously as our...seriousness?”<sup>16</sup> I’ll add, what if we had to put out all these chairs for Simchat Torah or even Shabbat?

We entered this *Yamim No’raim* not with fear, but with wonder and awe. We experienced Days of Amazement. What if the rest of our year was about communal joy?

*Iv’du et Adonai b’shimcha, bo le’fanav birnanah.*

Serve Adonai with gladness, come before God’s presence with singing. Let’s g’faw for God. Let’s giggle in thanksgiving. Let’s experience the juicy joy of Jewish jubilation together, all year long.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Nehemiah 8:10, King James Bible translation.

<sup>14</sup> *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (The Rabbinical Assembly: New York, 2004), 593.

<sup>15</sup> The beginning of *Nitzavim* (Deuteronomy 29:9-12) emphasizes that all are present, even the convert, the water drawer and wood chopper, normally secondary people in society. Our afternoon reading from Leviticus 19 emphasizes treating everyone with respect including leaving the corners of your field for gleaning, paying wages on time and treating all people fairly in the courts.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, Fenster.

<sup>17</sup> Solovy, “Sacred Silly.”