

“I refuse to surrender my joy--*Even if I'm not particularly happy*”

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If you're a regular here at Har Shalom, you know that at a certain point in our Shabbat services, I can be found wandering around the congregation looking for someone, usually a pre-bar or bat mitzvah kid, to lead a call and response psalm that comes right before we put away the Torah. That psalm is called *Ashrei*, for months I would ask Jakob and Ellie to lead it, but they would flash me their bright smiles, shake their heads and insist that they weren't ready yet. Well, a few weeks ago I finally got Ellie up here, and she did it beautifully just as she did a few moments ago. The word *Ashrei* means “happy,” and the Psalmist lists one reason after another for why he is just so very happy. Well, as popular as *Ashrei* is in our service—we recite it three times a day—that word “*Ashrei*” happy is actually a pretty rare word in the Bible. Much more common, in fact 10 times more common, is the word *Simcha*, or joy. So, is there any difference between happiness and joy? And if there is a difference, can you be happy without being joyful or have joy without having happiness? In English, I think we tend to use these words interchangeably...but in the Bible, they are most certainly *not* the same...

You see in the Bible, happiness is something I experience as an individual, while joy is always shared with others. Listen to Psalm 1:

Ashrei ha'ish asher lo halach b'atzat resha'im:

“Happy in the man (singular) who has not followed the counsel of the wicked.”

Compare that, for example, to Deuteronomy 12:

There in the context of celebrating the festivals the Torah says...

Ve'samachtem (from *simcha*) You [plural], along with your children your servants the Levite in your settlement, all of you together shall rejoice on my festival.

Or perhaps more poignantly, in the *Sheva Berachot*, the seven marital blessings recited at Jewish weddings, the word *ashrei* in any form appears exactly zero times, while the word *simcha*

appears nine times in the course of those marital blessings. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that happiness is an individual attitude and experience, while joy is always shared with others.

I've been thinking about this lately, because during the month of Adar, the current month on the Jewish calendar, we are supposed to be *marbim be'simcha*, we are supposed to *increase our joy*. That's because of the holiday of Purim that occurs right in the middle of this month. But for the entire month of Adar we're supposed to be joyful...both leading up to Purim, and for weeks after it's over. I'm grateful that our tradition distinguishes between joy and happiness, because if I had to be happy these past few weeks, I think I would have pretty difficult time upholding that expectation. Just yesterday our entire synagogue staff was gathered around the security desk where we received a briefing on what to do in the event of a bomb threat. Instead of preparing for Shabbat, we were learning about the differences between a lock down and sheltering in place. After over 100 Jewish community centers and Jewish day schools including in our own community have received bomb threats, and three Jewish cemeteries: in St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Rochester were vandalized--hundreds of gravestones toppled from their bases, happiness is not the emotion that rises to the top of the list for me. Watching confused and frightened children evacuate their preschool classrooms, or the elderly try to move quickly to safety outside of the buildings where they have grown accustomed to feeling secure has been deeply upsetting. I practically grew up at the JCC in Cleveland...I attended its camps—as a camper and counselor, worked as a lifeguard at its pool, participated in youth group events and Shabbatons in its halls; I met Sari at the JCC in Columbus! Now JCCs in 91 different locations in 33 states and 2 Canadian provinces have become the targets for intimidation and threats. This is to say nothing about what's happening on college campuses, or across the European continent for that matter. For millennials who haven't had their own first hand experiences with the scourge of Anti-Semitism, this seems to be their moment.

But while it's been hard to be happy in the face of these cowardly, malicious acts, I refuse to lose my joy, not in Adar, not ever. Last Wednesday, I was walking down the steps of the Maryland State Capitol in Annapolis with an imam from Islamic Community Center of Potomac. We've gotten friendly since Har Shalom hosted last November's community interfaith Thanksgiving service, and we jointly gave the invocation on the Senate floor on Wednesday. A rabbi and an imam recite a prayer at the senate on Ash Wednesday...I'm sure there's a joke in there

somewhere. But as we walked together toward our cars, Tarek asked me if I had been feeling unsafe lately? He then offered to have members of his congregation come to patrol the parking lot and premises if we ever felt the need for additional security. He said that we needed to be there for each other, and he promised that all I had to do was call, and he would be there for us. When those hundreds of gravestones were toppled, tens of thousands of dollars were collected by non-Jews, and dozens of interfaith groups came out to the cemetery with rakes and tools, including the Vice President of the U.S. and the Governor of Missouri, joining their Jewish neighbors in restoring dignity and peace to those sacred grounds. When a mosque in Victoria, Texas was burned to the ground, a local synagogue immediately opened its doors to Muslim neighbors to worship there—story is that the president of the shul went to the home of the president of the mosque and handed him the keys to the synagogue. Three local churches also offered the Muslim community a space to pray until the building was rebuilt. This past Friday morning, representatives of numerous faiths: Hindus, Muslims, Christians of all denominations, Sikhs, and others stood on the stage at the Bender JCC with our local Congressmen and U.S. Senators in a show of support for the Jewish community, and a repudiation of hate and intolerance. What gives me joy is that these despicable acts have had a surprising larger effect...they have brought communities together, they have caused alliances to be formed, they have made people more sensitive and aware of the plight of others. I have witnessed more interfaith outreach, more neighborly concern and consideration, more interaction between communities that have previously been suspicious of each other than ever before! Moreover, this national experiment called the United States of America has been better for the Jewish people than any other national project in the history of the world save for Zionism. And I do not believe that the appalling activities of a few radical outliers will change that one iota. Kierkegaard once wrote: “it takes moral courage to grieve; it takes religious courage to rejoice.” (Sacks, *The Pursuit of Joy*) What we need now is the religious courage to see the bigger picture, to look beyond all the maddening headlines and to realize that we have the capacity to face this as a strong, resilient Jewish community; and as a Jewish community that is not isolated or alone, but that can count many friends and allies among its neighbors. As Rabbi Sacks wrote: “A people that can know insecurity and still feel joy is one that can never be defeated, for its spirit can never be broken nor its hope destroyed.”

Just as the Jews in the Purim story enjoyed relief from their enemies: *ne'hepach lahem miyagon le'simcha*, and the transformation from grief to rejoicing, so too I believe we will experience that here, in this time as well. So be joyful, it's Adar. We have plenty of reasons to rejoice!