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I don't like Simchat Torah.

It's not that I have a problem with the holiday itself – I love marking the completion of the Torah and rolling it back to the beginning. I love teaching our children that the Torah has sustained our people for thousands of years. I love coming back together for one last celebration after the intensity of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot.

It's the dancing. Don't get me wrong – I love dancing. But on Simchat Torah we're supposed to dance with unbridled joy – even if we really don't feel joyful. I hate being forced to be happy. It feels so inauthentic.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav would tell me to get over it. He thought we *should* force ourselves to be happy. In Likutey Moharan he writes:

It is a great mitzvah to be happy always! Make every effort to maintain a happy, positive outlook at all times. It is a natural human tendency to become discouraged and depressed because of the hardships of life: everyone has their full share of suffering. That is why you must force yourself to be happy at all times. Use every possible way to bring yourself to joy, even by joking or acting a little crazy! (Likutey Moharan II, 24)

And in Sichot Haran he writes:

Even if you are upset and unhappy, you can at least put on a happy front. At first you may not feel genuinely happy in your heart. Even so, if you *act* happy you will eventually attain true happiness and joy. (Sichot Haran #74)

Really?! We're supposed to force ourselves to be happy, and if we're still not happy, we should act like we are?

It's not that Rabbi Nachman didn't understand sadness. Just the opposite; he struggled with terrible depression and endured many tragedies in his short life. It's fair to say that he wrote so much about happiness because he was trying to ward off his own depression. Some of his teachings are quite insightful, and he develops interesting spiritual practices that could be used to help us cope with loss and depression. But I think his insistence on being happy or pretending to be happy is problematic. He sets up an impossible task for those of us who are struggling with loss or depression by teaching us to force away our depression – or if that doesn't work, to just fake it.

Rabbi Nachman lived in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and now has tens of thousands of followers – the Breslover Hasidim. These are what my friend calls the happy, hippie Jews – the ones who dance wildly in fields and forests and crowded streets of Jerusalem and who make pilgrimages to their Rebbe’s grave in the Ukraine every Rosh Hashanah. Look at a Youtube video or join them for a dance or two or click on the “Simply Smile” link on their website – they certainly *seem* happy. But I wonder if their intense focus on happiness really helps us confront loss and depression in an authentic way.

This movement has an interesting parallel in our secular society. Many writers, psychologists, and motivational speakers also teach us that we can control our world by controlling our thoughts. We should think positive thoughts so that we create positive outcomes. Take one of the more extreme versions of positive thinking, the “law of attraction” which was heavily promoted by Oprah. If we visualize best-case scenarios and banish negative thoughts from our minds, the universe will listen and respond, and we will transform our lives. In other words, we will be happy and rich and successful if we just adopt a brighter outlook on life. This is clearly different from Rabbi Nachman – there’s no ecstatic dancing, no rebbe worship, no intimate discussions with God – but the basic premise is the same: think positive thoughts so you can create positive outcomes.

I think there is great value in living a life of joy and meaning, but I don’t think that the pursuit of happiness should be our goal. We encounter and experience loss throughout our lives, and we are confronted with all kinds of feelings – sadness, disappointment, and anger, just to name a few – that come from that loss. We can pretend that they are not there – and even try to suppress them – but that might not give us what we need.

Take breast cancer. A good friend of mine struggled through it. People told her to be positive, to be courageous, to make sure she had the right attitude. But she was angry and afraid. Chemotherapy sucked. She didn’t feel like fighting anything. The sea of pink ribbons didn’t support her in discussing the real losses that come with the disease – like not being able to work and take care of her children, like feeling awful every day. Not to mention living with the fear of a premature death. The real cost to focusing so much energy on being happy is that it doesn’t work that well, and even if it did work, it would cover up feelings that are essential to what it means to be human.

If it’s all about attitude, we wind up blaming ourselves for not getting better or we become obsessed with the notion that we can get rid of negative thoughts. The worst part is when we live in a culture of positive thinking, people all around us scold us for not being happy and try to make us believe that our feelings are causing the illness or preventing its cure.

It’s not that I think we should adopt a negative attitude around illness and loss or that I think there is anything inherently valuable in sadness. It’s also important to make a clear distinction between sadness, on the one hand, and depression, which requires professional help. Serious depression can be debilitating and life-threatening. But sadness, grief, disappointment, and anger are not the same things as depression. They are a normal part of life.

Or, as Ecclesiastes says:

Everything has its season; there is a time for every experience under heaven...A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ...a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing... (Kohelet 3:1-5)

When we embrace everything in its season – the full range of emotional experiences – we can actually live more fully and authentically and not feel a false obligation to feel happy. I'm not saying we should dwell indefinitely on negative feelings, but we can recognize them as part of who we are and we can understand that they are legitimate responses to loss.

In another domain the promotion of positive thinking can actually serve as a diversion, even a barrier, for social change. Take the massive worker layoffs we've seen or experienced in recent years. There's no shortage of motivational advice for people seeking jobs or struggling to keep their jobs. I know a man who struggled for years to find a job after he was laid off, but he was only able to get hourly work that led his family deeper and deeper into debt. It was heart-breaking. Being told over and over to be optimistic turned out to be an insidious response to a terrible situation: Deal with the economic downturn gracefully! Be upbeat when you send that hundredth resume! Use your misfortune as an occasion to embrace new opportunities for personal growth!

This man didn't need a better attitude, and he didn't need an engaging motivational narrative. He needed mortgage assistance, health insurance, job training, and subsidized child care. The ugly flip side to having a positive attitude so you can get a great new job is that if you can't find a job it must be your fault – you didn't try hard enough or you didn't believe deeply enough in the potential of your success.

Again, I'm not saying that a negative attitude would have served him well. He needed tremendous strength to send out hundreds of resumes; sinking deeper and deeper into debt extracted an enormous emotional toll on him. It's not that developing coping mechanisms isn't important; it's that telling vulnerable people to have a positive attitude is disingenuous. It tells us to suppress our emotions and constantly ward off all negative thoughts.

Forcing a positive attitude is exhausting and demoralizing. It teaches us to be content with the way things are instead of empowering us to harness our anger into working for social change. While we are responsible for our actions, focusing on attitude minimizes the role that circumstances play in shaping our lives. It leads us to think that it's not a shrinking economy or an economy that doesn't serve the needs of most people that's to blame. It's just our attitude.

I'm not recommending that we drown in our resentment or to let our anger become all-consuming, because that can be just as destructive as sugar-coating our real feelings. But some anger has its place. It can wake us up to dishonesty and wrongdoing. It can force us to question why things are the way they are and ask hard questions about the world we live in. When we focus on the deeper societal factors that lead to our hardships – in this case an

economy that increasingly only serves the rich – we can become more engaged in our communities. This allows us to move away from self-blame and towards asking how we can structure a society that cares for all people in its midst.

So if a positive attitude isn't our goal, and a negative attitude isn't our goal, then what is? Well, maybe it's not about attitude at all, maybe it's not about trying to think or feel in a particular way. I think our goal is to look in an honest way at ourselves and our world, and to confront what lies before us with an open and whole heart. This means affirming all of our feelings and creating spaces to experience and express them. It also means dealing with loss directly, finding opportunities to have heartfelt and sincere conversations about the realities of illness or layoff or any other kind of loss – and finding healthy ways to manage stress, disappointment, anxiety, sadness, and anger. It means knowing that this is part of who we are and then mustering up the courage to look beyond ourselves. This allows us to see ourselves not just as individuals, but as individuals who are woven into complex communities, as individuals who have a responsibility to others and a responsibility to making sure that everyone's needs are met.

The stories that we tell at this time of year are some of the most emotionally challenging texts of our tradition. On Rosh Hashanah we have the bitter feud between Hagar and Sarah, and we have Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac. We have Hannah's yearning for a child, and we have Rachel's weeping for her children in exile. On Yom Kippur we have the ritual of letting go of wrongdoing and sin. And we have Isaiah's anger at the people for their lack of compassion for the oppressed.

These stories force us to deal directly with painful and complicated relationships, with disappointment and fear. With jealousy, dashed hopes, deep resentment, selfishness and forgiveness. It's as if our tradition is telling us that as we celebrate the new year and move through the days of awe, we must not turn away from difficult feelings or situations. We must not sugar-coat them. We must not avoid uncomfortable truths. It's this genuine engagement that allows us to live with an open and whole heart.

Gemar chatimah tovah – May this be a year of honesty and of living more fully and authentically, of being responsible to everyone in our community.