

The Culture of Joy

Yom Kippur Minha
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Anti-Semitism, BDS, the self-hating Jew, Sefaradi vs. Ashkenazi infighting, Iran, Assimilation... The list is long and distinguished of people and things that seem to be trying to destroy Jewish culture. Some are external, and some seem to be tearing us apart from the inside. The venom and divisiveness within the Jewish community on a whole host of issues seems to be as much of an existential threat as a nuclear Iran.

There is no way to talk about Jewish culture without realizing that throughout our history there have been people and forces trying to destroy it. We have survived, we have even flourished, in the face of all of this, and the question is why. What is it about Jews and Judaism that has allowed us to outlast so many others? What is it about our tradition that enables us to flourish even when our objective reality tells us that we should not?

I would like to argue this afternoon, after nearly a full day of being hungry and thirsty, that one possible answer is the Jewish Culture of Joy. I know it is hard to believe and think about right now, but in reality our ability to find joy in even the most difficult moments is one of the most relevant attributes that has allowed us to survive. Over the centuries we have developed our own uniquely Jewish way of seeing and finding joy. Unfortunately, for many reasons, American Jews have forgotten how to find the joy in who we are and where we come from. That, my friends, might be the biggest threat to our future of all.

Every Christmas we hear the songs . . . “Joyful, Joyful We Adore You; Joy to the world; Have a Holly Jolly Christmas.” The season is filled with songs of joy and happiness, of celebration and love.

I am waiting for them to come out with an album for the Yom Kippur. What would the songs be? Have a Lilty Guilty Yom Kippur? Hungry, Hungry we Implore you?

The point is that here we are, like our Christian neighbors on one of the most Holy days of the year, and we seem to have a very different feeling about why are here and what we hold up as being Holy. There are many reasons to come to shul on Yom Kippur, but Joy never seems high on the list.

As a matter of fact one of the top reasons that people go looking elsewhere for their spiritual nourishment is that there appears to be no sense of joy in Judaism any more. We have become so intellectual and detail oriented with the 39 categories of work on Shabbat, and the fins and scales and

cloven hooves that, the argument goes, we have moved away from just finding a place of happiness in our lives.

The truth is that this is not a new issue. Finding joy in the details has always been a challenge, and throughout our history different groups have approached it in various ways. Probably the most famous of internal divisions on this issue has been between the Hasidim and Mitnagdim. These two groups exemplify the two ends of the spectrum in dealing with the Joy of Judaism. On the one hand we have the Mitnagdim who were intellectuals and Talmudists. Who would spend hours on one verse in examination of all of the various lines of thought. They believed that study and prayer should be done with seriousness and kavod, respect.

On the other hand we have the Hasidim, founded by the Baal Shem Tov on the idea that without the spiritual, without the celebration, Judaism is vacant. The teachings we have from him and his followers are moral and spiritual tales that show the passion in Judaism. The Hasidim were known to actually stop in the middle of prayers and just sing. Imagine that!

For those who have taken a class with me or heard me speak about Jewish Law, you know I believe that a fundamental basis of Judaism is balance. I believe that Jewish Law as a system, by constantly defining the boundaries is continually pushing us towards the center. We go to one side and see that it makes no sense at a certain point and that leads us to the other side where we see the same thing. Eventually we end up somewhere in the middle.

There must be a way to bring both of these traditions together—to understand Judaism on an intellectual level and see the beauty in the intricacy of Jewish Law as well as let it touch our soul and move us to heights of joy.

So to the question: Where is the joy in Judaism?

In less than a week we will be celebrating the Festival of Sukkot, which, according to the Torah is one of the most joyous Holidays of the year. Unfortunately, it is also one of the least celebrated that we have in the calendar. Perhaps it is a matter of timing, five days after the marathon shul experience of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is not really a time to get people to think about yet another Holy Day. And yet our rabbis tell us that this is exactly why we have it.

The work we do on these days of Repentance is tough. To truly look at ourselves and realize where we can improve, to make the changes necessary to actually do that is difficult work. And much like

decompression after finals week in college, we need an opportunity to celebrate what we have accomplished. Sukkot is that time where we can go back to the home rituals that bind a family together and celebrate what it means to be a Jewish family and community.

Building and decorating a Sukkah allows us to go out and express our Judaism in tangible ways. It is something that everyone can be involved in, young and old, handy or not, there are things each person can do to make the sukkah more beautiful, just as there are things we can all do to make life more beautiful. We have art projects from each of our children that date back to their first year on earth, and they still find pride and joy when those “masterpieces” are hung in our sukkah. Building a sukkah show us that we can all do Jewish, there is something for everyone and it brings people together in joy.

It is for that reason that the Torah tells us regarding Sukkot, V'samahta B'Hagekha, on this holy day especially you shall be joyful and celebrate together.

On Rosh Hashanah Rabbi Earne spoke about Shabbat. The rabbis saw Shabbat a powerful mechanism for expressing joy. No matter what is happening in our lives, no matter how stressful work is or what problems we may be having with the kids or our spouse, every week we come together and take a break. It is sort of a reverse time out. Instead of spending time apart, we spend time together.

But, my friends, we all know how difficult that is in today's world. Statistics show that the number of families who eat together even one meal a week is dropping. With many of us in two career households with our children so busy with school and extracurricular activities it is amazing that we even recognize each other. I remember a comic in the newspaper a few years back with the children calling the police on an intruder in the house only to find out that it was in fact their father. We can chuckle, but the more we think about it the sadder that comic strip actually becomes.

How can we hope to find joy in family if we never have the chance to be together? That is the power of Shabbat. To take us out of the chaotic world in which we live and, as Rabbi Heschel said, “create a palace in time.”—a time to be together and find joy.

Our tradition is rich in opportunities for joy and celebration on almost every day of the year except for today. So why then have I selected to speak about Joy on Yom Kippur? Because as important and powerful as these 25 hours are, they are not really the answer to the question why be Jewish. Yom

Kippur is a tool, not the goal. It is an opportunity for reflection and change, but it does not ultimately bring to us that which we should change. That comes during the rest of the year.

I look forward to sharing this New Year with all of you. May be year in which we explore the vastness of Jewish culture. May be year filled with opportunities to grow, and fix, and repair ourselves and the world around us. And, finally, may be year in which we find joy in who we are and what we can be.