

BEE SWEET

Rabbi Steven Kushner
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Shanah Tovah. I hope it will be. I hope the New Year will be a good year for you, for those you hold dear, for our community, indeed for our world. Note that even though we may, when greeting each other, say "Happy" New Year (I do it all the time), in fact no where in our tradition is there even a suggestion that we should greet each other, even wish for a "happy" New Year. Clearly it's a fairly classic illustration of the power of cultural influence. On New Year's Eve, as the ball bottoms out in Times Square, we all reflexively cry out "Happy New Year". The phrase has no doubt become so ingrained that on "this" New Year we revert to *Minhag America*, the American custom, without stopping to wonder what *Shanah Tovah* really means.

It means "May the New Year be Good". *Shanah Tovah*. A Good Year. The more formal greeting, *L'Shanah Tovah Tikateivu*, means "May You be Inscribed [in the Book of Life] for a Good Year". And perhaps the most complete version: *Y'hi ratzon milfanekha . . . she-t'chadeish aleinu Shanah Tovah u-M'tukah* -- May it be Your Will, Adonai Eloheinu, God of our mothers and fathers, that You renew upon us a year of goodness and sweetness. For me, this is what it's all about. A year of goodness and sweetness.

It's a catchy phrase, to be sure. But did you ever stop to think what it means? Are these just nice sentiments, that we use the words "Goodness" and "Sweetness" in ways indiscriminate? Would it simply be better to wish someone a "happy" New Year and be done with it? Or is there something significant to the employment of the words *Tov* and *Matok*, Good and Sweet?

I get *Tov*. *Shanah Tovah*. Have a good year. May the coming year be filled with goodness. With good things. And even though there is no suggestion as to what is meant by "Tovah", by "goodness", I think we all pretty much get it. And the reason we get it is that we implicitly understand the meaning of the word "good". We know what is good, just as we know what is bad. A *Shanah Tovah* is a year of good health, a year of meaningful and rewarding relationships, a year of abundance, a year free from worries. A *Shanah Tovah* is a year of peace, a year where love triumphs over fear and hatred, a year where there is no want, where -- as the Torah idealizes in *Parashat Bechukotai* at the end of the Book of Leviticus -- we are blessed to "walk upright". All the things we hope for our children, all the things we pray for the entire world. For Judaism, the New Year is immersed in a universality. It is the New Year of the World. This is the day God brought the Universe into being. There is no room for parochialism on Rosh Hashanah, certainly not to the exclusion of other peoples. Praying for The Good really requires no explanation. We all get Good. ("Get it? Got it. Good." Danny Kaye. *The Court Jester*. 1956.)

But sweetness is another matter. Sweetness is not so simple.

At its core, it is a function of the sense of taste. It is among the most primal of experiences. It is our very first delight. And for the rest of our lives we continue in search of the sweet. (Some of us more than others.) But culturally this notion of The Sweet has transcended its original understanding. It's not just an articulation of taste. The Sweet has become a value.

Beyond a simple adjective describing the taste of a particular food, the notion of "The Sweet", depending on context and speaker, can have very different meanings. To Chicago Bears fans it represents the great running back Walter Payton: "Sweetness". To my mother, a baby was sweet. It was term of affection. Even I have been known to employ it regularly when addressing my daughters: "Sweetie" (which, as we well know, is short for "Sweetie-Pie"). Often the utterance of the word, in this connotation, is accompanied by the pinching of someone's cheek. In this sense, sweetness is suggestive of endearment. But to my children's generation, "The Sweet" has a very different meaning. An exclamation of affirmation, the word "Sweet" is often pronounced as a positive acknowledgement of a desired outcome. "Did you see my new BMW?" "Sweet," is all that needs to be said. "I just passed the Bar exam." "Sweet." It's the new "Cool". (Although I must admit, I'm not sure I could ever think of Steve McQueen as the embodiment of The Sweet.) Alas, just like the word "Cool", the utterance of "Sweet" is equally non-sensical, at least in terms of the conventional, traditional dictionary definition of the word.

For our people, the symbol of The Sweet is unquestionably honey. We welcome the New Year by taking apples, which are tasty but not in and of themselves sweet, and we dip them in honey. And in this simple act we assert our hope that the New Year will be filled with sweetness, even if we never really stop to wonder what we actually mean when we say "Sweet".

This is what I want to talk about tonight. What is sweetness? How is it that we are in danger of distancing ourselves from it? And what can we do to restore it to its proper place in the order of the Universe?

Sweetness is honey. (Not the other way around.) To be sure, there are any number of foods we could be eating at the Rosh Hashanah dinner table that we could identify as sweet (and that our children might very possibly prefer). The invention of candy has brought serious competition to the sweetness of honey. And yet it's not processed sugar that we sprinkle on our slices of apple as we welcome the new year. We're not passing out marzipan. (Although now that I mention it I'm imagining not a few of you are thinking to yourselves, "Hmmm? Marzipan? That's not such a bad idea.") Nevertheless, honey it is. And there's a reason for it.

There can be little doubt that honey is the Torah's paradigm for The Sweet. Fifteen times in the Torah the land of Israel is referred to as *Eretz zavat chalav u-d'vash* -- a land that flows with milk and honey. The book of Deuteronomy reminds us that there is nothing God can't do; God can even bring forth "...honey from the rock." Numerous times in the *TaNakh*, the Hebrew Bible, the word "*d'vash*" or honey is used to imply sweetness, especially in the Proverbs where it is often equated with wisdom. And although some scholars argue that in the literature of ancient Israel "honey" might just as soon relate to a by-product of dates or figs, there is little doubt in my mind that the use of the word "*d'vash*" or "honey" is suggestive of the honey manufactured by bees.

I particularly derive this from the story of Samson (*Shimshon*). Enroute to ask his love to marry him, he is confronted by a lion, but Samson -- you know, like the strongest guy ever -- slays the lion with his bare hands. After becoming engaged, as he returns along the path he discovers that the carcass of that lion has become a home to a hive of honey bees. He eats some of the honey, takes some more for his parents, and then -- at his wedding feast -- proposes a riddle to the local Philistines: "Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet." The lesson: Honey -- that is, The Sweet -- will always prevail over the strong.

But more than simply "tasting" sweet, the sweetness of honey is, I believe, a metaphor for something truly sacred.

What sets honey apart, what distinguishes it is that it is "naturally" sweet. And by that I mean, we have nothing to do with it. It's just there. It's there for the taking. As in the story of Samson (or Winnie the Pooh for that matter), honey becomes a symbol for the natural world. It is not of our making. It is not manufactured (at least not by we humans). Like all other mysteries of nature, it is the embodiment of all that God gives to us in this world. A land that flows with "milk and honey" is the paradigm of a utopian place, God's place, a place that is unpolluted by us, a gift from God to us. A gift of sweetness.

This is what we pray for as we enter the New Year. Tellingly, we don't ask God to "give" us sweetness; instead, we ask God to "renew" the sweetness. Because it was always there. So we pray to God to restore it. Or even better, to help us rediscover it. To enable us to re-enchant ourselves with it.

Not that we don't know it when we see it. All you need to do is scroll through your Facebook page at any commonly observed vacation time and the evidence is dramatically displayed for all to see ("friends" and lurkers alike). The pictures we share look like something out of a National Geographic travelogue. The pictures of sunsets. The panoramic shots we are now capable of creating with our smartphones, images of mountain ranges or oceanscapes. The eagle we caught in flight. The deer turning her head to examine us as we, like children, giddily snap our cameras' shutters capturing what we think is a sacred moment. And it is. Because in that deer's curiosity, in the wingspan of the magnificent bird, in the awe-inspiring majesty of the mountain peak we recognize and affirm that which is beyond us, that which is greater than we. Our desire to want to capture and preserve the moment, our need to share it, is merely a reflection of our instinctive awareness that all of that is truly "sweet". Because it's more powerful and more beautiful than anything we could create. And somewhere along the way, maybe for just a moment, we understand, even if we're unable to articulate it, that we are not outsiders looking in, or insiders looking out, but rather nothing more and nothing less than a part of the whole. This is the greatest sweetness. This is the honey we cherish, a symbol of the mystery of creation. Nor is this limited to vacation destinations. The sweetness of the natural world is resplendent in the first breath of a newborn child, in the embrace of two people falling in love, in the wild blueberries growing along the side of the road, in laughter and cries, in our desire to comfort each other, in unplanned singing, in the cool breeze and the warming sun, in the life-sustaining rain and the rest-inducing darkness. All of it. All free. All gifts. As sweet as the honey of the bee.

Now I'll tell you how I came to choose to talk about this tonight.

About a month ago, as I walked out of the Temple towards my car, on the entrance walkway I saw a bee. A honey bee. A *dead* honey bee. Just laying there, in the middle of the sidewalk. And I thought to myself, that's something I don't normally see. I'm usually afraid of bees, especially when they start to follow me. And I've been known to kill a few, especially when they invade my space. And I've seen dead bees before, especially ones trapped within a window frame. But seeing a honey bee just lying in the middle of the sidewalk caught my attention. It was this sight that induced me to recall hearing about a blight upon honey bees.

Now in the larger scheme of things, problems facing honey bees probably won't rank as high as climate change and universal health care and chemical warfare. But by the same token, the crisis in the bee universe is no small thing, and its consequences are more dire than the potential challenge it may create for future celebrations of the Jewish New Year. I'm not really concerned about the prospect of not having enough honey in which to dip our slices of apples, but the drastic reduction of the honey bee population bears a message to us that we are losing our connection to the sweetness of the world. Perhaps we are even destroying it.

They call it CCD: Colony Collapse Disorder. It's been going on since 2006. By some estimates, as much as 50 percent of the honey bee population has died. Although no one can say with certainty what the specific cause is -- speculation ranges from destructive mites to pesticides and herbicides and fungicides to viruses to even cell phone tower radiation -- one thing everyone seems to agree on is that the bees don't have the mechanism to fight off the danger. And the most compelling theory lies at our feet.

Honey bees are not native to North America. They were introduced by our European ancestors. As such, they are not feral or wild bees; rather they are domesticated. They are bred for agriculture. Not simply to give us honey -- actually the honey we get from their hives is a very small part of the purpose of domesticating honey bees -- the primary function of bee colonies is to pollinate crops. Crops like the fruits and most of the vegetables we put on our dinner tables. More than one-third of the foods in our diet -- specifically fruits, vegetables and nuts that make up the Western diet -- are dependent upon honey bees. To name just a few -- almonds, apples, asparagus, avocado, broccoli, blueberries, onions, cherries, cucumbers, celery, plums, and watermelons. This past June a Whole Foods market in Rhode Island for one day removed all the items that they would not be able to provide were it not for the honey bee. Of 453 items, 237 vanished for a day. I'll put it to you in more stark terms: The honey bee is responsible for \$15 billion worth of American agriculture.

Yet perhaps what is most interesting is that what many scientists seems to agree on is that whatever the direct cause of the death of the bees, what is at the root of the problem is that the bees don't have the ability to fend off the danger. Especially the brood, the young and the larvae still nesting in the hive. And, many scientists suggest the reason the bees can't protect themselves is that they are domesticated. They are living in colonies of "our" creation. That in our attempt to make more honey, to pollinate more fruits and vegetables, we have come to "manufacture" bees that are, by and large, all the same. I have been told the technical name for it is *monoculture*. And it is this "sameness", this uniformity that by-passes (unintentionally, to be sure) the process of natural selection, and that subsequently prevents the bee population from "adapting" and thus rendering it vulnerable to the outside influences (largely of our making) that are threatening it. And so the bees die.

None of this is to impugn the beekeeper. On the contrary, they are the only ones keeping the bees alive. But whatever is killing the bees, the source seems to be either directly or indirectly human. As such, I wonder if this isn't symbolic of the world "we" have created. As opposed to the world "God" gave to us the creation of which we celebrate today, the world we have made is for our purposes, for our benefit. But in so doing we are also undoing God's purveyor of The Sweet. The honey bee, one of nature's truly great wonders, who lives in perhaps the most clearly defined and highly-organized society, who's primary purpose for existence is to create life-sustaining foods -- for us -- is in grave danger because we presume we can do better than God. And in our pursuit of the profitable, we risk losing God's sacred gift of sweetness.

Is this not true of our lives in general? We say we love The Sweet. We live for our vacations. To see in person the landscapes of Ansel Adams and Alfred Bierstadt and the seascapes of Jaques Cousteau. But, of course, they are not their landscapes and seascapes. They are God's "scapes". We wait all year just to take time off to enjoy each other. To walk and climb and swim. To get back to eating those fruits and vegetables and nuts. All the things that have been there since the beginning. But then come September we come back to "our" world, to the place of our making, to our cell phones and the Internet, to industry and manufacture. And it's not that it's a "bad" world, certainly not intrinsically. It has the potential to do good. But is it sweet? Can it bring sweetness into our lives?

The bee assumes a unique place in our tradition. The name of one of our most inspiring leaders, *Devorah*, means honey bee. And the root of that name -- *dalet, vet, resh* -- is the same root for *davar* or "word". Perhaps to suggest that the mystery of God's *davar* is symbolically ensconced in the magnificence of the honey bee. Indeed, can we not see the sweetness in God's word, in Torah? (Did you know that traditionally when a child begins his or her Hebrew education the teacher places honey right on the letters of the prayerbook for the child to lick it off?) I wonder if, in our distancing ourselves from The Sweet inherent in nature, we are at the same time distancing ourselves from the *davar*, from God's word? Or maybe it's the other way around? Maybe the more we let loose of Torah in our lives, we lose touch with The Sweetness so symbolized by the *devorah*?

For the rabbis, the honey bee was an enigma. Not kosher in itself -- it falls into the category of *sheretz*, the swarming insects we are forbidden to eat -- nevertheless, it is their food that helps us welcome the New Year, the honey that is the very symbol of God's place on earth, the land that flows with it.

But perhaps most interesting, and prophetically cautionary, the rabbis of the Talmud debated whether or not we have the right to interfere with the business of bees. In tractate Shabbat of the *Bavli* (the Babylonian Talmud), the rabbis declare:

"One may spread mats over bee-hives on the Sabbath: in the sun on account of the sun and in the rain on account of the rain, providing he has no intention of capturing [the bees]?"

And according to Rabbi Judah, what is meant by not capturing the bees is he must not cover the hive "...like a net. He must leave an opening so that the bees should not be automatically

caught." In other words, we are forbidden to dominate the bee. We may use it. We may enjoy its product. But we are not permitted to control it. It belongs to God. As does its sweetness. Yet the lesson, or perhaps better put, the "promise" of this Rosh Hashanah is that God has gifted both the bee and its honey to us. They are our sacred trust. If only we could truly understand this.

Shanah Tovah u'Metukah. May it be a good year. May it be a year filled with sweetness.

Actually it already is. And its renewal, contrary to the words of our prayer, is not dependent upon God but rather us. May we renew the sweetness as we reenchant ourselves with God's *devorah*, the bee who places the sweetness of God's *d'var* in our mouths.