

Serve God with Joy - Rosh Hashanah in the Round 2018

Introduction (Rabbi Sarah Graff)

A few weeks ago, I was at a large synagogue event and I went over to check in with a young woman who was new in our community and there by herself. I asked her how she was doing, suspecting that she might be feeling kind of alone. She responded that she had indeed been feeling awkward and kind of lost. But then, I had asked if anyone could help pass out siddurim. And she said yes. Next thing she knew, she was handing out books, meeting people, and feeling grounded. She said to me, "I just have to remember, if I find a way to be of service, I'm good."

Now, there is a backstory to this conversation. This woman has been in 12-step recovery for several years, and in the recovery world, being of service is an imperative. One's sobriety depends upon it. The 12th step teaches, one must be of service, especially to other addicts, in order to stay sober.

I was well acquainted with this philosophy from my time working at Beit T'shuva, an addiction recovery community in LA, for Jews. Still, her statement struck me as novel, and important. "I just have to remember, if I find a way to be of service, I'm good."

I wondered if I could instill this value in my children. That whenever they go into a new situation and are feeling awkward or insecure, all they need to do is "be of service," and have confidence that from there, they will be fine.

It's not just my children who need this message though. It's me too. And I think it's all of us, our country, our synagogue community, our world. In times when it can feel like the world is in chaos, we need more than ever to remind ourselves what our mission is, as human beings and as Jews.

So I brought for us today, a statement from the Psalms, that I think is **our mission**, and our version of that message from the 12 steps.

Ivdu et Hashem b'simcha. Serve God with Joy.

It's 4 simple words, but each one is rich.

And each one can be challenging.

The notion of service, serving, being subservient?

The idea of God, a higher power, serving something greater than ourselves or those around us.

And the challenge to do it with joy. To do hard tasks, unpleasant tasks, or just everyday tasks, and to approach them with joy.

So what I want to do now is give you an opportunity to reflect on these words, Ivdu et Hashem B'simcha, Serve God with Joy, and to ask yourself what they mean, to you. I invite you to turn to a person or two sitting next to you and discuss the questions on the page, or, if you prefer, you can reflect on your own. We'll take about 10 minutes for this reflection, we'll pass out some treats to perhaps infuse the task with some extra joy. And then we'll reconvene and get to hear from two members of our community about what these words mean to them.

(See separate link for the handout.)

Reflection shared by Rabbi Shelly Lewis

Ivdu et Hashem B'Simcha

I have a favorite, inspiring teacher to nurture joy, the premier teacher of joy in our rich tradition. He is Rabbi Nachman of Breslav who lived over 200 years ago. His life was filled with obstacles that would have caused most of us to succumb, losing his young wife and several children, facing fierce opposition in his life as a community leader, and, finally, coming to terms with his own premature death from tuberculosis at the age of 38.

Yet, it is from his heart that he taught:

“one must be very strong, using all of one’s strength, to be always joyful, for it is the nature of being human to tend towards black bitterness and depression due to the afflictions and events in time. Everyone is filled with suffering. Therefore, one must force oneself with great strength to be in a state of simchah always.”
(Likutey Moharan, II, 24)

While his life was truly beset uncommonly with tragedy, we all face suffering. What I love about Rabbi Nachman is his assertion that we are not powerless in growing the quotient of simchah in our lives. It does seem a bit surprising to hear that we can really grow our joy. Yet, this is exactly R. Nachman’s conviction. We can take control. How can we do that?

I want to speak very personally. I come from a family which was beset with bipolar disorder. My own father faced this malady. An aunt and uncle were laid low by depression. I’ve struggled with depression, and I’ve wondered at times if I’ve lost my way. I want to share with you my toolbox for simchah.

First, it seems so important to define what we mean by simchah. It is surely not frivolity or light heartedness. It is not even being in a good mood. It is much deeper, reaching levels within of enduring satisfaction. It is possible, I believe, when we are attached to something much greater than ourselves, that our lives, each day, each hour are contributing to a worthy goal. Simchah is joined with seriousness of purpose, with connecting our very mortal, vulnerable lives with something transcendent. We seek and need a greater purpose. Simchah is joined to Mitzvah, to Torah learning, to fundamental values, to a people, to a hoped-for

destiny, to serving God. There is an alignment of this kind of enduring joy with serving God.

Secondly, I love to study. We are the heirs of a priceless treasure of wisdom and uplift carefully recorded and transmitted to us over millennia. It contains the best fruits of mind and heart of our wisest souls in quest of meaning and connection to God and joy. It awaits us, and it is there to raise our spirits. Making Torah learning a regular focus simply brings joy. From that open page, we're stretched out of usual time and space dimensions, beyond the concerns of every day that can drag us down, to something higher.

Yet being even with a holy book can be lonely. It only works for me because I can close my book and go out to meet others. I need to go out every day and join with others. Without a sense of community, of solidarity with others, without face to face engagement every day, my spirit would sag. It's especially uplifting if I can join with others in a Mitzvah, big or small.

Moreover, I have learned from Jewish tradition to strive to connect the dots in my life so that there is a unifying purpose. Whether I am working on my own inner life, engaging with my wife and family, reaching out to friends and community, encountering complete strangers, or trying to act even globally, I aspire for the same goal. I want my life to be cohesive, unified, not fragmented. The mundane and the exceptional, the profane and the holy, should be aligned, even merged. For me, and I hope for you, Jewish tradition provides that roadmap. The goal, however elusive, is holiness. Serving God with joy is a pathway that links every thought, speech, and action to a unified higher purpose. This is the precious gift that Jewish tradition bestows upon us.

There are times for me when my spirit sinks low when time weighs heavy, when the suffering I feel or witness can seem overwhelming, when I feel powerless and doubt that I have anything to contribute, when even Jewish ritual seems lifeless. Yet if I open a treasured book of Torah, if I share my day with others, and if I commit to some mitzvah however modest, I feel inflated once again with purpose and joy.

It's not easy. A pursuit of simchah has its share of failures, its ups and downs. But I know that the "ups" are more than possible, and they can populate

our lives with greater and greater frequency. I wish them for you. We can take hold and cultivate joy.

Reflection shared by Miguel Sanchez

A few weeks ago Rabbi Graff called to ask me to participate in today's sermon.

When I asked why she thought I might have something to contribute, she replied that my wife Kara had told her that "Miguel approaches washing dishes without complaining" so here I am.

I did start wondering though, what makes a person more willing to approach tasks with a different attitude? And more importantly, what can one do to teach some of these attitudes to our children.

In my case, I realized that I learned to wash dishes from my mother, not just the mechanics, but also the doing messy and unwanted things without complaining.

I was born in Mexico, and my mother was a nurse in the army until I was 11 years old. So I was very young when I realized that one often has to take orders from others, and more specifically, learn to serve, often for a purpose larger than your own. After the army, my mother held many other jobs from owning a daycare to selling selling insurance. But she was always a woman of action, often recognizing need in others and finding ways to push them forward.

My mother and father come from large rural families in Mexico, and both were among the youngest children in their families. Almost all my aunts, uncles and older cousins were farmers, and many of them even came to

the US as migrant workers. It was, in part, this sacrifice by them that allowed my parents to be the first in their families to go to school, the first to have a professional degrees, and to move into the Mexican middle class. I even spent my teenage years living in Madison, Wisconsin while my father got his PhD.

Although I have more than 70 first cousins, and hundreds of second cousins, the majority weren't as lucky to have the opportunities I've had. I know that I owe a lot to my extended family for this.

But what about my children? They are growing up in one of the wealthiest areas in the world, they have parents that are professionals and basically enjoy many conveniences and I'd even say luxuries in their life. It's not surprising that they sometimes complain when I ask them to wash dishes. Telling me that we now have machines to do that.

How can one teach them to want to help, and to care about others?

One thing we'd been doing is helping them maintain a connection to their family in Mexico. Seeing the rural conditions in which some in our extended family live in certainly takes our children out of their comfort zone and hopefully helps them appreciate the extreme luck they enjoy by the random circumstances of where they were born.

But you don't need to travel to Mexico to learn about hardships. Our own Bay Area has also recently been facing important challenges relating to housing affordability, wealth disparity, and even negative sentiments towards immigrants and minorities. This has motivated my wife and I to take action at a local level, and this in turn has provided us opportunities to show our children how one can act in the service of others.

To learn about local issues, we became readers and participants in our local newspaper, The Mountain View Voice. It arrives at our house on

Friday afternoons, and this often gives us great topics of discussion over our Shabbat meals.

A few letters to the paper have even offered hard lessons to our children, like the time I decided to write something to challenge and correct another resident who tended to send in frequent letters with an unmistakable anti-immigrant slant in his opinions.

Other local issues happen right outside our house. Within a few blocks from us, there are currently over a hundred new townhomes being built. Unfortunately, many cheaper rental units were removed for this new construction. So we now see former neighbors live in RVs parked on the streets of the city. This is why we are now more involved in city council workings and things like rent control initiatives.

We also began to notice that simple conversations with people around us often revealed a great need in our community, in all sorts of things. It opened our eyes.

Earlier in the year I attended a talk in Los Altos in which one of the speakers was a young immigrant advocate. After talking to her a little more in private after the event, we learned that although she was helping others, she herself was on the brink of losing her protected immigrant status because she didn't have the money to file an extension. This was just a random meeting. A couple months ago we heard from her again, in a text telling us that she'd received her immigration extension.

Sometimes the help doesn't need to be monetary, and can be just about offering guidance. For example, as we meet people in our community that help in tasks like gardening or house cleaning, we've learned that those that have children in High School sometimes struggle to help them in the transition to college. As the parents sometimes never went through this

themselves, they need help pushing their kids to be the first in the family to attend college, at least in the U.S.

It's worth noting that many of these experiences have been humbling and we've made our share of mistakes. The main thing we've had to learn is to put aside our quick judgement and superficial assessment of people's lives and real causes of their challenges. Often times you need to help for the sake of helping, putting your ego and own goals aside.

Some of you might know my cousin Pepe who is our wonderful facilities manager here at Kol Emeth. Over 15 years ago, we helped him move to the U.S. with the original idea of guiding him towards a career in the tech industry, since he'd studied computer science in Mexico. Pepe's become an important member in our community, but neither him nor us foresaw the twists and turns in his story many years ago.

These opportunities to serve present themselves to many of us, if only we are willing to look a little beyond ourselves and learn to identify them. For our family, learning to do this has certainly been challenging, but it has also brought us joy and a sense of purpose.

So maybe my children don't need to learn to wash dishes exactly as my mother taught me. I admit that they live in a different world in that sense. But they still live in the same world as my parents in terms of having a responsibility to push others forward.

We all have this responsibility, to serve, to identify need in our communities, and very likely, even find joy doing so.

Shanah Tovah.

Closing reflection by Rabbi Graff - Serve God with Joy

So, I have a confession to make. I gave a Rosh Hashanah sermon on being of service 7 years ago (perhaps a few of you remember), and I even passed out little cards that say “Serve God with Joy.” I taped one of those cards on my kitchen cabinet, so I would see it every day when making my kids’ lunches, in hopes that it would elevate this unwanted task to a higher level in my mind. It helps, sometimes. But after 7 years, I felt I needed to refresh my thinking, or at least refresh the card.

I embrace the idea that we are here to serve God. It actually gives a great deal of meaning and purpose to my life. But for the last month, I’ve been asking myself, do I really feel like my dutifully emptying the dishwasher every morning is serving God. Or unloading groceries? or even putting my kids to bed?

On some level, yes. And I want to think of it this way. But, if I’m honest, sometimes it’s just about serving my family, or serving myself, or serving others who have asked things of me. But throughout this same month that I’ve been questioning what these words really mean to me, I feel I’ve witnessed numerous people around me, serving God with joy. I’d like to share two experiences just from last week.

I was putting gas in my car at our neighborhood gas station, and this man who works there, who I’ve seen dozens of times and never spoken to, suddenly came over and struck up a conversation with me. His name was Juan Garcia. He saw me sending Chava and Orli across the parking lot to get a snack, and he was moved to stop emptying garbage cans and tell me that he is a great grandfather, at the age of 59! He told me with great pride that his great grandchildren are living with him, and that he gets up early every day to take care of the baby, make breakfast for his great grandchildren and clean up the house, before going to work at the gas

station. He didn't talk about God, but he talked about gratitude. And he smiled ear to ear, as he spoke about serving his family.

Three days later, I was at the hospital, visiting someone, and I watched as a nurse came in to clean up a toileting accident the patient had had. There was no shame involved in the interaction - for the patient or for the nurse. She acknowledged the messy situation with good humor and a smile, and proceeded to cheerfully chat with the patient throughout the entire clean up.

She didn't speak of God either. But I felt, very powerfully, she was serving God with joy.

As I reflect upon these two interactions, it makes me wonder if serving others with joy is serving God, whether it's conscious or not. From my vantage point, there was no question, they were serving God in their joyful and grateful approach to life.

So what message do I take into the new year for me?

To focus on the joy, and trust that God is there in it. I'm not necessarily talking about exuberant, banging on the table joy. I'm talking about smiling on the inside joy.

My hope for myself in the new year is that when someone asks me a favor, that I not say, "well, actually, it's pretty inconvenient, but OK, I'll do it."

Rather, I want to just say yes, with joy. And when I spend the afternoon schlepping my kids from one place to another to another, to say to myself, "I get to do this," and to do it with joy. And when Rosh Hashanah ends, and I get really stressed out that I haven't begun to write my Yom Kippur sermon, to embrace the challenge, and say "I get to do this, with joy."

I pray every morning, in my personal prayers at the end of my Amidah, that I may serve God wholeheartedly all the days of my life. This year, may I serve God by choosing joy. (Sing Ivdu et Hashem b'simcha)

