

Kol Nidrei 5783
Rabbi Karen S. Citrin
Bittersweet

I am not a sports fan. The extent of my sports knowledge pretty much consists of four years of high school marching band observing football on the sidelines. While I feel an affinity for Boston sports teams, in the spirit of confession on this Yom Kippur, I am sorry to say that I just don't really care about the games.

I recently received an education into the record breaking, nominated for 40 Emmys in just two seasons, TV show Ted Lasso. Not only a world-wide phenomenon, business schools around the world started teaching case studies on Ted Lasso and his lessons in leadership. At the end of the first season, after a devastating loss, the optimistic, loveable Division II American college football coach gives his British team an inspiring speech. I might even call it a sermon.

Coach Lasso tells his team, *"Now look, this is a sad moment right here, for all of us. There ain't nothing I can say that can take that away... I want you to be grateful that you are going through this sad moment with all these other folks. Because I promise you that there is something worse out there than being sad, and that is being alone and being sad. Ain't nobody in this room alone."*

In this moment, Coach Lasso acknowledges and affirms the sadness of loss. He also affirms the power of comfort in team, in community.

Judaism is no stranger to sadness and loss. Our people have suffered more than our share of hardship. Coming out of the global pandemic, none of us are strangers to hardship, with the challenges that COVID gave us these past few years, the missed moments. Sadness is on our minds. Throughout the ages, the Jewish people have learned how to hold together the bitter and the sweet.

Tonight, as the powerful and melancholy music of Kol Nidrei sinks in, I would like to take a moment to dwell in the delicate balance of sadness and joy, and to see what we can glean from Jewish perspectives on both the bitter and the sweet, the oys and joys of life.

Tonight has special meaning for me this year. As you may recall, I was not present for our Kol Nidrei service last year. It was the first time in my nearly twenty years as a rabbi that I missed Kol Nidrei. My sister and I had made the decision that week to change our step-father's hospice care. With the timing of things beyond our control, we learned that he would arrive by ambulance at around 7:00 that evening. I made the very difficult decision to be present when he arrived, rather than fulfilling my role at temple. As we helped him get settled in his room, I tuned in to the temple's livestream to hear Kol Nidrei. In that moment, I was able to exhale for the first time that day. I knew I was in the right place. My step-father was comfortable. He died one week later.

Judaism offers us ways to embrace both sadness and joy. Embracing sadness can especially be countercultural to our typically "Don't worry, be happy" western culture. But Jewish tradition

places value on dwelling in the sadness, at certain times of the year, and in certain times of our lives.

This summer a group of Temple Beth David members gathered on a Shabbat morning to study the scroll of Lamentations in preparation for Tisha B'Av that evening. The Ninth of Av is a day of mourning in the Jewish calendar, marking multiple layers of destruction, the only other 24 hour fast besides Yom Kippur. Lamentations, one of the 5 *megillot* or scrolls, is the scriptural reading for the day. It begins with the Hebrew word *Eicha* – How? “How lonely sits the city once full with people, she that was great among nations is become like a widow. Bitterly she weeps in the night, her cheek wet with tears.”¹

Together our group discovered the power of lament throughout Jewish history and into modern times. Author Elaine Scarry writes, “The act of verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain.”² Lament, often expressed in a female voice, not just in Judaism but other cultures as well (think Picasso’s *Guernica*), helps give voice and face to suffering. Like Jewish rituals around mourning, loss and pain are not something to get over or move on from. Rather, these rituals guide us to take time to dwell in the sadness, to receive comfort, and to care for the living.

A recent book by Whitney Goodman called *Toxic Positivity* emphasizes the problematic way that American culture sometimes bombards us with pressure to be positive. We know that so many of us are anxious, depressed, and burned out. Too often we are told “there is always a silver lining,” that our loved one “is in a better place,” or “it can always be worse,” “be strong for your kids,” and “life, or God, doesn’t give us more than we can handle.”

In my personal experience and as a rabbi, I take issue with these sentiments. Sometimes life is hard; it hurts all over. And in the words of Rabbi Jake Schram in the movie “Keeping the Faith,” sometimes we have to “embrace the suckiness.”

Pixar studios also took this message to heart with its Oscar winning animated feature, “Inside Out,” which offers a poignant mental health message. The story focuses on eleven-year-old Riley who has to move across the country while also caught in the emotional storm of incoming adolescence. Her emotions, specifically fear, joy, anger, disgust, and sadness, are portrayed by loveable animated characters who run a control center in her brain. The director Pete Docter had considered a few different emotions for the starring role of the film, with sadness being the last on his mind. But as the characters took form, he discovered that Sadness, of all the emotions, portrayed in the color blue, was the ultimate bonding agent, the emotion that everyone could identify with. Sadness, he realized, “triggers compassion. It brings people together.”³ It’s more than alright to cry.⁴ It is sadness that ultimately saved Riley.

¹ Lamentations 1:1

² *The Body in Pain*

³ In *Bitter-sweet*, Susan Cain, 2022.

⁴ Reference to “Free To Be You and Me”

Perhaps the Talmud said it best, “Even when the gates of prayer are closed, the gates of tears are always open.”⁵

On the other side of the coin of life, Judaism also firmly embraces joy and gladness. The end of Lamentations affirms, “Return to us, *Adonai*, and we shall return; renew our days as before – *Hashiveinu Adonai elecha v’nashuva, chadesh yameinu k’kedem.*”⁶ Countless prophets offered hopeful messages in times of gloom, especially the prophet Jeremiah with his belief that our mourning would turn to joy.⁷ From Groucho Marx to the Borscht Belt to Sarah Silverman, it is no coincidence that many of America’s best-known comedians have been Jewish. We have always found ways to see the *kiddush* cup as half full.

And there is our High Holy Day season. Immediately following the challenging work of Yom Kippur, we are instructed to start building the sukkah, where we will soon rejoice and count our blessings. On Sukkot leading into Simchat Torah, the holiday of rejoicing with the Torah, the proper greeting is “*moadim l’simcha*” (celebrate with joy), and we are commanded, “*v’hayita ach sameach*” (you shall only be happy)⁸. Not only do we get to celebrate Chanukah, and Purim, and Passover, these High Holy Days start with the sweet taste of apples dipped in honey and end with mandated rejoicing.

But perhaps where Judaism really got it right is in the collective embrace of both sadness and joy, bitter and sweet. There are two classic Jewish images where we see this fusing.

The first is at a Jewish wedding. Arguably the most well-known part of any Jewish wedding is the breaking of the glass. Our ancient rabbis recognized that even in our most joyful moments, we must also realize the fragility of our happiness in a broken and imperfect world. (Talmud) We rejoice with this tempered perspective. And yet, when a wedding and a death occur at the same time, according to Jewish tradition the wedding takes precedence over the funeral.

The second image is in the tasty melding of the bitter and sweet found in the Hillel sandwich at the Passover seder. The charoset mellows the sting of the maror and the maror brings out the sweetness of the charoset. Rabbi Ed Feinstein teaches, “Eating the sandwich, bitter herb and the sweet charoset together, we savor the taste of life – Bittersweet is the taste of life lived in full awareness of the passage of time.” Think about the bittersweet moments of sending a child off to preschool or college. Or ending one part of our life’s work to begin another. An awareness of these stages gives new meaning to tears of joy.

Along these lines, Susan Cain, in her new book, “*Bittersweet, How Sorry and Longing Make us Whole*,” encourages us to embrace a bittersweet state of mind. Cain writes, “Bittersweetness shows us how to respond to pain: by acknowledging it, and attempting to turn it into art, the way musicians do, or healing, or innovation, or anything else that nourishes the soul... if we realize that all humans know – or will know – loss and suffering, we can turn *toward* each other.”

⁵ Brachot 32b

⁶ Lamentations 5:21

⁷ Jeremiah 31:13

⁸ Deuteronomy 16:15

In other words, amidst the angst and unease of our world, it is our essential task to find meaning, comfort, and joy on our own journeys, and to eventually help others on theirs. Grief becomes a teacher. And as Coach Lasso reminds us, “Ain’t nobody in this room alone.” Especially not on this holiest night of the year.

This summer, Joni Mitchell’s surprise performance at the Newport Folk festival inspired many of us, and brought tears to some of our eyes. When Joni took that mic at age 78 and sang “both sides now” – a song she released when she was 23 – it struck a note in our hearts, and the crowd was moved to sing along with her.

Joni Mitchell overcame incredible odds in her life. Following a brain aneurysm, she had to relearn how to speak, walk, and sing. She had to relearn how to play guitar by watching videos of herself to see where to put her fingers. As the New York Times wrote after the festival, Mitchell seemed to sing that day in Newport with a grinning shrug as if to say – “I really don’t know life at all. You never know – anything can happen. Even this.”⁹

Embracing both sides, the bitter and the sweet, is, after all, at the heart of Jewish experience. Yom Kippur reminds us that there is much we don’t know about life, and, there is opportunity for the joy, goodness, and sweetness that life can bring.

Segue to music... Both Sides Now, Joni Mitchell

⁹ <http://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/07/28/metro/why-joni-mitchells-return-newport-folk-festival-mattered-so-many-us/>