

Yom Kippur Morning Sermon – 2014 / 5775

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Let Us Rejoice! It's Yom Kippur!

Today our Yom Kippur observance continues. It is not a series of services, but rather one long day of worship. It is a day of fasting and contemplation, introspection and self-evaluation. We practice self-denial – going without food and drink, abstaining from certain earthly pleasures like wearing luxury clothing or makeup or jewelry. Even taking a long shower is considered an excessive indulgence. We face our mortality as we tremble in the shadow of the *Unetaneh tokef* prayer. Who shall live and who shall die? Will God pull us out with the crook of his shepherd's staff as we walk underneath? Tradition says that last night at Kol Nidrei when we removed all of our Torah scrolls from the ark, we stood facing, not only an empty ark, but actually our own casket – not the *Aron haKodesh*, the holy cabinet, but the *aron ha-meitim*, the cabinet of the dead. This is to remind us that at the end of our lives, we are destined to lie in that casket – definitely a serious moment. It is difficult to consider feeling any different about this day, this *Shabbat Shabbaton* – the Sabbath of Sabbaths.

Inherent in that name, *Shabbat Shabbaton* – the Sabbath of Sabbaths, however, is the idea that perhaps Yom Kippur is more than just a day of dread, more than a day to afflict ourselves. Shabbat is a day of joy, after all – the most precious of days. Shouldn't *Shabbat Shabbaton* be the MOST precious of all days?? Let's take a closer look.

If you think about the words *Yom Kippur*, or even better yet, the words *Yom haKippurim*, you can hear and see the name of another holiday... Can you find it? [solicit responses]

Yes, it's *PURIM*. So *Yom* means "day," *ki* means "like," and *Purim* means, well, "PURIM".

So Yom Kippur is a day like Purim. What??? Purim is such a happy, joyous holiday. These two holidays couldn't be more opposite! So, what's going on? "*Pur*" means lot, like in lottery. "*Purim*" means lots. So in a way, going back to the more somber interpretations of the holy day, Yom Kippur is a bit like a day of drawing lots. Who shall live and who shall die? Inscribe us and seal us in the Book of Life... Both holy days involve fateful decisions. On Yom Kippur one's individual fate is destined, and on Purim the fate of the entire Jewish people is destined, and the Jewish people lives. So let's continue to explore why Yom Kippur is a joyous day.

Yom Kippur is the last day of the Ten Days of Repentance. This is the final day of our judgment. Our slate has been wiped clean. There are new opportunities to grow, renew, start over. As Isaiah tells us, "Though they be as scarlet, your sins shall be made white as snow," which begs the question, if we are observing such a serious holy day, why do we not wear black? Black is the color of mourning, sadness, and somber occasions. Yet, we wear white, NOT black. Very traditional Jews will wear a white *kitel* on Yom Kippur, a robe-like garment that also serves as one's burial shroud.

Yes, the *kittel* serves to remind us of our temporal existence here on this earth, yet this is also the garment many Jews wear during the Passover seder when we celebrate our festival of freedom. Traditionally the cantor wears the white *kittel* on certain festival days during Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot. And just as a bride wears white on her wedding day, the happiest day of her life, so does her groom wear the *kittel*. It is said that even angels wear white. White is such a bright color. It the combination of all the colors in the spectrum. It is summery and light and full of hope.

But isn't this a day where we contemplate our faults and lament that we have sinned? Shouldn't we be mournful? Maybe not. The Ba'al Shem Tov who is the founder of Chasidism told a story about traveling to a city once right before Rosh HaShanah. He asked the people there, "Who leads the worship services here during the Days of Awe?" They replied, "The rabbi of the city," so the Ba'al Shem Tov asked how he leads the services. The people replied, "He chants all of the Yom Kippur melodies in joyful tunes." So the Ba'al Shem Tov went to see the rabbi and asked him, "Why do you sing the confessions so joyfully?" The rabbi said to him, "A servant who is cleaning the courtyard of the king, if he loves the king, is very happy to clean the courtyard, so he sings joyful melodies because he is giving pleasure to the king." Replied the Ba'al Shem Tov, "May my lot be with yours!" (There's a reference to Purim.) So think about some of the music that we sing today. The tune that we sing for the *vidui*, for that alphabetical litany of all our sins is in a major key! It sounds happy...like a Shabbat tune! [sing ay, ay's for

Ashamnu] We approach our king – God – with joy, just as the psalms enjoin us to do. Enter God’s courts with thanksgiving, with praise, with singing. All of our holy work should be done in gladness and joy, for we are glad to serve God, our sovereign. Even in confessing our sins, though the prayerbook calls them an “alphabet of woe,” we can still be joyful, for we are being given the opportunity to begin again and start fresh.

And God, too, is happy at our return. God misses us when we are away. The prophet Ezekiel speaks God’s word: “‘Do I indeed delight in the death of the wicked,’ says the Lord God, and not rather in his turning from his way that he might live?’ . . . ‘I do not delight in the death of the one who dies,’ says the Lord; so turn and live.” God rejoices during Yom Kippur because we are all here striving to improve ourselves. God rejoices because he sees that we are choosing life and not death, goodness and not evil. God takes out the Book of Life, otherwise known as his bragbook, and exclaims, “Look at my children! Yes, they get on my last nerve and sometimes I wonder if they’re going to make it, but look at them now. Look how hard they are trying! I am so proud of them!

Last evening we stood together to hear the mournful tones of the Kol Nidrei, asking God to forgive us of our wrongdoings and to absolve us of the vows we had taken in vain. Before we even prayed those words, we read from the Book of Numbers: “As, in Your love, You, O God, have been patient with this people from the time You led us out of Egypt to the present day, so in Your great love, may You forgive Your people now.

And God said, 'I have pardoned in response to your plea.'" *Salachti ki d'varecha*. I forgive you, and you haven't even asked me to yet. God in infinite mercy forgives us even before we ask. Of course, this doesn't mean that our confessional prayers and penitence are not an important, even crucial, part of this day – only that we should do them with joy. Instead of approaching the Day of Atonement as a day of dread and denial, let us welcome the chance to begin anew, start fresh, and relish the opportunity we've been given.

So why be happy on this *Shabbat Shabbaton*? Because happiness leads to spiritual well-being and fulfillment, and happiness is vital to our physical well-being as well. To use the language of the psalms, it is our life and the length of our days. Research demonstrates that happiness may be associated with lower stress-related hormones and better immune function, as well as a reduction in heart attacks. God wants us to be happy.

So let us approach this Day of Atonement with gladness, with the desire to be more grateful for what we have, for the daily miracles that bless our lives. When we think about those who are truly happy, they are those whose hearts are filled with gratitude for what they have, even if what they have is very little. Those who seem to have so much in their lives, never seem to have enough and want more. Contentment never seems to be within reach.

Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, teaches us: *Eizeh hu ashir? Ha sameach b'chelko*. Who is rich? One who is content with his lot. (And there we have the reference to Purim again.) Our tradition tells us to say at least 100 blessings each day. One hundred seems like an unachievable number, but compared to the immeasurable number of miracles in our lives, that is hardly enough. There are so many reasons to be grateful. Thank you, God, for letting me awaken to a new day. I know my joints creak, but that means I'm alive. Thank you, God, for helping my body to work, albeit a little slower sometimes. Thank you, God, for blessing the earth with drops of rain and rays of sun. Thank you for the twinkling stars and for tiny snowflakes. Thank you that I have a home to keep me warm. Thank you that I am part of this community. Thank you that I live in this magnificent place. So many blessings. Counting those blessings leads to great happiness.

So let us be happy on this *Yom haKippurim*. This is a day that God has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Let us sing with joy and abandon. Let us dress up like the angels and wear white after Labor Day. Let us embrace this new year of opportunity, of holy work, and of blessing. And then tonight, as you conclude your fast, remember to hammer in the first nail in your sukkah, as soon we will enter the festival of Sukkot, *z'man simchateinu*, the time for our joy. It's all connected.

So as we declare the sacred power of this day, for it is awesome and full of dread, let us balance it with hope and white and song as we delight in performing our spiritual housekeeping. As we contemplate our own humanity, let us pray that we will live each day that we are given to the fullest – for ourselves, our families, our congregation, and our community. And let us all say together, Amein.