

In autumn of 1948, the new State of Israel was still fighting for its survival. Sirens often interrupted the nights in Tel Aviv, and families huddled in shelters. On Simchat Torah, however, people spilled into the streets. In Dizengoff Square, men and women — some in uniform, some still carrying rifles —formed circles around the Sifrei Torah and began to dance. Ammunition trucks rumbled past, yet the hora never stopped. Soldiers began singing “Am Yisrael Chai” at the top of their lungs. The war was not over, but for that night joy conquered fear.

Fast forward twenty five years to the fall of 1973. The Yom Kippur War had erupted less than two weeks earlier, and Israel was still reeling from surprise attacks and heavy losses. In the Sinai desert, tanks stood silent for a rare pause in the fighting. Soldiers climbed down, dusty and weary, and unwrapped Torah scrolls that had been brought to the front. In the shadow of battle, they formed a circle in the sand and began to dance. Their voices rose in song, their feet stamped a rhythm of joy, and for a few precious moments the battlefield became a synagogue without walls. It was not a celebration of victory, but of life — a declaration that even amidst war, the Jewish people would dance with the Torah.

And then, just fifty years later, October 7, 2023. Many of us will remember being here in this very sanctuary, our hearts shattered by the catastrophic events that we were just coming to understand, wondering if it was even appropriate to celebrate Simchat Torah at all amidst so much devastation and loss. And yet dance we did that night, and the next morning too - for all those who weren't able to dance themselves, to stand in defiance of enemies who would wish to take our life and our spirit, because one of the most powerful tools with which to confront despair is an abiding insistence on joy. Indeed, in times that are difficult, Jewish joy is more important than ever.

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Over the last years I have given sermons about anger and sermons about fear and so many sermons about grief, but this evening I'd like to speak instead about joy. I know that this is a counterintuitive choice and don't mean it to minimize all that is so very overwhelming and scary, heartbreaking and bleak in our world these days. It has been nearly 2 years since October 7th and still there are close to 50 hostages still imprisoned. Our loved ones in Israel are living under unimaginable conditions - missile launches, terror attacks, the sickening worry of having children and grand-children on the frontlines, not to mention the unresolved trauma of 10/7 itself. The Jewish community is deeply divided with some feeling increasingly alienated from an Israeli government that does not represent their values and others feeling increasingly alienated from a world that holds Israel (and by extension the Jewish people) solely responsible for tragedies perpetrated by Hamas. Hopes of a true and lasting peace in a safe and secure homeland feel more and more remote.

In the United States too, we are living through extraordinarily challenging times. Antisemitism has exploded around the world and particularly on college campuses here in this country. The despair and polarization characterizing American society is too often spilling into violence, leading us to no longer feel fully safe in our schools, our houses of worship, at public gatherings

and events. The Jewish community, again, is divided with many feeling that we are moving further and further away from core values related to democracy, welcome, and inclusion and many others feeling that these very values are being used to protect only other minority groups and never the Jews. On top of these communal sorrows, some of us are also struggling in more personal ways - contending with challenges related to health, relationships, money, or loss that leave us feeling frightened and alone. In the face of such a grim landscape, speaking about joy might sound naive or pollyannish.

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I'd like to clarify, however, that I'm not speaking about *happiness* tonight, I'm speaking about *joy*; happiness being a positive but temporary emotion that comes and goes depending on external circumstances whereas joy is an enduring attitude of wellbeing fueled by an intrinsic sense of purpose, meaning, and connection. Happiness is what we feel when we take a first bite of chocolate cake or root for our favorite sports team or jam it out to Taylor Swift when driving alone in the car. Joy is what we feel when we watch our grandchild graduate pre-school or catch up with a long-lost friend or hear the first haunting strains of Kol Nidre on Yom Kippur night. Joy doesn't just happen to us - it is a deliberate and intentional edifice that we build by creating a life that is so deep and rich that it carries us through even in dark times. Perhaps that is why the Babylonian Talmud Taanit<sup>1</sup> indicates that Yom Kippur is one of the most joyful days of the year. We may be fasting and spending long days in shul, our heads may be pounding from caffeine withdrawal, but we are deeply in touch with our people, our values, and our community. *These* are the things that ultimately make life worth living and which make the promise of Jewish joy as strong as ever before.

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There are many Jewish texts that speak about the importance of joy, but sticking with the theme of holidays, the one I'd like to draw upon this evening comes from Deuteronomy 16:14, תַּחֲנֹן וְבָרְאֵךְ, “You shall rejoice on your festivals.” The verse, of course, refers specifically to the Pilgrimage Festivals and, here in the Diaspora, has become part of the Yom Tov Torah reading for Shemini Atzeret and the final days of Pesach and Shavuot. Perhaps it is obvious that holidays should be times of joy, yet this verse is saying something subtle yet significant - not “you shall have happy holidays” (sort of like we say here in America, “Happy Holidays,” expressing a wish that the joy promised by the holiday season shall be yours) but rather something more akin to “you shall make your holidays happy” (a commandment, obligating us to find joy in this sacred season). How can we be *required* to feel a particular emotion at a particular time of year? Joy, in Judaism, is not so much a feeling as it is a way of life.

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<sup>1</sup> Taanit 30b

The Torah is able to insist that we make the holidays joyful because it knows a little something about the core idea behind each one and knows, too, that it is precisely these themes that lead people to lead joyful lives - lives of purpose, meaning, and connection:

First there is Pesach which is about peoplehood, about having a shared history and destiny with others, about being part of something larger than oneself, about bonds of love and loyalty that transcend time and space so that even strangers we've never met before can feel like instant family. Peoplehood binds us to a grand narrative, creating identity, responsibility, resilience, and hope that no one person could sustain on their own. How do we contend with the pain of oppression, asks Pesach? By seeing ourselves as part of a greater whole that has an ultimate moral purpose and mission in this world.

Shavuot is about Torah, about the values and teachings, rituals and practices that have distinguished our community for millenia. Jewish tradition gives shape to our day-to-day lives, providing us not only with an ethical anchor but also a wellspring of resources to connect us to God and one another, spiritual tools to make our lives more rich and worthwhile. How do we contend with the pain of desert wandering, asks Shavuot? By creating a structure through which the Jewish people can thrive and find meaning.

And finally Sukkot, which we celebrate again next week, a holiday that is about community. We invite friends into our dwelling places along with the traditional *Ushpizin* guests, feeling the strength and comfort, joy and contentment that comes from strong and trusting relationships, from a sense of belonging, from understanding that there are those who know and care for us, who value us and see us as we really are. How do we contend with the pain of life's fragility, asks Sukkot? By surrounding ourselves with people that we love.

Purpose, meaning, community. These are the building blocks of joy which make them perfectly suited to lie at the heart of our festival cycle and to find full expression this holy Kol Nidre night as we stand with Jewish communities around the world, as we reaffirm once again our most deeply held values and commitments, as we feel the warmth and fellowship of dear friends, our extended Jewish family, right here in this room. In these difficult times, there are plenty of places to find fleeting happiness, but I believe that the particular kind of joy that comes from deep Jewish living, that comes - if I may be bold (and also so biased!) as to say so - through being part of a *synagogue* community in particular is rare and precious. We fight despair not by slapping smiles on our faces and pretending the threats aren't real, but rather by acknowledging all that is so scary and broken in our world but insisting that joy will carry us through nonetheless. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "A people that can know insecurity and still feel joy is one that can never be defeated, for its spirit can never be broken nor its hope destroyed."<sup>2</sup>

And so I want to close tonight with the words of my dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Rachel Kobrin. Over Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Kobrin spoke about the fact that many of us feel like the world is going to hell in a hand-basket but she then asked something provocative: What would it take to make the world go to heaven in a hand-basket instead? I invite us all to think about this profound question and would love to hear your answers. As for mine, it is this: we need to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://rabbisacks.org/quotes/ode-to-joy/>

double down on joy - leading lives so full of purpose, meaning, and connection that they not only carry us through but ultimately help us to reverse these times that are so very dark.

בָּתְּמִימָה תְּשִׁלְשֵׁלָה - May we not only feel, but also feel obligated to create, joy in the new year just begun. G'mar Hatimah Tova!