

Kol Nidre

Kol Nidre is a time for taking stock of things. We look back on the past year, note its flaws and faults, and own them. We hope to do better. We plan, too, for the coming year, but with an awareness – this is what the Kol Nidre prayer itself is about – that we know we'll fall short. We talk stock of ourselves with open eyes, aware that much is out of our control.

Every one of these High Holiday sermons this year I have written with an awareness that perhaps a war with Iran will pre-empt what I had planned to say. But this sermon, even in case of war, I do not plan to change. Because I want to speak tonight about the paradox of joy, and how we can feel some joy in this complicated and brutal world. And why I think this is necessary in our lives.

I'm going to jump right in with a machloket, an argument, from the Talmud between Rabbi Hillel and Shammai. Ketubot 16b-17a. You might be familiar with it – do you tell a so-called white lie about a person's appearance on their wedding day? There are gender components here that are worth discussing, but that is another sermon, because we are going to go to a mystical reading of this text.

תָּנוּ רַבָּנָן: כִּיצַד מְרַקְדִין לְפָנֵי הַכֵּלָה?

The Sages taught: How does one dance before the bride, i.e., what does one recite while dancing at her wedding?

בֵּית שְׁמַאי אוֹמְרִים כֵּלָה כְּמוֹת לְשֵׁיא. וּבֵית הֵלֵל אוֹמְרִים: "כֵּלָה נְאֻה וְחִסּוּדָה"

Beit Shammai says: One recites praise of **the bride as she is**, emphasizing her good qualities. **And Beit Hillel say:** One recites: **A fair and attractive bride.**

I said this is an argument, but maybe it's a story. What do you say to a bride at her wedding? Keitzad merakdin, how do you dance before her – there's clearly some ritualized dance encoded here that we have lost. In that dance, there seems to be a part where you express praise of the bride. **Hillel says:** you say she is beautiful and graceful. **Shammai says:** if she's not beautiful and graceful, you instead "tell it like it is."

The dance aspect of this suggests to me that this was some sort of choreographed moment – I don't think this is a text about the male gaze. But that certainly can be a piece of this, to be discussed another time. I want to focus here on what **Hillel** and **Shammai** are arguing.

As an aside, if you're ever in this situation, listen to **Hillel**. He's right. And he's right with how you deal with people, too. I've officiated a lot of funerals, and sometimes the family of the deceased says about them: they really told it like it was. I've heard this many times, and you know what? I've never heard it with a sense of gladness.

Always with a sense of: this was a personality defect that impeded them their whole life. So I'm telling you all now: don't do that.

But I think we can relate to the problem of: what if you're at a wedding, or at some experience where you don't really feel the joy that you are "supposed" to feel. Do you

fake it? How should you act?

The Baal Shem Tov, the great mystical teacher of the 18th century, says the following here as a comment on this story:

Ha-shechinah nikret kalah.

He says: the Shechinah, the word we have for God's presence on earth, is also called a "bride."

What's the Shechinah? One aspect of God's interaction with the world is called the Shechinah. Shechinah means something like, "The presence," sometimes it's called the "indwelling," because the root of the word comes from "sha-chan," dwelling, like the word "mishkan," dwelling place, does. The aspect of God that dwells in the Temple, that is in this world - and the aspect of God that was rendered homeless upon the destruction of the Temple, and that went into exile along with Israel, along with the Jews - that aspect is called Shechinah. Shechinah is a feminine word, and if you see feminine imagery referring to God in the liturgy - description of God as queen or bride, like Shabbat Bride, Shabbat Queen - it's referring to God's being in exile with us.

The Baal Shem Tov says: You know, Hillel and Shammai are not just really about a bride at a wedding. They're talking about the Shechinah.

Namely: when the Shechinah is in such a bad state - when exile is real and Israel is suffering and the world is full of pain - what do you say? Shammai says: you look at

the world, and tell it like it is. And Hillel says: kallah na'ah va-hasudah. A beautiful and graceful bride. That is to say, the Baal Shem Tov writes:

"You might be surprised how you can dance at a time like this, during the exile of the Shechinah, when we can't even yet call it Bride, but the dance is to lift up the sparks and the level of the wedding to a higher place, like a holy dance."

That is:

The world is pretty horrible right now, but we can lift up the good in it and increase the good in it if we approach it with joy.

Joy here - simchah - is not just a feeling. It is a posture toward existence in which we respond to goodness and beauty with more goodness and beauty. To do this, we have to be able to see the goodness and beauty in the world, and we also have to have the capacity to respond by mirroring that.

I am calling this joy, because it's a good word, and because it's simple. If you wanted to be more philosophical, you could call this "yes-saying." If you wanted to be more theological, you could call this seeing the world as God declared it at creation - Tov Meod, very good. If you want liturgical language for this, you could say, "Ivdu et-Hashem be-simchah" - worship God through joy, or worship God joyfully.

I'm not going to pretend this is easy. We have personal losses and fears. We have communal losses and fears. Feeling joy is a task - it's not a quick thing. It's a task of cultivating moments of joy, moments of mindfulness and awareness, and trying to

center them in your life. It's in many ways a practice of gratitude.

Responding to our experiences of spiritual torment, of existential fear, of physical pain, of endangered existence with joy is a project for a lifetime. This is huge work. But also hugely beneficial to the world and I think a necessary condition for the future.

What does that look like for us in a world where we do so often see or encounter things that make us sad or angry? What are the impediments to our experiencing real joy?

The Baal Shem Tov did not live in an easy time. It was harder to be Jewish, harder to be alive, and there was more suffering than we are used to. Yet he did not largely see these external factors as getting in the way of experiencing joy. He saw, instead, that our experience was affected by what he called "machshavot zarot," the thoughts or habits of our minds that impede us or depress us. Machshavot zarot is the hasidic way of saying: how we get in our own way psychologically.

This doesn't mean that there are no external stimuli from our emotions - of course there are - or that there aren't things that happen in the world that should affect us. But these are not things that should preclude our experience of joy. More often, when I see situations with people where external events are eating them up, there is almost always an individual spiritual/psychological correlative - there is something going on in their own life. This person is getting in their own way.

This High Holiday season, I've drawn attention to some of the ways that we get in our own way. Honestly, I think that is the most important topic for any high holiday sermon - you want to address as many people as possible about areas for teshuvah / growth. I spoke about the paradox of trying to fix others - how being a busybody, how trying to fix someone else, tends to actually make us worse. Then I spoke about the paradox of silence - how endless talking is not going to help us become who we need to be, but instead, how we might better get there through silence. Similarly, allowing ourselves to read a book, or meditate, or doing something other than go online - that can help, too. These paradoxes are ones we are living with post-Oct. 7. Tomorrow morning, I'm talking about discomfort and resilience - how we have to allow ourselves to sometimes feel it and experience it - and really, that sermon should be tonight, but Kol Nidre is the top billing for a sermon and this one is the most all-encompassing.

But these are only some themes. There are other ways we get in our own way - other ways that prevent us from acknowledging and mirroring a world that is na'ah vahasudah, that is beautiful and graceful.

One way is through anxiety. We feel anxious about relationships, about ourselves, and that causes us to act out - often against ourselves. I have seen people persevere themselves into bad behavior - perseveration is the obsessive focus on anxious fears - and this is a real issue. I can't provide the kind of care necessary for that through a

sermon, but I can tell you that if you find yourself focusing on certain things again and again, talk to a therapist, or reach out to me, and I'll help you find one.

But my hope is also that Yom Kippur can do some of the joy work for you. To explain why that is, let me talk a bit more about joy.

Joy is not escapism. It's not thoughtless fluff, TikTok Joy, or gluttonous joy. Real joy that is the ripe fruit of having really experienced the hard stuff and faced it, the ripe fruit of all the labors of our life.

Yom Kippur is a holiday on which we achieve atonement for sins. Itzumo shel yom mechaper - the day itself atones for our sins bein adam l'makom, between people and God. For sins between people and each other, bein adam l'chavero, Yom Kippur atones for sins if we have done teshuvah. What is teshuvah here? On the interpersonal level it means: trying to fix a relationship. It means engaging in the work and not avoiding it.

Yom Kippur is understood as a joyous holiday, because if you start doing that - even if you don't finish that - Yom Kippur accomplishes a lot of the work that way. Think of it like a Monopoly board - if you start the teshuvah process, Yom Kippur lets you skip forward to the next Community Chest or whatever. And I know that today is Yom Kippur, so you might hear this and be like, "Oh, great, thanks Rabbi," but actually, that atoning power of Yom Kippur continues until Hoshanah Rabah - the holy energy of the days gives you a boost.

And this is wonderful! This is the secret of why Yom Kippur is seen as the most joyous of all our holidays. The Mishnah, rabbinic legal text from the first and second century, tells us that in ancient Jerusalem, the night after Yom Kippur was a party night and that it was actually a big hook-up scene. Why this joy on a day that is so solemn? Because Yom Kippur tells us: you are doing well. If you've started the work on your own, God will help you with the lion's share of it.

The holiday is joyous because it tells us: we are more than our sins, we are more than our worst moments or worst relationships, we are more than our worst suffering.

Yes, maybe you still have sins left you have to account for and deal with. Maybe there's a conversation you still need to have. Look at having that conversation as a way to say: I can now put that sin to bed and focus on the next year. I have downgraded that sin and can look for joy in the year instead of being dragged down by it.

We are given this gift of Yom Kippur, this gift of the possibility of atonement, because it helps us not to be dragged down by our own issues. It helps us heal and grow in a way that allows us to see beauty and goodness in the world, to praise it, and to lift it up.

I'm not pretending that problems are going to fade away. The tradition does not say that the work of teshuvah, or the work of fixing broken things in the world, is

unimportant. Far from it! But the tradition recognizes, instead, that we are so incredibly apt to get in our own way over these issues. And that we've got work to do. The purpose of that work is joy. That purpose of that work is beauty. Appreciating beauty and joy and goodness is a way of doing that work.

So what have I said this high holiday season? Don't get caught up in fixing other people's problems - deal with your own stuff. I didn't share this in my Rosh Hashanah sermon, but the Hebrew word for fixing your own problems there, k'shot, as in, k'shot atzmecha v'achar kach k'shot acherim, fix yourself and afterwards fix others, that word does not literally mean fix. It literally means, "adorn" or "beautify." Beautify yourself - allow yourself to be a source of joy and beauty and love - so that there can be more beauty in the world, so that you can help others to find it, and so that you can build the more loving world we so desperately need.

Shanah Tovah.