

## Rosh Hashanah 5784: Cultivating Joy in the New Year

Shabbat Shalom. Shanah Tovah. What a beautiful morning to celebrate the birthday of the world and the birth of a New Year for all of us. Have you made any new year's resolutions for 5784? What? You don't make lists of resolutions for the Jewish New Year? Yeah, neither do I. But I suspect many of us reach this season with a desire to make a change or two and find a way to make the coming year better than the one that just ended. Unlike the often superficial resolutions folks make on January 1st - eat less sugar, work out at the gym more, etc., our High Holy Days are a time for introspection and deep analysis of how we can return to our best selves in the new year. Don't get me wrong, changing your eating and exercise habits can be very challenging and rewarding work. But reframing the way we look at situations, people, and events and then making sure our responses are in line with our highest intentions? That's the major work of our lives on this planet.

When the weather started heating up this summer, I began thinking about what I wanted to share with you today. One word kept emerging for me - Joy. This little three-letter word carries a lot of weight. Joy is something much deeper and richer than happiness. Joy includes multitudes - gladness, gratitude, optimism, fulfillment. And somehow the presence of joy does not guarantee the absence of sorrow. In fact, joy and grief can walk hand in hand. Joy is a flow of holiness that connects and reconnects us to the infinite source of life. Joy is the river flowing from that original garden in Eden to water each of our parched souls.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught that it is a great mitzvah to be joyful. A mitzvah? That means we are commanded to cultivate joy within ourselves. Not just because it is good for each of us, but it will contribute to a great healing of all of us. Joy ripples out into a world that thrives on our connection.

So, what are the moments when you feel joy? What are the images that come to mind? It can be something as simple and sweet as a toddler examining an insect on the sidewalk or as enormously emotional as a wedding of two people in love. This summer I had the amazing opportunity to officiate the marriage of my favorite once-toddler bug inspector and his beautiful wife. I'm surprised my heart didn't burst out of my chest overflowing with all my joy.

And speaking of officiating weddings, Ben and Lynden's was the third of eight weddings I've been asked to officiate this calendar year. After so much sadness and illness in the past few years, it has been a delight to immerse myself in the joy of crafting marriage ceremonies and rituals celebrating love. I don't know if I'll ever have a year so filled with brides and grooms, although I can tell you that my daughter is now engaged so there will be at least one more wedding to plan next year!

If you've been to a Jewish wedding you may recall hearing the Hebrew word for joy - Simcha - many times. In the Sheva Brachot, the Seven Blessings of marriage, we speak of joy at least four times. We express gratitude to the One who joyfully reunites people who have been divided. We give thanks to the Source of all life for bringing loving companions

together to rejoice as all God's creatures have since the days of creation. We praise the fountain of blessings who creates joy and gladness, brides and grooms, love and friendship. We ask that there always be heard in the streets the sounds of joy and happiness, the shouts of young people celebrating, and the songs of children at play. It is clear in our wedding liturgy that the joy of a marriage extends well beyond the couple - to the extended family, into the streets, and beyond.

Ok, so you can imagine feeling joy at a wedding and at other major celebrations in your life and the life of those you love. Yet how do we cultivate joy on a regular day? Let's start by focusing our attention. Make a point of noticing something beautiful or delicious or adorable or amazing every day. Much like prayer, or learning an instrument, or engaging in a sport, cultivating joy is a practice. The more we take the time to notice things that bring us joy, the more we will notice things that bring us joy. I might venture to say this is one of those "fake it til you make it" concepts where your effort could surprise you into ultimately feeling a result. And you really have nothing to lose.

Now I'm not saying this will be easy. Scientists have shown the human brain is wired to focus on the negative. Our ancestors in prehistoric times had to be able to recognize danger in order to stay alive. The cavemen and women who registered threats fastest were the ones who lived long enough to pass on their genes to us. Yet we don't have the same need to worry about predators and poison berries, so we can afford to (and benefit from) rewiring our brains to shift our attention to positive things. We can

balance out our inherent negative bias by recognizing all that is good in our lives.

And when we notice what is good in our lives, psychologists tell us to take a few moments to truly enjoy positive experiences. Fully engage in the happy thoughts and pleasant sensations. This is called savoring and the experience will build up a collection of positive memories which you can draw from in the future. When my daughter was very young, she'd sometimes pause for a moment and then smile. One time I asked her what she was doing and she explained that she was "taking a memory picture." We should all have an archive of memory pictures to lift our spirits and rekindle joy when we need it most.

I recognize that there is great tragedy and sorrow in the world. I know that you don't have to look far to find suffering and sadness. It may seem naive to suggest we can focus on savoring sweet moments and feel joy in a world that can feel very dark. Do not forget that our people have walked dark paths countless times in history, and yet, we are here today. The Piaseczno Rebbe wrote beautiful sermons to his followers in the Warsaw Ghetto, including these words before Passover in 1939.

"The main aspect of the festival is to be joyful...this is actually the purpose of the entire creation...When the time comes for the Pesach evening prayer, you should rejoice in your tremendous fortune, in the great privilege you have, to be engaged in divine service. You should say to yourself, 'My joy is without bounds...True, I have my problems, both material and spiritual. But for now I discard them; the

entire world is no longer important to me...' Your joy should be so exalted that you can barely hold yourself back from breaking into an ecstatic dance."

So let's make a commitment to shift our focus to joy in this new year. Let us cultivate an inner wellspring of peace and happiness that fills us with delight and hope. Let us savor the gifts in our life, the moments that bring us joy. May we find time to enjoy simple pleasures and savor at least one delicious taste, smell, or sight each day. Let's remember to laugh and play, dance and sing. May we feel the impact of living a life of purpose and joy in 5784. Shana Tovah u'metukah!

[Finish with singing May I Suggest - Red Molly's version]