

Joy, Throughout Pain; Sunshine in the Rain Rosh HaShanah II, 5778

After a trying period in their corporate history, the leaders of a large company wanted to know whether they could expect an optimistic outlook for the future, or if they should prepare for the worst. The consultant they hired, who had been keeping up with the latest trends, suggested that rather on relying on economists, who could easily be wrong, they should assemble a diverse group of people and draw upon the Wisdom of Crowds.

So an invitation was issued to some of the brightest people in the nation from all walks of life, and soon dozens of people congregated in the company's conference room. The facilitator, who was a whiz with metaphors, welcomed everyone and then said to the amassed group: "There is an old proverb that says that, when looking at a glass like of water, optimist will see it as half full, while the pessimist will see it as half empty. We would like to know how you see it."

First to speak was a Survey Specialist who said, "I wonder how it got half full? Because if we could figure that out, we could get it all the way full!"

Then a scientist replied "The glass is simply twice as large as it needs to be."

A doctor intoned "Pessimism correlates with stress-related diseases that can shorten your life by up to twenty years, so if you know what's good for you, you had better see this glass as at least half full."

A statistician shook his head, and, holding up a chart, explained "At no point is the glass precisely half full or half empty, because the water is constantly evaporating."

Next up was a lawyer who said "We have no comment at this time regarding the fullness or emptiness of the alleged glass."

A new immigrant said "Where I come from we have no glasses, and nothing to put in them, so by comparison this glass looks very full to me."

A former billionaire who had lost three fourths of his wealth retorted "Hey, I think that's my glass, where did you get it? And when I last saw it, it was full. And it was a bigger glass!"

A politician from the party in power drew himself up and proclaimed "Despite the fact that the previous administration neglected this glass disgracefully, we have

made it a priority to ensure that the fullness of all glasses everywhere is and will be maximized.”

But a politician from the opposition party replied “Despite the hard work of the citizens of our country, the current administration continues to shamefully allow this glass, and all glasses across this great country of ours, to be drained to the point of exhaustion.”

Finally a Taoist said quietly: “The glass simply is what it is, and so is what is contained in it.”

Others in turn expressed their views, and finally the expert consultant thanked them all and declared the conference concluded. When the guests had all left, the executive said to the expert: “Well, now we’ve heard the Wisdom of Crowds; is the glass half full or half empty?”

“Yes,” said the expert. “Please let us know if we can be of further assistance in future.”

In life, we are profoundly affected by the things we see, feel, and experience each day. We have moments that elevate our lives and moods, that make us feel invincible and untouched by the chaos of life, and other moments that can crush our hearts.

I’ll be totally honest with you; in the past few months, I have had far more of the latter. It is disheartening to watch as people I know in this community and around the country suffer from injustices that I know in my heart should not be. Throughout most of the last year, I’ve been watching people I love struggling with drawn out illnesses and fighting to stay healthy. And there are days when I want to shut things out, to pretend that nothing is wrong and just enjoy the pleasant things

in life, even while continuing to worry, and wonder, about what the future has in store.

Because of that, I have spent the last many, many weeks struggling with the message I wanted to deliver to you today. What can I say to make your lives better? What advice could I give, or lesson could I share, that might enable you, and our whole community, to move into the year ahead feeling good, clean, and ready for the world that is out there waiting for us?

Until recently, I was somewhat at a loss. These emotional wounds I have been carrying around over the last few months that have at times felt unbearable. And I know many of you have endured hardships over the past year that affect your day-to-day lives, your families, your jobs, and may have even shaken your own core beliefs and values.

But a wise and caring person asked me, “Scott, what message would YOU want to hear from YOUR rabbi this Rosh HaShanah?” I thought about that question for a long time. So here is what I settled on:

Life is full of joy and wonder.

As human beings, we have the unique ability among all of creation to shape our perceptions of our own reality through sheer force of will.

If we see the glass as half empty, then it is. If we see it as half full, then for us, it will be so.

And it turns out, this is not a new idea. Throughout the Jewish tradition, we are exhorted to blend joy into our lives each day. The Sages of the Talmud tried give us the tools to create such a framework, saying:

אין עומדין להתפלל לא מתוך עצבות ולא מתוך עצלות ולא מתוך שחוק ולא מתוך שיחה
ולא מתוך קלות ראש ולא מתוך דברים בטלים אלא מתוך שמחה של מצוה

One may not stand to pray from [a mindset of] sorrow, nor from [a mindset of] sluggishness, nor from [a mindset of] laughter, nor from [a mindset of] idle talk, nor from [a mindset of] frivolity, nor from [a mindset of] trivial matters. Rather, one should approach prayer from an atmosphere imbued with the joy of a mitzvah. (Talmud Bavli, Brachot 31a)

The act of prayer, for our Rabbis, serves as a model for each of our actions, especially our most important and most frequent ones. Make the concerted effort to bring joy into the world you inhabit and you will give yourself the best chance to live a happy life. Every day, therefore, we are asked to put ourselves into a positive mindset, to literally use our every breath to fill the earth with joy, as it says in Psalm 100,

מִזְמוֹר לְתוֹדָה הֲרִיעוּ לִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ: עֲבֹדוּ אֶת־יְיָ בְּשִׂמְחָה בָּאוּ לְפָנָיו בְּרִנְנָה:

A Psalm of thanksgiving. Shout up to Adonai, all the earth.
Serve God with gladness; Come before God with joyous song.

So, how do we get to a place where we can feel the fullness of our lives? Like so many important parts of our every day, it is at once the simplest thing to choose and one of the hardest to do consistently. Here is the secret: choose joy.

In the book, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, Rabbi Alan Lew's masterful guide to experiencing meaning during the High Holiday season, he pleads with us to consider our choices:

We live with the consequences of our choices. And perhaps we have chosen arbitrary spiritual language to express these things, or perhaps God made human culture so that we would express these things precisely as we have in every detail. It makes no difference. What makes a difference is that it's real and it is happening right now and it is happening to us, and it is utterly inescapable, and we are completely unprepared. The moment is before us with its choices, and the consequences of our past choices are before us, as is the possibility of our transformation. This year some of us will die, some of us will live, and ALL of us will change.

All of us WILL change. Even if we try to slam the brakes on the flow of time through our lives, we are each constantly engaged in an eternal process of growth and change. There is no reverse, only drive. There is no pause, only (it seems) a fast-forward run into tomorrow. We don't get the ability to try all over again. Whatever has happened has happened, but what is more important is the fact that we cannot force what is yet to happen to accord to our will. All we have is our choices,

what we choose to work on and fight for, what we choose to accept, and one of the impactful decisions we ever make is how we allow the experiences of our lives to affect us.

Do we let the insults of others define how we see ourselves, or do we give ourselves permission to see the best and most holy parts of who we are? Do we let the pain of the today's world drag down our spirits, or do we use it as fuel to shape a better world for tomorrow?

I don't want to come off as Pollyannaish or flip. Pain hurts. Oppression of anyone is destructive for every single one of us. People commit evil acts, and ignoring them helps no one.

Even still, holding on to the pain of every single one of the arrows that may assail us in our lives is an unbearable way to live. Just this past year, a new sociological term has been coined: outrage fatigue. When there are so many things going on in life that make your blood boil, that attack the very core of what you believe to be good and right and true, it is easy to get burned out and to simply stop caring. Most of us have been there already: we turn off the news, put away the paper, switch the radio station to music, delete that email asking us to take action. We can only take so much.

But feeling all the world's pain or ignoring it are not the only two options. We can embrace the world as it is without letting the darkest parts of our experiences define us. We can work for a better world

while still living our lives, day after day, with a sense of hope and optimism.

In May of 2016, Dr. Sylvia Boorstein, an expert on meditation and spiritual practice, and author of the phenomenal spiritual guidebook *Happiness Is an Inside Job*, did an interview on the NPR radio show “On Being.” She elegantly explained the ways through which we can create and maintain joy in our own lives despite whatever difficulties might come our way, saying:

Sometimes the pain of the world seems incomprehensible and unbearable to me. And I think if there's anything that balances it, it's wonder at the world, the amazingness of people...So [we need] to be able to look at human beings and say, 'Life is amazing! The sun came up in the exact right place this morning!' Celebrate seasons and birthdays and holy days. Here we are again, at another time in another season, and there's that great cosmos out there to look at. Our ancestors looked at the same stars. I keep in myself a sense of amazement.

This sort of outpouring of joy is nothing new. Each day, we are given countless opportunities to experience joy, if we only open our minds, eyes, and souls to the possibility that life could be a overflowing with happiness. Heschel called this way of looking at life “radical amazement,” and taught that it was “a holy joy to remember [this feeling], an overwhelming thrill to be grateful.¹ So powerful is the joy

¹ Heschel, A.J. “The Holy Dimension,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, p.334.

we bring into the world that the Hasidic Masters made bringing joy to ourselves and others their highest ideal, even going so far as to say that while the gates of prayer may always remain OPEN to our tears and our pleas², the joy we bring into the world has the power to knock down all gates and walls and barriers.³

The fact is that we cannot single-handedly control all that happens in the world. If we try to, we are liable to not only be disappointed, but to find ourselves drained of the ability to care at all for anyone or anything. All we can control is ourselves, what we do, say, and yes, how we perceive our lives. If we see them as dark and dangerous, then they are. If we see them as full of light and joy, then for us, they will be.

Today we sit together and pray to be written in the Book of Life. We pray for success, health, support, inspiration, love, connection, justice, progress, and simply another year to move closer to our goals. Instead of asking for these things this year, what if we took a look at what we already had? None of us can force this day, week, year, or lifetime to turn out exactly how we might want. All we can do is find those things that bring us joy. Maybe it is a person, an experience, a memory, a song, a food. Hold these things close, let them fill you up, let

² Talmud Bavli, Brachot 32b: "Rabbi Elazar teaches that since the destruction of the Temple the gates of prayer were closed, but that to the gates of tears are continuously unlocked."

³ Rabbi Moshe Leib Sosoover (18th c. Hassidic master), *Likutei RaMaL*, Parashat Vayeyitze

their joy fill your every waking moment until you can't contain it anymore.

Then, let it out. Let it out in every word and every deed, in every project and every prayer, in every smile and every tear, until there is more joy in our world than we can possibly measure or accurately appreciate. I ask you today, "What would it be like to live in such a world?"

Well, there's only one way to find out. Chag Sameach.