



“JOYOUS AND WHOLE ”

In 1983 I had my Bat Mitzvah. I know that is crazy ancient history for many of you. For me and a few others in the room, it feels like yesterday.

I remember a lot of things about my Bat Mitzvah, including forgetting my speech at home and since it was way before the age of smart phones and GoogleDocs, my Dad had to drive home to get it. Luckily, we lived in a small town in Virginia, so it didn't take that long. I remember bits of the party - particularly the band (no DJ) which was the Jr. High band teacher's side gig called The Blue Suede Shoes. And I remember getting blessed by the rabbi at the ark after I had read Torah and given my drash. You might think that since I became a rabbi, I would have all kinds of nostalgic feelings about that moment. Sadly, I do not. What I do remember is that it was a very hot September, maybe the a/c wasn't working too well in the sanctuary, the rabbi was wearing a heavy robe as they all did in those days and when he put his hands on my head to bless me, my nose was right in the sleeve of his robe. And it did NOT smell good in there.

It was, to be sure, an imperfect blessing. But it was a blessing nevertheless and one I sometimes think about as I get ready to bless our b'nei mitzvah. That thought is often followed by the hope that I have put on enough deodorant and a little shpritz of perfume.

The blessing has three parts and a traditional translation in both Jewish and Christian contexts is -

The Lord bless you and keep you
The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you.
The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.

Or in the way that I've learned from my teachers at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, which resonates much more for me, boiling it down to the essence of each piece of blessing -

May you feel:

Blessed and safe
Luminous and loved
Joyous and whole

Last night I focused on the first line of the blessing - May you feel blessed, may you feel safe. Today, I want to think about the third line - may you feel joyous, may you feel whole.

Joy is an interesting thing and though I have thought about it a lot, I find it a little slippery to define. It's not just pleasure and it's not just enjoyment. It's definitely not entertainment.

The Hebrew here is 'yisa Adonai panav eilecha' may the divine face be lifted toward you. One modern scholar, Jacob Milgrom teaches that the idiom of lifting the face means 'to smile at.' If there is, in our experience of a moment, a divine smile on us, it points to a deep experience of happiness that is grounded in meaning. It's the kind of happiness that comes from feeling that all is right

with the world, if only fleetingly. It's the kind of satisfaction that flows from having done what we needed to do, done what we were capable of doing. And I think joy usually arises when we feel connected to other human beings we care about or to the well of connection that we sometimes refer to as God.

May you feel joyous. May you feel whole. The way we use the blessing suggests where we find joy as well. It is recited at baby namings and bris ceremonies; at weddings, bar mitzvahs, and each week at some families' Shabbat tables. In my house, I whisper these words to each of my kids and also to any other kids who happen to be sharing our Shabbat meal, Jewish or not.

But it's slippery, right? Ultimately, joy is best experienced, not defined. So, like we did last night under the ceiling (instead of under the stars) I want to invite you to do something inherently Jewish but too rarely practiced - A meditation.

Close your eyes if you can, feel the ground under your feet and the chair under your seat. Feel the breath come in and the breath go out. Let the breath coming in and out; invite a softening of your muscles.

As you sit here, I want you to call to mind a moment in which you have felt joy. It could be an hour, a week or a split second of your life story, but hold that moment. It could be a moment of connection to something bigger than yourself, it could be an experience of knowing that you matter or a moment of knowing another deeply and sweetly. Feel it in your body, feel how joy, if even for a moment radiates warmth and energy. Allow yourself enjoy the feeling of joy - Yisa Adonai panav eilecha. May you feel joyous

(You can open your eyes)

Joy comes in being fully present to the experience of the most meaningful moments of life - those heightened moments in which not only happiness but also awe and meaning are present.

Sometimes, joy just happens, but we can also tune in to joy and feel it more in our lives. In the 80's we would have said 'point our tv antennae in that direction.' Today, maybe we have to say 'get faster internet?' In any case, the kind of meditation we just did, noticing joy in our lives, having awareness of the Divine smile when it comes, feeling it in our bodies, builds and grows. When we see more joy, we experience more joy. But it takes practice - spiritual practice if you will. As I mentioned last night, part of my own spiritual practice is to have these words of blessing in front of me to remind myself.

They are literally written on post it notes that hang on my refrigerator because if I don't have them in my face, then seeing the smile from God's face is nearly impossible in the chaos that is daily life.

The blessing concludes v'yasem lecha shalom - may you feel whole. Perhaps it ends this way because joy is so often mixed with

sadness or because, as the psalmist says, our deepest moments of sadness, are often followed by joy. "Those who sew in tears, will reap in joy" (Psalm 126:5) and "weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:6)

Khalil Gibran - Joy and Sorrow Chapter VIII:

Then a woman said, "Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow."

And he answered:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.

And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.

And how else can it be?

In those moments of sadness and pain, it can be all too easy to miss the joy when it does finally come. That's also why the sticky notes help. They remind me to look for the joy even when I have no confidence that it will ever come. Feeling whole doesn't mean that the joy gets rid of the sadness. It means that we are able to hold all that life is and elevate the joy in it. It takes practice, like everything else, so maybe some sticky notes on your fridge?

An ancient sermon, thankfully recorded for posterity, Pesikta deRav Kahana, says "In this world, there is no perfect joy, unmixed with anxiety, no perfect pleasure, unmixed with envy. But in the future, the Holy One will make our joy and pleasure perfect."

Until we get to that future perfect world, my prayer is that joyous things will happen for you - that joy and reasons for joy will come into your life, that among all the uncontrollable occurrences in your life, there will be sweet, happy, soul-filling ones.

It's also a prayer that you will invite those things and be open to them when they happen so that you will feel whole.

Shana Tova u'metuka - a joyous and whole New Year.