

The Joy of Potency and Impotency סוכות

Well, I did it again. One day after the highest moment of the year, I did it again. I knew I was going to do it too. I felt so light, so high, so released from the pressure of the High Holidays, those gates of life and love clanging shut and all of that. I forgot a core spiritual principle that finds its way into our High Holiday rhythm and cycle in the most amazing way. We'll get to that a little bit later.

So that expansive feeling I experienced, that joy, which wasn't happiness, but deep joy, of being able to face the truth, to make amends, to be honest with myself and with others, that deep joy that bubbled within me that made everything I looked at have that glow of eternity, of the sublime, that everywhere I cast my eyes, it wasn't my eyes that were looking, but my heart beaming through them, holding each thing in its radical perfection and suchness. And I was driving my greatest teacher to the Chelsea Piers to play miniature golf. And looking in the rearview mirror, catching a glimpse of his beautiful face and his perfection, my heart leapt, and then I tried to catch it, and then I got sad. And I realized at that moment that I had not really internalized the rhythm of this High Holiday period. See, when you hold on to anything, and with this I will disagree slightly with some of my teachers about the nature of letting go and holding on, but holding on to anything and enjoying it at the same time doesn't work. We can't enjoy what we hold on to.

It was Blake who observed, he who binds himself to a joy does the winged life destroy, but he who kisses the joy as it flies lives in eternity's sunrise. One can't become attached to a joy. Joy isn't a quality that lends itself to attachment. Joy is a quality that arises out of non-attachment. Joy is a surprise, a gift, an experience that is born when we're looking somewhere else, or as the Talmud says, we don't find Messiah unless we stop looking for him. The less we plan and the less we expect, to some degree, not always, the easier it becomes for happiness and joy to find a place in our hearts.

And the most amazing way that this appears is in a number of statements in the Talmud that seem to indicate that even though it's true that on Wednesday night after a day of fasting and saying, Chatanu tzireinu uslachnanu yotzreinu, forgive us, and the image of the gates closing and our even saying, Chotmeinu l'chayim, seal us for a new life. There are many rabbinic statements that seem to indicate that Yom Kippur isn't over, guys. The gates are still open. And the gates won't be closed until we're able to come out of Yom Kippur and make our way into Sukkot. The high holiday period does not end with the break fast and our bagels and lox and orange juice. Our high holiday period ends when four days after the lowest place that we can get, the highest place, the deepest place, when we're literally begging God for our lives, we're begging ourselves for our lives, saying, wake up and smell your coffee, brother. Wake up. Four days later. V'samachta b'chagecha v'hayita ach sameach. You shall dwell in booths for seven days, the Torah says, so that you will know with every fiber of your being that your ancestors dwelt in booths during their sojourn in the wilderness when they were leaving Egypt.

This is one of the few commandments in the entire beautiful expanse of Torah which we are enjoying to do with our whole bodies. Not a leg, not an arm, not a voice, not a heart and a head, but the entire body immersed in a sukkah, in a booth of impermanence, in something

you can't hold on to even if you tried. It's the semblance of a home. It's the intimation of a home. It isn't an actual home. Tsemi dirat keva v'shev bit dirat arayit, the Talmud says in sukkah, go out of your permanent home and go sit in an impermanent home. Two walls and a little shtickle. Two walls and a side. From the point of death and the transcendence of death into the reality of impermanence and the illusion of security that we wrap ourselves in. Sukkot, unlike any other holiday, every holiday has joy, but sukkot has an extra measure of joy. There's no holiday in which the word for joy, simcha, appears as often as in sukkot. Sukkot is joy. So we wake up the morning after Yom Kippur and maybe the joy that we're feeling is the lack of anxiety, right? There's nothing holding us back. Maybe our joy is related to that relief, but maybe, maybe something deeper is at play.

Rabbi Alan Lew, speaking about sukkot, writes this. On Passover, while we rejoice, it isn't a full joy because the spring seedlings are just beginning to come up, just beginning to break the plane of the earth, just beginning to show themselves in the world, and we don't know if they'll make it to harvest or not. And by Shavuot, also, it's the early harvest, the time of the first fruits. And although there is a special joy in this holiday, there's also a little bit of anxiety. But sukkot, no anxiety. There's nothing to hold back, only rejoicing. The full harvest has come. And then he says something very beautiful. He says, Let me offer another interpretation. Perhaps the special joy on sukkot is precisely the joy of being stripped naked, the joy of being flushed with life, the joy of having nothing between our skin and the wind and the starlight, nothing between us and the world. We've spent the many weeks stripping ourselves naked, acknowledging our brokenness, allowing ourselves to see what we won't usually look at, embracing the emptiness at the core of our experience, reducing our lives to a series of impulses that rise up and then fall away again. And we've even let the reins of denial slip a bit. We've relaxed our fierce determination to ward off death at any cost, invited ourselves to entertain the possibility that we might die. On Rosh Hashanah, it is written, we acknowledge who will live and who will die. And by Yom Kippur, we acknowledge that it may very well be us. So now we sit flush with the world in a house that calls attention to the fact that it gives us no shelter. It's not a house. It's a parody of a house. According to Jewish law, the booth we must dwell in for seven days need only have us closed in two sides and a little bit, and we must be able to see the stars through the organic material, the leaves and the branches. This isn't a house because we never felt truly secure anyway in the one before. Radical.

That joy is the triumph of Yom Kippur. Sukkot is the completion of Yom Kippur because if we finish with just Yom Kippur, we're not done. How many people come to me after years of therapy and acknowledging all of the hurt and the denial and the confrontations, and they're clean. They're done. And I say to them now, can you be happy for seven days? No, happiness is... I'm working on it. I'm good with all my original pain work. I beat a bataka. I killed my... I did everything. I've given it all back. Every hot potato that was handed to me, I've handed it back. And how are you doing now with the joy in your body? How do you... Not there yet. I've released the pain. But the joy, it's a lot harder for me to let that in. I don't know if I can. I don't know if I can trust it. I don't know if I can radically allow myself to experience my birthright. I'm so used to fighting my demons, I can't welcome my angels.

Along comes Sukkos and says, you're not done. If you only hold your triumph over death and your impotence, you haven't yet reached the value that joy can give you. And so Alan Lew ends his piece with something very beautiful that I want you to think about. He says, on

Sukkot we're enjoined, we are commanded to take four species. Right? The palm frond and the myrtle and the willow and the citron, the etrog. And he says, isn't it obvious for anyone to look at the lulav surrounded on both sides by the myrtle and the willow and then the citron that we're speaking in sexual imagery, in procreative imagery. He says, he says, I will wave these things twice. Once as I sing hymns of joy and praise to God and once as I march around the synagogue saying, save me God, save me. The sexual imagery couldn't be clearer. The palm frond phallus with the myrtle and willow testes, the rigid and speckled yellow fruit. And nor could it be more appropriate. What sex and agriculture have in common is that they point simultaneously to both the power and the impotence of the human condition. We have no idea how to form a human life. We can't make it happen by ourselves and yet we are absolutely indispensable to the process. We have no idea how a seed bears fruit. We can't make that happen either. Yet if we don't plant the tree and nurture it and water it and harvest it, no fruit will ever come. These things can't happen without us but neither can we make them happen on our own. And here at the core of life, at its paradoxical center, there is a mysterious, inexplicable, senseless joy.

An inexplicable, senseless joy. Impotence, potency. Yom Kippur, Sukkot. Life, fruit. Our capacities to heal, our capacities to grow. Whatever was planted on Yom Kippur needs to be irrigated and needs to be tended to, nurtured. Whatever was born in you needs to be developed. It needs to be held with awareness and consciousness. We can't leave Yom Kippur and arrive at life without Sukkot in between inviting us, demanding from us that we practice joy as much as we practiced making amends.

So the next time I take my teacher to go somewhere, the next time I look at that sweetness, the next time you look at joy, there's an impotency. You can't make it happen. It has to surprise you. And yet you have to nurture. Each and every one of us has to pick up what we began. And so before you leave here this evening, I want to let you know that Sukkot begins on Sunday night. The Romemu will have a sukkah right outside of the church. And I want to beg you to go get your set of lulav and etrog, your male and female, your energetic centers, and come here on one day in Sukkot and circle round. Circle round with the symbols of potency and impotency. Circle round and cherish the joy that comes with releasing and non-attachment. Circle round and kiss the joy as it flies.