

The Blessing of a Smile

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Barely 48 hours removed from the end of our most solemn holy day, we find ourselves only two days away from Judaism's most joyous holiday. Sukkot is the only time when Jewish tradition commands us to be happy, *v'samachta b'chagecha*, the Torah commands, "You shall rejoice in your festival."ⁱ

The contemporary mind does not readily accept the notion that one can, or should, be commanded to experience any particular emotion. In fact, we may even cause harm by instructing others to be happy. "When you tell [a depressed person] to just shake [it] off..., you trivialize their condition and deny their pain, according to Debbie Plotnick, [of] Mental Health America. For [some] people..., 'cheering up' is not a simple task, and it's important to recognize that they probably wish they could, too."ⁱⁱ

Still, Judaism insists: "Eulogies and fasting are forbidden...One is required to rejoice and be cheerful"ⁱⁱⁱ during the Festival. In fact, "When ... Sukkot ... occur[s] in the middle of *shiva*, the remaining days of *shiva* mourning are annulled."^{iv} A friend of mine out of state is grieving his father, who died last night. After the funeral Sunday morning, the opportunity to mourn, at least officially, with Jewish rituals, will last only a few hours, until the holiday begins with the setting of the sun.

We may vigorously object that people's significant, legitimate psychological and spiritual needs may go unmet if rejoicing is commanded of the wrong person – or of anybody at an inopportune time. Rabbi Nachman of Beslov, though, expanded the obligation to celebrate well beyond Sukkot when he proclaimed: "To always be happy is a great mitzvah."^v

I wonder if we might find a compromise that is both healthy and consistent with our religious tradition. Perhaps Sukkot is a reminder to take our joy where we can find it.

On this Shabbat, in the brief space between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, we read Moses' final exhortation to the Children of Israel before his death. Moses is speaking at a moment when he has every reason to be angry and bitter, particularly toward God, who won't permit him to lead his flock into the Promised

Land. Nevertheless, these words come out of his mouth: “I proclaim the name of Adonai! Give glory to our God! The Rock! God’s deeds are perfect. Indeed, all God’s ways are just; a faithful God, never false, true and upright is God.”^{vi}

I wonder what motivates Moses’ joyful expression of faith, even as he faces God’s severe punishment for a misdeed that can only be described as trivial in the context of Moses’ extraordinary life of service. This portion isn’t explicitly related to the time of year when we read it. Still, I wonder if it isn’t specifically applicable to the transition from Yom Kippur to Sukkot.

A few years ago at this season, S.R. Hewitt connected the two Holy Days: “[T]he Jewish people are especially joyful [on Sukkot,] knowing that the world has been judged [on Yom Kippur] and, please God, their prayers for atonement have been accepted.”^{vii} Perhaps Moses dies with words of praise on his lips because he believes that he has been blessed with atonement. Moses takes his joy where he can find it.

Imagine the mourner, walking into the Sukkah, sitting down for a meal, taking in the beautiful scenery, the greens, the fruits, the fresh air and the fragrance. She may require encouragement to put something tasty into her mouth. He may need to be handed the *lulav* before he waves it, perhaps with little enthusiasm. Then, perhaps unexpectedly, performing the ritual may give way to a joyful remembrance, however fleeting.

Judaism might not have invented the phrase, “fake it ‘til you make it,” but our tradition certainly adheres to the principle. Even when we doubt the existence of God, we are commanded to fulfill the *mitzvot* in the hope that our righteous actions will lead us to faith. No, waving the *lulav* is not going to cure depression or cancel the grief that follows a loved one’s death. It may, however, enable us to find a moment of joy when we do not expect it.

One Friday night, early in my time in Arkansas, I somehow became aware that I wasn’t smiling as I was leading the service. I don’t recall being unhappy, and I don’t even know whether not smiling was my norm on the *bimah* or just something that I noticed in that moment. What I did realize was that a smile might be infectious. Our worship might be more joyful, even more engaging, if the person leading the prayers made a conscious effort to smile, at least occasionally, during the service.

I have no data to present. We don’t film our services; I haven’t been able to watch to see whether smiling is a norm for me when I’m up here. I don’t recall

that anybody has ever mentioned it, one way or another. What I do know is that, when I think about it, and I smile, I feel better.

I also know – because I learned this summer from Rabbi Lauren Berkun at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem – that the value of the smile is supported by our Jewish tradition.

Pirkei Avot, Sayings of our Sages, includes the injunction to “receive every person with a cheerful face.”^{viii} The Talmud elaborates, “One who whitens the teeth to a friend by smiling is better than one who provides milk to drink.”^{ix}

Milk is a powerful symbol, representing the most basic nourishment. We customarily eat dairy treats on Shavuot, when we celebrate receiving the Torah, our basic sustenance as Jews. For our state of mind, a smile is nourishing, whether on our own face or on a face in front of us.

Turns out that science backs up the Talmud in this case. Dr. Ronald Riggio writes, “[S]miling activates the release of neuropeptides that work toward fighting off stress... The feel-good neurotransmitters – dopamine, endorphins, and serotonin – are all released when a smile flashes across your face as well. This not only relaxes your body, but it can also lower your heart rate and blood pressure.”^x

I am not one for facile solutions to complex issues. A smile is not going to cure depression any more than the onset of Sukkot can actually suspend mourning. Still, Sukkot offers us an opportunity to find a reason to smile, setting aside moments for gladness even in the midst of the world’s troubles and our own. Let each of us find cause for some celebration, and hopefully a smile, if only for an instant, during the festival of joy.

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 16:14.

ⁱⁱ Abbey Schubert, “14 Things to Never Say to Someone with Depression,” *Reader’s Digest*, undated article accessed on September 21, 2018 at <https://www.rd.com/health/wellness/things-to-never-say--to-someone-with-depression/>,

ⁱⁱⁱ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Rest on a Holiday, 6:17.

^{iv} Zalman Goldstein, “The Rules of Shiva,” *Chabad.org*, undated article accessed on September 21, 2018 at https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/370617/jewish/The-Rules-of-Shiva.htm.

^v S.R. Hewitt, “Rejoicing on Sukkot: Then and Now,” *Huffpost*, September 28, 2012, updated November 28, 2012.

^{vi} Deuteronomy 32:3-4.

^{vii} Hewitt.

^{viii} *Mishnah Avot* 1:15. Text taught by Rabbi Lauren Berkun, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 3, 2018.

^{ix} *Babylonian Talmud*, *Ketubot* 111b. Text taught by Rabbi Lauren Berkun, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 3, 2018.

^x Ronald E. Riggio, Ph.D., "There's Magic in Your Smile, *Psychology Today*, June 25, 2012.