

The Path of Sorrow & The Path of Joy *Erev Rosh Hashanah 5764*

A teaching, from the early Hassidic rebbe, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, as told by Martin Buber:

The Rebbe was asked: What is the right way, that of sorrow or that of joy? And he answered:

There are two kinds of sorrow and two kinds of joy. When a person broods over the misfortunes that have come upon him, when he cowers in a corner and despairs of help—that is a bad kind of sorrow, concerning which it is said, “The Divine Presence does not dwell in a place of dejection.” The other kind is the honest grief of a person who knows what she lacks.

The same is true of joy. She who is devoid of inner substance and, in the midst of empty pleasures, does not feel it, nor tries to fill her lack, is a fool. But he who is truly joyful is like a person whose house has burned down, who feels his need deep in his soul and begins to build anew. Over every stone that is laid, his heart rejoices. (*Tales of the Hasidim*, p. 231)

This is an intriguing, challenging, teaching, and I’d like to explore it with you tonight.

First, the question that the student poses to Levi Yitzchak: What is the right “way”? I imagine the student is asking here about the right spiritual path, or, in relation to this holiday this evening—what is the path of *teshuvah*, of turning—to God, to our truest selves, to a life that is upright and true? On a more basic level, the student is asking: how should we be living our lives?

And the student asks whether sorrow or joy is the right path. We tend to think of those two states as emotions, as things that come upon us—but here the student identifies them as possible paths to wholeness. What is the right path, sorrow or joy?

I am intrigued by the rebbe’s answer concerning sorrow—that there are two kinds of sorrow, a bad kind and a good kind. The idea that there even is a good kind of sorrow is a fairly radical notion, for us modern Americans.

For all the real misery that exists in our own country and around the world, the truth is that we live in a pain-averse society. We inhabit a culture that expends enormous amounts of time and energy and money trying to convince us that pain and sorrow can and should be avoided and, when it is unavoidable, should be minimized or ignored.

As many of you know, I am a somewhat reluctant listener to sports radio during baseball season—well, not entirely reluctant, I actually find it quite addictive. I try to avoid talk of football, but the other day the disc jockeys were discussing a Patriots game, and spoke

with great admiration about a player who had played the second half of the game with a serious injury. What struck me was their exaltation of this man to deny his pain and engage in an activity—an activity which, after all, is just a game—that would certainly make the injury worse.

That's an extreme example, but I think this "tough it out" mentality is quite prevalent in our society. When we experience pain or loss, we're supposed to grieve quickly, support ourselves with a minimum of reliance on others, get over it and get on with life. I cannot tell you how often people apologize to me when we're talking and they start to cry—as if tears are a source of shame, or weakness. As someone who learned at an early age not to cry in public, I understand this very deeply. How sad for all of us that a natural human emotion, a universal human experience, is felt to be a weakness or a source of shame.

We can see our pain aversion when it comes to raising our children—the extreme concern we have to shield them from all possible sorrows. We can see it in all the lawsuits over this and that—the anger people feel if something goes wrong, if damage results, if perfect health is not regained. Not that negligence shouldn't be called to account—but I wonder sometimes at what seems to be a basic assumption that so many Americans hold—the assumption that pain and sorrow are an aberration, something that, all things being equal, I and those I love shouldn't have to experience. And if we do, then someone is at fault and must pay.

But of course we have to experience pain and sorrow; how can we be alive and not? The question is not whether or not we're going to experience suffering in our lives—the question is, how do we relate to that suffering when it arises? What is our response?

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak is clear that one response is not useful—that of brooding, and of despair. He calls this a "bad" kind of sorrow. The reality is, this kind of sorrow is probably familiar to most of us. Who hasn't had their moments of despair, of brooding, of weaving chains of misery around ourselves—convinced that this pain will never end, that nothing and no one can help us. Whatever pain we feel we magnify one hundred times as we sink our teeth into it, worry it, refuse to let it go. We can invent elaborate stories out of this pain, convince ourselves we are the target of a cosmic conspiracy of misery. (The Red Sox fans in the congregation know what I'm talking about!) It's a natural human tendency, but not a particularly helpful one.

Levi Yitzchak also points out that this kind of sorrow is not a path to God or Godliness—quite the opposite. We become so locked into ourselves that we cannot be open to anything beyond ourselves; we sometimes refuse to believe that anything beyond ourselves can be of help. We may pray for some miraculous deliverance, but our heart is shut, our soul is closed in, there is no room for the possibility of something new arising.

What, then, according to the rebbe's teaching, is the "good" kind of sorrow?

When my father died, this past spring, I became aware of two different aspects of my grief. They differed only subtly, but I realized that it was an important difference.

In the pain of losing my father, there was an aspect of my grief that was focused primarily on me and my needs. This part of my grief asked the question, “how is this going to affect me? How will I suffer, what in my life will change?” It was accompanied by a lot of anxiety and fear. I think it was an entirely natural reaction; and yet, as I named it I recognized in it a potential abyss of self-pity, of misery—not an honest or helpful place to be.

Yet at the same time I experienced the simple, pure grief of loss. I experienced the hard, dark pain of the truth that someone I loved, someone who was a part of me, was abruptly gone. I think this is the aspect of sorrow that Levi Yitzchak calls “honest,” and he is right. It is honest because it is the truth of the moment. This kind of sorrow has a quality of clarity and purity. It’s not easy or pleasant, not anything I would invite or wish for-- but it is honest, and true.

Levi Yitzchak says that the grief that comes when we know what we lack or have lost is not only “honest,” it is also “good.” Why? What is good about it? I have a few potential answers.

One answer is that this kind of grief affirms our ability to love and to feel connection. With this grief, we ache in proportion to the love that we have felt, the good that we have lost. Our sense of loss confirms for us that the person or experience that is gone was indeed a blessing in our lives. We know that we are alive, that we have allowed ourselves to be vulnerable, to experience life fully, to take that which is offered to us. While the loss itself can feel devastating, held within it is an acknowledgement of blessing that is a precious gift.

I know that there are many more aspects of grief, that any kind of loss is never a simple thing. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s teaching is helpful in pointing out to us the value that lies within sorrow. It affirms that feeling a lack, acknowledging a loss, is not shameful or pathological, not something to “get over” or bulldoze our way through.

It is helpful to know that when we do experience sorrow, we can see it as a path towards healing and wholeness, instead of distracting ourselves from it, or trying to find a “solution” for it. Honest grief is the ability to sit in the presence of our pain, our sorrow, and neither push it away nor get all tangled up in it. Neither to ignore it nor obsess over it. Honest sorrow becomes a “path” when we can be open to it, learn from it, allow it to point us in a direction that we need to go.

Another answer is that there is an additional kind of sorrow that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak is talking about. This sorrow is of a more internal kind—a sense of disconnection from ourselves, or from God; a sense that we have lost our way. This is the sorrow we feel when we look at where we are, and see how far it is from where we want to be. And rather than being a cause for despair, the Rebbe teaches that this is also a good kind of grief, a path in and of itself. It becomes a path if, in our sorrow for what we have lost, or for what we have yet to achieve, we experience a moment of turning. This is the path of

teshuvah, of finding that motivation to take the steps we need to reconnect, to return, to open ourselves to new possibilities. Sometimes the only way for us to begin that process is to feel deeply the lack, to be aware that we are not yet whole. This is the honest sorrow that helps turn us in the direction we need to go.

So now we come to the two kinds joy. Again, Reb Levi Yitzchak identifies two kinds, both bad and good. “She who is devoid of inner substance and, in the midst of empty pleasures, does not feel it, nor tries to fill her lack, is a fool.” This kind of “joy” is a cover, an attempt to paper over a deeper spiritual void with pleasure, with material things, with distractions.

If this was a spiritual challenge in Levi Yitzchak’s day, in 18th century Poland, how much more so today! We are encouraged—bombed, I’d say—on every side to feed our sense of emptiness, to fill the lack we feel, with stuff that’s advertised on TV, stuff that pops up on our computer screens, that awaits us in the grocery store aisle.

I never cease to be amazed by what television ads seem actually to be selling us—not just a car, but a sense of freedom; not just a soft drink, but a whole new social life. Our insecurities, our yearnings, our hopes for wholeness—all of this becomes fodder for a huge marketplace that now includes not just material goods, but also spiritual well-being. Everything promises us happiness, and usually we’re told we can get it quickly, with minimal effort, and with no real challenge to our life as it is.

And what is real joy? Here is the strangest part of the teaching. “The one who is truly joyful is like a person whose house has burned down.” “[This person] feels his need deep in his soul and begins to build anew. Over every stone that is laid, his heart rejoices.”

Our house has burnt down. What does that mean? So often when we feel a deep sense of lack, of emptiness, it becomes a source of strife, of anger and anxiety. If it is our own sense of self that is diminished, we can turn that in so many negative directions—we can try to diminish others through sarcasm and harsh judgment; we can deny others the joy that we ourselves cannot feel.

What Reb Levi Yitzchak offers us is the possibility of turning the experience of lack, that powerful image of the burned-down house—the loss of self, of safety and security—he shows us how this can be turned into a Godly path.

Our house has burned down. We do not have a dwelling. We have left a place that is familiar; we are in an open space. There is an emptiness—an experience of loss, yes, but also of possibility. There are no walls to hold me in, no old rooms in which to get lost. I can feel my yearning so purely—I have no house, and I need a new one.

This is the path we are embarked upon together, beginning this evening. We are here to rebuild our houses, one brick at a time. And the great gift is that this can be a joyful process, if we are open to it. “Over every stone that is laid, her heart rejoices.”

Whatever brings us here—whether it is sorrow or joy, whether a sense of hope or an experience of disorientation—we are here together to walk on a path towards wholeness. We won't get there tonight, or tomorrow, or even by the end of Yom Kippur. But bit by bit, stone by stone, we can begin to rebuild our house.

I hope that this “house,” this sanctuary that we create from our wall hangings and our Torahs, from the presence of every person in this room—I hope that this house will be one to which you can bring your sorrows and your joy. I hope that we can feel safe here—safe to experience grief, safe to open to joy, safe to take a journey in the presence of many people whom we know, and many whom we don't know.

May this be the beginning of a sweet and fruitful year for all of us – shanah tovah tikateivu!

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