

Two Paths

Rosh Hashanah 5772 – Rabbi Toba Spitzer

In this morning's Torah portion, we read about two contrasting events. The first is a moment of joy, of celebration—the birth of Isaac. Isaac's name means “he will laugh,” and we hear Sarah exclaim (p. 483), “God has brought me laughter!”

Yet within a few verses, the mood shifts dramatically. Sarah feels that Abraham's firstborn, Ishmael, the son of her handmaid Hagar, is in some way a threat to Isaac, and Sarah demands that Abraham banish both Hagar and Ishmael. From a peak of joy we are thrust into a scene of heartbreak and anguish. (p. 485) Hagar and Ishmael are expelled from their home; they wander in the wilderness. When their water runs out, Hagar fears that Ishmael is about to die, and she raises up her voice, and weeps. Only then does a *malach*, a messenger of Adonai, speak to her and reassure her, so that she can open her eyes and see the well of water that will nourish her and her son.

It is a little unclear how or why this Torah reading ended up being assigned to Rosh Hashanah. On the face of it, there is not a lot here that directly correlates to the notion that the world was created on the first day of Tishrei, or to the sense of Rosh Hashanah as a day of judgment.

Yet as we turn into the new year, preparing ourselves for the year that lies ahead, this portion captures a very basic truth about our existence: that for all of us, every year, sometimes in the same week or even the same day, there are moments of joy, and moments of sorrow; moments of celebration, and moments of anguish. Like Sarah, we can easily move from laughter to fear. Like Abraham, our great joy can be transformed into great heartache. And like Hagar, we can despair one moment, and open our eyes to the nourishing waters of hope the next.

That may sound like a fairly simplistic truth—but living in that truth is not so easy. How many of us comfortably inhabit the reality that our lives are a constant mix of pain and joy, beauty and sorrow? If we had our druthers, wouldn't we take the happiness part, thank you very much, and leave the sadness out on the curb?

I have found, not surprisingly, that most people find it fairly easy to accept life's moments of joy, of contentment and blessing. I have never, in my time as a rabbi, been confronted by someone asking me: “Why me?” in response to great good fortune. Even if we truly appreciate and are grateful for the bounty that we receive, we don't usually think of it as a major aberration in the workings of the universe. Good luck? - maybe; divine caprice? - never.

Conversely, it is a real challenge to encounter suffering in our lives and not experience it as some kind cosmic slap in the face. We want to know what we have done to deserve this. We experience it as an aberration from how our lives are “supposed” to be. When we see that there are people around us who are not suffering in a similar way, it can feel

profoundly unfair. And most of all, we want it to be different. We want the pain to end, the struggle to cease.

In thinking about this amalgam of sorrow and joy that makes up this Torah portion, and that shapes our lives, I remembered a Hasidic teaching that I shared on erev Rosh Hashanah eight years ago. With your permission, I'd like to share this text with you again today, and I promise that my thoughts will comprise no more than 20% post-consumer recycled content...

This teaching is found in Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*, attributed to the 18th century Hasidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev.

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)

So, according to this teaching, not only are sorrow and joy both inextricable aspects of life on this planet—each in its own way can be a spiritual path.

Let's begin with the student's question. He asks, “What is the right way, the right path - that of sorrow or joy?” Here, sadness and joy are not two emotions, but two potential paths. Paths to...? Perhaps, by “right way,” the student means a way of connecting to a sense of God's presence. Perhaps “way” means a way of being in the world, a path of right living. What is the way? How I am supposed to live? And, for the Hasidim, how am I to live in such a way that I am always aware of the Godliness, the divinity, within everything in creation?

There are two apparent choices, according to the student's question: the way of sorrow, or the way of joy. Yet Levi Yitzchak offers a complicated answer. It's not either/or, he says; it depends on which type of each.

He begins with sorrow: “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.’”

This negative kind of sorrow, according to Levi Yitzchak, the kind that does not offer us a “way,” is despondency, or despair. It is a place in which we “brood over” our misfortunes, weaving a story of our own misery. We become, in some way, attached to our misfortunes. We may urgently wish that we felt otherwise, yet even with that, we hold on to the story of our own suffering. Perhaps it is a comfortable story, giving us a sense of identity. Maybe it is simply an old story, one that we can’t imagine doing without. Or perhaps we imagine that by brooding, dwelling, holding on so tight to our sense of misery and misfortune, we can figure something out, wrestle some meaning out of it, can think our way through to the other side.

This kind of sorrow is inevitable; we have all struggled with it at some point in our lives. Perhaps we are sitting with it now. But Levi Yitzchak teaches that this is not a “way.’ Which means: it does not take us anywhere that will allow us to grow, to gain a greater sense of connection or of Godliness. It is isolating. It becomes a trap, a downward spiral. We can’t actually think our way out of our misery. We cannot liberate ourselves from a story if we’re holding on to it as if our very identity depends upon it. And most of all, if we are carrying within us a sense of despair, we will be incapable of reaching out, of having our eyes opened, as Hagar’s were, to be able to see the well of hope that may be right there in front of us.

But the alternative to this, according to Levi Yitzchak, is not joy, but another kind of sorrow, a kind that is indeed a “path.” This, he says, is “The honest grief of a person who knows what she lacks.”

To “know what we lack.” First we must come to an awareness of our loss. We acknowledge that there is indeed something missing – whether a loss of health, of livelihood, of love, of our sense of who we are. This is the honest recognition of the truth of the moment. And unlike the first kind of sorrow, we do so without creating a larger story around it, without identifying so strongly with that loss that we become it.

This is an amazing insight. We can know our sorrow without brooding over it, without getting lost in it.

So why is this kind of sorrow a “way,” and the other not?

One answer, perhaps, is that to truly grieve, to be able to honestly experience loss, is a testament to our human spirit. If we are able to love, then we will feel loss. If we are able to make ourselves vulnerable, then we will experience hurt. If we are able to truly embrace life, then we will inevitably encounter sorrow when we lose something or someone precious to us. And none of this is inherently bad, says Levi Yitzchak. This is the path of approaching God – or, to use different language, this is the path of connection, of realizing our interconnection with all that is. This kind of sorrow, in a paradoxical way, reminds us that we are, by definition, never alone. We are inextricably linked to everything and everyone around us.

There is a powerful midrash, an early rabbinic teaching, that echoes Levi Yitzchak's insight. The midrash says that when a person makes use of a broken vessel, it reflects badly on him. But "the Blessed Holy One only makes use of broken vessels," as it says in the book of Psalms: *Adonai is close to the brokenhearted* (Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 24:5). Our brokenness allows us to be vessels of Godliness.

Why?

Perhaps because our broken heart, our sorrow, can open us up. It allows us the possibility of achieving a greater sense of connection. Like God in the midrash, we can "make use" of our brokenness, instead of trying to push it away. Because the reality is, we can't push sorrow away. The alternative to this kind of "honest sorrow" isn't to never experience loss or suffering – that is simply impossible. The alternative is to numb ourselves, to avoid feeling much of anything at all. It is to shut our hearts to our own suffering, or the suffering of others. It is to reject compassion and opt instead for cynicism, sarcasm, or hate.

Anchored in our "honest grief," we can indeed make a "way" for ourselves. And that "way" will be different for each of us. As we confront our own suffering, or the suffering around us, we can begin to explore the path of compassion – compassion for self, compassion for others. If we are grieving a perceived lack within ourselves, then it might be the path of self-acceptance.

If we are wrestling with the loss of a job, of a relationship, of something that has become fundamental to our sense of self—then it might be the path of possibility, of allowing a different picture of ourselves, of what our life might look like, to emerge. If we are feeling sorrow in the knowledge of how far we are from where we want to be, from who we want to be, then we are invited onto the path of *teshuvah*, of turning and returning to our own best self.

Levi Yitzchak says that what is key here is our honesty—our willingness to face the truth of what is, without elaboration or shame. And the other key is to never despair or lose hope. And it's not the hope that the situation causing our sorrow is going to change – it may not. But our faith in ourselves, our awareness of our capacity to come to a greater sense of peace and of connection—this is what we can foster.

And then there are the two kinds of joy that Levi Yitzchak describes.

What is the "bad" kind of joy, the kind that is not a 'way'? Levi Yitzchak says, "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."

Just as we we've all had our moments of brooding misery, I'd guess we've all had our moments of trying to fill some inner need with "empty pleasures," with the distractions of consumer culture, shopping, television, artificial stimulants of all sorts. Those moments when we open the refrigerator when we're not really hungry, looking inside as if somewhere on those shelves is the answer to... everything.

The analog to the sorrow of brooding is a grasping after happiness that is in reality a mask for a profound sense of lack. This can never be a 'path,' because it is a never-ending cycle, like a hamster on a wheel. We will never stop needing more to maintain this false sense of wellbeing, because we are not feeding the true hunger at our core.

And so we come to the strangest part of this teaching – the “good” kind of joy:

“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.”

We are invited to imagine that our “house has burned down.” Our assumptions about who we are, what our life is about, what the future might look like, are gone. We have lost something that has felt central to our identity. Or perhaps we have shed a burden, something tying us down, some old definition of ourselves that we no longer need. So what is our task, in this moment? It is to “feel our need deep in our soul, and to begin to build anew.” “Over every stone that is laid, our heart rejoices.”

What is this need that Levi Yitzchak identifies? It is our deepest need – our deepest desire. In the Ashrei, the daily prayer that begins with the word “Happy!”, we read this verse: *Poteach et yadecha, umasbia l'kol chai ratzon.*

Addressing the very Source of Life Itself, we say, “You open up your hand and satisfy the *ratzon*, the deepest desire, of every living being.” What an audacious statement. The universe is waiting, with open hand, to satisfy our “*ratzon*.” And whatever that is, it is unique for each of us.

But we don't always know what the deep need of our soul is. So this is the path—to discover what it is that we truly need and want, and then to lay the stones, to take the simple steps towards building a fuller sense of who we are.

Perhaps over these High Holydays we can sit with this question: “what is it that I truly need?” “What is my deepest desire?” - and see what answer arises. The answer might be very simple, yet very profound. And as Levi Yitzchak suggests, whatever it is, it's most likely not something that lies outside of ourselves – a new job, a new relationship, a new project. It's something that we build, right here, in our own hearts, in our own lives.

Unlike the problematic kind of joy, where we inure ourselves from our sense of lack by indulging our senses, the path of joy calls upon us to really feel as if our house has burned down. That is, to revel in the sense of being unencumbered, open, without walls, without shame. An openness that is both terrifying and exhilarating. We are open to the “need deep in our soul” and we embrace that need, instead of running from it.

As you may have realized by now, the path of sorrow and the path of joy are, in the end, not so different. Both call for a deep level of honesty and vulnerability, being able to embrace whatever it is that our hearts are calling for in this moment. We may feel sorrow or we may feel joy, but in the end that doesn't even matter so much. What matters, I think, is our

willingness to remain open to the potential for connection—to our own hearts, to the people around us, to That which surrounds us and sustains us. It is also to accept the invitation to seek out the deepest need and desire that lies within us.

And then we begin to build, brick by brick, new structures in our lives. And this too is our work of these Ten Days of Teshuvah – a construction project where we build new ways of being in the world. Depending on where we are in our lives, the new building might look radically different than what was there before, or it may only involve some minor adjustments, perhaps a new room or two. We can build structures that allow for greater connection, greater compassion for self and others. Structures that expand our capacity to make wise choices, to act with integrity. Structures that expand our willingness to be grateful, to cherish whatever it is that we have. A structure that can become a *sukkat shalom*, a shelter of wholeness and peace.

Whichever path you are on this Rosh Hashanah, whether the path of sorrow or of joy, may your steps be nurtured and supported as you walk that path in the year to come. May we all enjoy the blessing of knowing our deepest desire, and may we begin to believe that we could indeed have it satisfied.