

Joy Doesn't Come Easily
Shabbat Shuvah 5778

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A couple years ago, I gave a Kol Nidre sermon about racism. I asked our congregation, myself included, to look inside our hearts and recognize the residual bias that lurks within. Only by confessing that we yet harbor at least some racist notions can we repent, root out those unwelcome thoughts and the actions they induce; and then join in building a better future for ourselves, our community, and our nation.

After that Yom Kippur, our Temple President – David Bauman, at the time – gave me feedback, as is the President's duty. Without divulging the sources of complaint, David told me that some had remarked that the sermon was a "downer," making them feel bad about themselves. They had not left Temple that night uplifted, as they had hoped.

I looked at David: "They do know what Yom Kippur is; right?" David laughed in agreement. The trouble is, nobody wants Yom Kippur. I, for one, hate fasting. I dread it like my teenage son anticipates horrors whenever a hypodermic needle is in his immediate future. He claims, "I would rather have the flu than the shot." We're talking about a National Merit Semifinalist. He knows better. But aren't we all like that? Wouldn't anyone prefer to avoid the harsh confessional and demanding process of repentance, skipping straight to the shofar blast that heralds the break-fast?

Many of you have heard me remark that *shannah tovah* is a wish for a "good year," not a "happy new year." Which do we really want? Rabbi Avi Fertig has observed, "We tend to associate pleasure with inactivity, with rest and relaxation – sipping a martini under a warm sunny sky."ⁱ Yes, we do crave vacation, and we do often find joy in relaxation. Still, I wonder: Isn't joy most often achieved through effort, even toil and trouble?

Tonight, we asked God's blessing on Anne and Larry, as they celebrate fifty years of marriage. And I did say "celebrate." Their anniversary trip and a night like tonight are particularly well deserved. After all – and here, I'm referring not specifically to Anne and Larry but to any long and happy marriage – effort was required to achieve the milestone.

Yes, a couple married a half century will tell us that they are grateful to have found one another, and that they reflect on countless shared moments of pure bliss. The same couple will testify that marriage isn't always easy. Even the best-matched couples experience difficulty. They share a lifetime of sadness and loss, not only times of exaltation. They have helped one another through disappointments. They haven't always agreed about the best way to get from here to there. One might have wanted to stop for directions, and the other might have barreled ahead on instinct. Some may even reach a "big" anniversary after having been separated in the past or considering a split more privately. Marriage is hard work under the best of circumstances. The payoff is joy and celebration, but only for those who have persevered and succeeded where many have failed even with the best effort.

On Yom Kippur Eve, we will begin with *Kol Nidre*. We will ask to be released from vows unfulfilled. Reform prayer books have long inserted words that aren't in the traditional Aramaic, understanding *Kol Nidre* only as seeking forgiveness of failed vows "after sincere effort." However unfaithful to the original, the translation is helpful. We are obligated to fulfill our promises, to live by our commitments. Only "after sincere effort" are we likely to achieve the desired result of our undertakings. Hard work is required before we can celebrate success or be relieved of the obligation.

Rabbi Fertig proclaims, "The birth of a child is perhaps the greatest joy that we humans can experience. But my wife reminds me that there is also intense pain."ⁱⁱ Indeed, the labor of childbirth is a profound metaphor for any victory we hope to celebrate.

My own children are older than Rabbi Fertig's, and I can testify that parenting offers tremendous joy and moments of unparalleled pride. Yesterday, for example, I was overwhelmed by Robert's blasts of the shofar at the Children's Service. Daniel also gave me great joy on Rosh Hashanah, but that one requires more explanation. Soon after our morning service began, our Temple wifi failed, and we lost connection to dear members "attending" from afar. Meg Marion and I had discussed a plan. As the worship leader, I wouldn't be in a position to solve any problem that might arise. If the connection dropped, I would close my iPad as a signal, and Meg would seek to reconnect from her seat near the front. Daniel was sitting next to Meg. He suggested disconnecting her phone from wifi, and our friends in Philadelphia were able to rejoin us. Then, for the remainder of the

service, nearly two hours, Daniel helped Meg hold the iPhone – or, put another way, he held the Lewis family in his hands. He was selflessly devoted to the task.

Those Rosh Hashanah moments are far from the only times that my sons have filled their mother and me with joy. However, within the same twenty-four hour period, we had ample opportunity to, um, guide each of our sons. I don't post those moments on Facebook. Parenting is hard work. Parents go through labor time and again, working toward the fulfillment of pushing responsible, kind, independent, hard-working young adults into the world. Parenting only brings joy after considerable effort; and, I hasten to add, even the healthiest and most ardent parental devotion does not guarantee any particular outcome.

I have a friend. I'll call him Seth. Decades ago, in his early 20s, Seth robbed a bank with a gun. Seth has bipolar disorder, and mania doubtless fueled his crime. Still, he was convicted, the insanity plea rejected. Though Seth knew that he wouldn't have robbed a bank had he not been ill, he felt terribly guilty, particularly about the terror he had inflicted on the tellers at whom he had brandished his weapon. He also deeply regretted the pain and torment he had visited upon his parents.

I had known Seth from camp before I became his rabbi. He reached out to me, seeking guides to find forgiveness. Seth was eager to apologize to the people he had harmed. He wrote letters. He served almost a decade in the federal penitentiary. And he resolved that his most important redemption would come from building a productive life, in and after prison.

Incarceration offers limited opportunities, but exercise and reading are among them. Seth got into excellent physical shape. A brilliant student, Seth studied the science of better health through exercise. He began to help his fellow inmates transform their bodies. Upon his release, Seth sought certification as a trainer, ultimately opening his own business, eventually expanding to several locations and legendary success. He is a wonderful son to his parents, giving of his time and of financial resources he might never have been expected to earn.

Seth doesn't know how his life would've turned out had he never robbed that bank. He would, of course, still take it back if he could. He can't turn back the clock. None of us can. But Seth can be a good son, a faithful member of the Jewish community, an ethical business owner, and a virtuous employer. His life is his *t'shuvah*, his repentance, after years of trouble and sorrow.

The psalmist taught, “Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.”ⁱⁱⁱ Like a couple celebrating a milestone anniversary after years of working at their marriage. Like parents, rejoicing that now-adult offspring are successful, whatever the challenges of their youth. Like Seth, achieving goodness after doing evil. Let us find joy and fulfillment, even after misfortune or sin. At this season, let us confront and confess our wrongdoing. Let us change our ways. Let us make things right, for that’s what *tzedakah* is all about. Then, may we know true joy when the shofar sounds and it’s time to break the fast.

Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Avi Fertig, “Through a Mussar Lens: Joy in Process,” *Yashar*, The Mussar Institute, April, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalms 126:5.