

A Spoonful of Honey

Rosh Hashanah 5786

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Rabbi Rob Nosanchuk is a cancer survivor, at least for now, never knowing when his metastatic melanoma may return. Shortly after his initial diagnosis, Nosanchuk writes, “a dear friend in the Muslim community called...to insist that each day ahead, I should taste a small spoonful of honey. He wasn’t trying to convert me to Islam or foolishly trying to convince me that honey cures cancer. What he wanted from me is not to withdraw from experiencing that which sweetens life.”ⁱ

When Mary Poppins sang that “a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down,” she was drawing on timeless wisdom: Even the bitterest pills life demands that we swallow may be sweetened by inviting joy into our lives as well. Moments of joy do not make our challenges disappear, but they do remind us why life is worth living. Hours of sweetness give us the strength to face what we must.

Today, we wish each other a *שנה טובה ומתוקה*, a good and a sweet new year. We offer that blessing, knowing full well that the kindling of our Rosh Hashanah lights did not magically bring an end to the trials and tribulations any of us was facing an hour earlier—ranging from a threatening diagnosis, like Rabbi Nosanchuk’s, to deep concerns about the direction of our country or Israel. We **will** confront antisemitism this year. We **will** have conflicts—at home, at work, at school, and yes, at Temple. Some will be bereaved. Some will lose meaningful work. Some will see their aging bodies continue to decline. Still, we will taste the apples with honey, inviting sweetness into the new year with us, without denying our challenges or expecting the sweetness to neutralize them.

Welcoming students back to campus in Ontario, Canada, Hillel professionals Bev Shimansky and Jay Solomon write: “We’ve seen it time and again: When Jewish students respond to antisemitism not by retreating but by leaning more deeply into their Jewish identity, they change their personal trajectory and the story of the Jewish people. They shift the conversation from fear to pride, from isolation to connection, from defending their existence to celebrating their lives.” Shimansky and Solomon describe their work as “anchored in five priorities,” the first of which is, “We will unapologetically celebrate Jewish joy with more people, in more places, than ever before.” Yes, they will confront horrifying, frightening antisemitism, often clothed in Israel-bashing that goes far beyond legitimate criticism, but they will not let that define their students’ campus Jewish experience.ⁱⁱ

One of the strangest narratives in the Torah takes place after Moses has reluctantly accepted God’s call to approach Pharaoh, demanding that he free the

Israelites. After God has charged Moses, we suddenly read, “At a night encampment on the way, יהוה encountered him and sought to kill him. So Zippora[, Moses’s wife,] took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin and touched his legs with it, saying ‘You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!’ And when [God] let him alone, she added, ‘A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision.’”ⁱⁱⁱ Weird wording aside, Moses has apparently failed to circumcise his newborn. Perhaps, as several commentators suggest, Moses was convinced that he had to keep moving, which could present a mortal danger to his child by not waiting for him to heal after circumcision.^{iv} More likely, Moses is paralyzed by a larger fear, of the awesome, potentially lethal mission that God has laid out for him. Moses focuses on his troubles and on his duties, even to the exclusion of celebrating the birth of a son. He has denied the joy of the occasion not only to himself, but also to Zippora. He has let the stress overtake his life, unmitigated by blessing that was rightly his and Zippora’s to celebrate.

On July 31, 2021, David Jaffe was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis, a painful autoimmune disease that can be treated but not cured. Then, he explains: “Over the course of the next year and a half, I would have three hospital stays, would try four different types of medication therapy that failed, see three registered dieticians and four different gastroenterologists, work with two different therapists, and receive more blood tests, CT scans, and ultrasounds than I can remember. Lest I forget, I would also finish my fifth year of rabbinical school, become ordained as a rabbi, have over twenty interviews throughout the rabbinic job search, get married, and start a new job. My life at the time could be summed up in one word—chaos.”^v

Soon-to-be Rabbi Jaffe found refuge in the deep wells of Jewish blessings. He writes, “When my life turned to chaos, I began to recite blessings before all of my actions. Before brushing my teeth, I would recite a blessing. Before taking a walk, I would recite a blessing. Before entering a classroom to learn, I would recite a blessing. Before listening to music, I would recite a blessing...By reciting a blessing before an action, regardless of the specific words that I might be saying in that blessing, I was creating something reliable in my life. I had some control.”^{vi}

Rabbi Jaffe had more than control. He had the ability to express joy, the discipline to count his blessings, praising God for the mundane goodness of his life amidst the chaos of illness and uncertainty, not to mention the growing realization that his affliction would be lifelong. When a congregational search committee asked his favorite blessing, he responded, “*HaMotzi*,” and the committee broke out laughing. They had not expected such a simple answer, but neither could they fathom what Rabbi Jaffe describes as his “longing for the moment when my doctor said I could eat solid food again...They also didn’t know how meaningful a moment it was for me when I finally could say those words over my plain, soggy hospital toast.”^{vii}

Neither the honey nor the joy it symbolizes will cure all that ails us, any more than it prevents Rabbi Nosanchuk from facing a cancer recurrence or ends Rabbi Jaffe's painful chronic disease. And it certainly won't prevent Jewish college students from having to endure Israel-bashing and even antisemitism.

Neither the honey nor the sweetness it symbolizes will change the news that makes some people's blood boil, whether it comes from Washington, from our State Capitol, or from Israel; nor will it stop the criticism of President Trump, Governor Sanders, or Prime Minister Netanyahu that makes other people's blood boil. And the sweetness will stop neither the governmental actions nor the responses to them from being harmful.

Our lives, though, are so much more than the troubles that assault us. Yes, we must take our medicine and help our afflicted family and friends. And yes, we are obligated to combat injustice whenever and wherever we can. Those are all necessary, but insufficient, to living a positive, meaningful life.

The rabbis facing illness, like the Hillel directors, are in it for the long haul. We all are. Resilience is required if we are truly going to enjoy a שנה טובה ומתוקה, a good, sweet year. Let us all find our joy in 5786, and let us seize it. Then, our eyes wide open to all that ails us, nobody fooled into thinking that a spoonful of honey will solve all our problems, may our lives bring us joy all the same.

Poetry says it best, so I'll conclude with a snippet of Yehuda Amichai's poem, "A Man in His Life:"

Ecclesiastes was wrong about this [that there is a time for every purpose].

A person must hate and love at the same moment, cry and laugh with the same eyes.

כן יהי רצון, May that be God's will. And let us all say:

Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Robert A. Nosanchuk, "Hawks and Snakes and Not Giving Up," *The Sacred Struggle: Jewish Responses to Trauma*, New York: CCAR Press, 2025, p. 99.

ⁱⁱ Beverley Shimansky and Jay Solomon, "Unapologetically Jewish and stronger than ever," *ejewishphilanthropy*, August 27, 2025, <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/unapologetically-jewish-and-stronger-than-ever/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 4:24-26.

^{iv} See, for example, Rashi's commentary to Exodus 4:24.

^v Rabbi David N. Jaffe, "The Next Chapter: Moving Forward with Chronic Illness," *The Sacred Struggle: Jewish Responses to Trauma*, New York: CCAR Press, 2025, p. 102.

^{vi} Jaffe, p. 104.

^{vii} Jaffe, p. 105.