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### **A TIME FOR REJOICING**

One of the highlights of my life was when my son, Adam, and his bride, Sarah, asked me to officiate at their wedding. When we met to discuss the ceremony they made a special request.

Normally a Jewish wedding ends with the breaking of a glass. As soon as the groom smashes it everyone yells “Mazal Tov” and breaks into shouts, song, and applause. This is the way it has been at every wedding I have attended. It is a well established tradition. Adam and Sarah, however, wanted to break the glass in complete silence.

While no one is sure exactly how the breaking of a glass became an integral component of a Jewish wedding ceremony, most authorities cite a story in the Talmud. A rabbi once interrupted a joyous feast by smashing an expensive goblet against the wall. The guests were startled and mystified. The rabbi’s bizarre behavior sobered them up and brought the party to an abrupt halt.

When the guests asked him to explain his odd behavior, the rabbi told them that joy must always be tempered by our sadness over the

destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and over us, the Jewish people, being in exile. For as long as Jews live outside of *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel, every Jewish celebration must include a moment of mourning

The breaking of a glass at a wedding is meant to remind us that even at moments of supreme celebration, the tragedies of Jewish life and Jewish history should never be far from our thoughts.

Adam and Sarah wanted the breaking of the glass at their wedding to reflect its original meaning. They wanted the breaking of the glass to be an opportunity for their guests to pause and meditate on the brokenness of Jewish life and of the world in which we live.

While I sympathized with their desire to reclaim the original meaning of the breaking of the glass, I still tried to dissuade them. “People are so conditioned to shouting *Mazal Tov* when the glass is broken,” I explained, “that even if I expound upon its meaning and call for complete silence, someone will surely yell *Mazal Tov* anyway. It’s Pavlovian.”

I asked them if they had ever seen the breaking of the glass carried out in silence. “Yes,” they told me “at a friend’s wedding.”

“How did it go?” I asked.

“Well, it didn’t,” they answered. “Even though the rabbi explained it

thoroughly and asked for silence, as soon as the groom smashed the glass some of the guests shouted *Mazal Tov*, and everyone else joined in.”

In the end they decided to go with the accepted custom. Adam smashed the glass, and everyone yelled *Mazal Tov* as they kissed under the *chuppah*. It must have worked, because seven and a half years later they are still married.

I am glad they made that decision. It was not because I was worried about someone accidentally breaking the silence, but because I think there is too much mourning and sadness in Jewish life. It seems to me that we Jews are much more interested in mourning our past than celebrating our present, or building our future.

Did you know, for example, that according to Jewish tradition, celebrations such as weddings and parties are forbidden during approximately one-fourth of the Jewish year?

First, there is the seven week period between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*, the time of the counting of the *omer*. When the Temple was in existence Jews would bring an *omer* of barley, a dry measure of approximately 3.64 liters, to Jerusalem as an offering between Passover and *Shavuot*. This daily offering was a prelude to the celebration of the spring harvest which

took place on *Shavuot*. Although we no longer bring an *omer* of barley to Jerusalem, we still count the days.

While originally the time of the *omer* was an occasion for rejoicing, over time it changed to a period of mourning. According to legend, the students of Rabbi Akiba were struck by a plague during the days of the counting of the *omer*. In memory of the plague, weddings and other celebratory events are prohibited during most of these days.

The second period of semi-mourning is the three weeks between *Sheva Asar B'Tammuz*, the seventeenth day of the Hebrew month of *Tammuz*, and *Tisha B'Av*, the ninth of *Av*. According to tradition, the Babylonians breached the walls of the First Temple on *Sheva Asar B'Tammuz*, and the Temple fell on *Tisha B'Av*. Later on, *Tisha B'Av* was also associated with the destruction of the Second Temple and other sad events in Jewish history.

Combined, these two periods add up to ten weeks of semi-mourning, nearly a quarter of the Jewish year. While I respect the tragedies of our past, it seems to me that ten weeks is a pretty large chunk of time to refrain from celebration.

Almost the entire period during which celebrations are prohibited is

connected in one way or another with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the existential situation of the Jewish people—that we are in *galut*, in exile. With Jerusalem in Jewish hands and most Jews living outside of Israel feeling at home in the countries in which they live, the reasons for these restrictions no longer seem applicable.

Rabbi David Hartman, the founder of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Israel at which I studied this summer, is fond of telling anyone who will listen about his first year in Israel. He recalls that after he made *aliyah* he went for walk on *Tisha B'Av*. He was surprised to see people out in the streets looking sad and forlorn. He said it didn't make sense.

“I didn't understand it,” he says. “Why are people so sad? Because the Temple is destroyed and we are in *galut*? Look around you, the Jewish People has returned to its homeland. There are Jewish businessmen and Jewish soldiers. Jerusalem and the Temple Mount are in our hands! Why should anyone be mourning? We should be celebrating! Israel is a vital and vibrant Jewish country!”

I don't think that Rabbi Hartman celebrates on *Tisha B'Av*, but to this day he does not fast on the holiday.

I agree with him. We are no longer in exile and I do not believe the

Temple should be rebuilt, at least as a cultic site for ritual sacrifice.

Furthermore, the legend about the students of Rabbi Akiba being struck by a plague during the period of the *sefirah* is historically suspect. It probably did not happen.

My own practice is to follow the *teshuvot*, the religious decisions, of the Committee on Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Assembly. I refrain from performing weddings after Passover but begin again on *Yom Ha'Atzmaut*, Israel Independence Day. I do perform weddings up to the first day of *Av*, and resume again after *Tisha B'Av*. The official decisions I follow are based on the reasoning I just outlined.

But in my own thinking I go a step further. While I understand why so many days in the Jewish year came to be dedicated to mourning, I find the emphasis on Jewish suffering counterproductive and onerous. The emphasis on mourning makes it seem as though we Jews like to suffer, that we embrace the celebration of suffering. As my colleague Rabbi Wayne Dosick observes, it is far easier to fill a synagogue when *Yizkor* memorial prayers are recited than to find a *minyan* when we chant *Hallel*, Psalms of Praise.

Jewish organizations often base their appeals for funds and support on our fears, rather than on our hopes and dreams. It is unfortunate, but it is a reality. Jews are much more prone to fight anti-Semitism, rally in support of Israel, and build Holocaust memorials, than they are to fund Jewish education, the needs of Jewish college students on campus, synagogues, or a community *Mikvah*.

Please do not misunderstand or misquote me. I am not saying that supporting Israel, fighting anti-Semitism, and memorializing the Holocaust and its victims are not important. But I am saying that historical tragedies and contemporary challenges should not define Judaism. Judaism instructs us to choose and to live life with joy and thanksgiving.

I want to tell you about someone who knew this well. Phil Schlossberg, z"l, was Holocaust survivor, Talmud Scholar, a member of Tifereth Israel Synagogue, and a personal friend. When asked, he would share his personal story of surviving the *Shoah*. During the war Phil experienced suffering, sadness, hunger, want, and innumerable horrors. He lost much of his family. Phil survived and eventually moved to New Jersey where he started a family and owned a toy store.

After Phil retired he decided to return to the love of his youth,

Talmud study. He decided against a traditional *yeshiva*, instead enrolling in a Masters program in Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, where I was ordained.

When he moved to San Diego he joined the New Life Club, the organization of Holocaust survivors and began teaching Talmud. He was an active member of the survivor community but somewhat of a provocateur. Whenever anyone spoke of the *Shoah*, he would acknowledge that it was a terrible time in Jewish history, but then he would subtly change the subject to Jewish life today. He would talk about Jewish education and Camp Ramah. He would talk about getting the younger generation involved in the Jewish community and the necessity of supporting Israel. He would talk about the synagogue and the need to have more people attend.

Phil would tell anyone he spoke with that we must acknowledge the horrors of the past, but it is more important to celebrate Judaism today and create a vibrant Jewish life for tomorrow.

Judaism can and should play an uplifting, joyful, and healing role in our lives. Unfortunately, most Jews believe it does the opposite. They see Judaism and its holidays, rituals, and history as overbearing and

oppressive.

Here's one example: When most Jews think about *Shabbat* what first comes to mind is the "can't dos." *Shabbat* is the day that you can't travel, can't cook, can't go to the movies, can't work in the yard, can't spend money, etc., etc., etc. They do not consider observing *Shabbat* because it is too restrictive and boring.

But the "can't dos" are not the essence of *Shabbat*. The essence of *Shabbat* is *Oneg Shabbat*, and I don't mean a tray of cookies. While we call the refreshments and social hour we share after Friday night services "*Oneg Shabbat*," that is its secondary meaning. *Oneg Shabbat* really means the "joy of the *Shabbat*."

*Oneg Shabbat*, the joy of *Shabbat*, is what we experience when we set aside the demands and grind of our day-to-day life in order to dedicate a full twenty-five hours to celebrating with family and friends. Instead of gulping down dinner and rushing off to a meeting or shopping or whatever else we do during the week, we sit down at a festive table, enjoy a leisurely meal, a glass of wine, and engage in an activity which is foreign to many Americans: sustained and meaningful conversation. *Shabbat* is a day to be at peace with nature, at peace with our fellow human beings,

and at peace with ourselves. It is a day to enjoy rather than conquer life.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "In the tempestuous ocean of time and toil there are islands of stillness where man may enter a harbor and reclaim his dignity. The island is the seventh day, the Sabbath, a day of detachment from things, instruments and practical affairs, as well as attachment to the spirit." (The Sabbath, Its Meaning for Modern Man)

Rosh Hashana is another holiday which has been sapped of its celebratory spirit. Most Jews approach Rosh Hashana with formality and solemnity. They sit in the synagogue believing that suffering through a long and incomprehensible service will somehow atone for their sins.

I do not deny that Rosh Hashana has a weighty message, that we are judged by our deeds. However, its greater theme is that of hope, renewal, and joy. More than judgement, today is about *selicha*, forgiveness, and *teshuva*, our ability to change. We don't have to live with our failings, the power to change our lives is in our hands. Rosh Hashana is a time for self improvement and second chances. Rosh Hashana is a time for renewal, a time to acknowledge God's compassion and forgiveness, and the time to recharge our lives. We can cast aside old baggage and begin the new year with a clean slate.

Our holiday meals tonight reflect its major themes. We dip our *challah* in honey, a sign of sweetness. We continue by dipping apples in honey and praying for each other: “May it be Your will Adonai our God and God of our ancestors that we be blessed with a sweet, happy, and healthy New Year.”

Shabbat and Rosh Hashana are but two of the many occasions that the Jewish calendar provides for joy and celebration. We also have *Sukkot*, *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Purim*, to name a few. The Jewish life cycle is equally full. Families shouldn't wait for funerals to come together. They should make ever greater efforts to assemble when there is a *simcha* such as a *Brit Milah*, baby naming, Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or wedding.

The celebration of Jewish suffering may be effective in guiltting Jews into donating funds, but it will not sustain Jewish life. In the long run, it is self defeating. Painting Judaism in dark and gloomy colors pushes Jews away, particularly young Jews. I don't blame them. Which one of us wants to be a member of community that is constantly beating its chest and bemoaning its fate?

Judaism does set aside time for reflection and sorrow, but more than anything else, it provides us with opportunities to acknowledge and

celebrate the many blessings that are ours.

Let us begin the New Year not only with self reflection, but with celebration. Let us pledge not to ignore or take for granted the blessings, goodness, and joy that surrounds us each day...

A baby's laughter, a couple in love, the air that we breathe, the sunlight which brightens our days, the rain which waters the earth, the beauty of blossoming trees, the wonder of birds in flight, the sustenance from which we are nourished, the caring deeds of strangers, the simple acts of kindness which touch our lives and hearts.

Let us find joy in everything we do, every word we say, and every breath we take.

“May it be Your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, that we be blessed with a sweet, happy, and healthy New Year.”