

## Shanah Tovah

In the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah, the great Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism, would hold a competition to see who would blow the shofar for him on Rosh Hashanah. Now if you wanted to blow the shofar for the Ba'al Shem Tov, not only did you have to blow the shofar like a virtuoso, but you also had to learn an elaborate system of kavanot — secret prayers that were said just before you blew the shofar to direct the shofar blasts and to see that they had the proper effect in the supernal realms. All the prospective shofar blowers practiced these kavanot for months. They were difficult and complex.

There was one fellow who wanted to blow the shofar for the Ba'al Shem Tov so badly that he had been practicing these kavanot *for years*. But when his time came to audition before the great Ba'al Shem Tov, he realized that nothing he had done had prepared him adequately for the experience of standing before this great and holy man, and he choked. His mind froze completely. His anxiety and fear paralyzed him. He couldn't remember *any* of the kavanot that he knew so well, that he had practiced for all those years. He couldn't even remember what he was supposed to be doing at all.

He just stood before the Ba'al Shem in utter silence, and then, when he realized how egregiously — how utterly — he had failed this great test, his heart just broke into pieces and he began to weep, sobbing loudly and uncontrollably, his shoulders heaving and his whole body wracking as he wept. “All right, you’re hired”, the Ba'al Shem Tov said.

Somehow, finding words amidst his tears, the man said, “But I don’t understand, I failed the test completely. I couldn’t even remember one kavanah.”

The Ba'al Shem Tov responded that kavanot are keys that open up doors in the House of God, but there is one key that opens them all, and brings us directly into the presence of the Divine: a broken heart. For it says in the Psalms, “God is close to the brokenhearted.”

The secret was that this person let themselves deeply feel a big, uncomfortable emotion. But that feeling, his heart breaking is what authentically enabled him to do this holy task. He did not just “push through” as we are so often told to do. He let his heart break and the tears flow. Blowing the shofar and reciting special prayers are not ends within themselves; they are tools to help us open our hearts, even to painful feelings; reminding us that it is through our brokenheartedness that we can draw closer to God.

In the weeks approaching the High Holy Days, I was struck, am still struck, by how hard this past year has been- how it feels even harder than the year before. This year of war in Israel and Gaza has been heart shattering, bringing unimaginable destruction in both Israeli and Palestinian society. This war keeps escalating and there seems to be no end in sight. And that is just one painful conflict of many that we are holding- the war in Ukraine rages on. In this country we are in the middle of a brutal election year causing so much anxiety and fear, not to mention the attacks on our LGBTQ siblings, immigrants, women, and more. It makes me sick with worry that the coming year will be even harder still. How else are we to feel but brokenhearted?

I mention all this because I believe that it is essential to acknowledge what it looks and feels like to be face to face with immeasurable suffering. But I want to speak very clearly and very firmly when I say that facing despair and succumbing to despair are different. As we look around this room, you might be noticing a heaviness, a grimness, and you might be feeling that feeling in your own body as well. You're not imagining things – this is a really, really hard time. But this pain, this fear, this anxiety – it needn't be debilitating, *and* we don't need to ignore it.

Look around the room again and you will see a great deal of goodness, of strength, of beauty, of community. This year, we have experienced wonderful life cycle events- beautiful weddings and b'nai mitzvahs.

We have named new babies and welcomed them into our community. We have celebrated graduations and anniversaries. We have taken care of people when they were sick and offered emotional support when they were feeling down. All of this goodness is present right here with us. And if you look around a third time and you'll feel sadness again, perhaps remembering our beloved family members and community members who are no longer physically with us. But then you will see hope and bravery.

Just like in this room where we can notice the moments of loss and moments of celebration, as we reflect on this last year in our own lives, we are holding both joy and grief. And amazingly, our hearts have this capacity to hold both the joy and suffering together. As the great poet, Khalil Gibran says, "Your joy is your sorrow unmasked,... they are inseparable." Allowing ourselves to feel one, enables us to truly feel the other.

Much of this past year, I found myself compartmentalizing. Either I was fully in the joy or fully in the suffering and paralyzed by grief. It felt completely unsustainable.

But this shifted for me over the summer. As many of you know, I got married this past June.

Like many Jewish couples, we were planning to break the glass under the chuppah, to remember the brokenness of the world, but we wanted more intention around that ritual, especially given the grief we have been feeling witnessing the devastation in Israel and Gaza this year. There is a custom to sing words from Psalm 137, longing for Jerusalem, right before the breaking of the glass. We decided to use that part of the ceremony to explicitly acknowledge the war, the pain and suffering present even on this joyous day.

That moment, as I stood under the chuppah, tears were freely streaming down my face. I felt my heart breaking into pieces. That moment was so real and raw and has stuck with me so powerfully as validation that my relationship to sorrow can transform. It enabled my heart – and if you looked around the hearts of so many others – to just cry out.

And at that same moment, my heart was still completely full of love and immense joy, as it was the entire day. I smiled, and laughed, and danced and I felt my heart bursting open. I understood that my heart can expand- it has the capacity to hold both joy and suffering together. I do not need to ignore one to deeply feel the other. In fact, the opposite is true – deeply feeling one *helps me* to deeply feel the other. The immense happiness and love I felt that day opened my heart, so that the grief could enter and be felt, and feeling that pain enabled me to feel more of that joy, to dance even harder.

There's a story in the Talmud that when the Holy Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, an increasing number of Jews expressed their grief by giving up eating meat and drinking wine, both practices directly associated with sacrifices, since the loss of the Temple meant no more sacrifices. Rabbi Yehoshua pointed out to these ascetics that by their own logic they shouldn't eat bread either, which was also used in meal offerings. When the ascetics suggested they subsist on produce, Rabbi Yehoshua reminded them that the bringing of first fruits had ceased, so maybe they should avoid produce. And the water libation was no more, so perhaps nobody should drink water. The ascetics were silent, knowing such renunciations would make survival impossible. Rabbi Yehoshua broke the silence to explain: To not mourn at all is impossible, but to mourn excessively is equally impossible. We must find a way to grieve and live. Go on living, but remember the destruction of the temple: Build new homes, but leave a piece without plaster; Prepare celebratory meals, but forgo one item. Fall in love and get married, but break a glass in recognition of brokenness. Believe that your hearts can be broken and full at the same time.

Jewish tradition recognizes that our heart is a muscle that stretches. That in moments of intense grief, we can hold joy and laughter and in moments of immense happiness, we also recognize and feel pain and suffering. It's not a coincidence that we shed tears both when we are crying and when we are laughing.

“Your joy is sorrow unmasked,” Khalil Gibran’s poem reads. “And the self same well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears. And how else can it be? The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.” Just as the Ba’al Shem Tov taught, allowing ourselves to feel broken-hearted opens up the potential for holiness in our lives, for more goodness, compassion, and joy to come in.

And so on this Rosh Hashanah 5785, as many of us sit here with broken hearts, and fear for what is to come, I invite us not to push those feelings aside. To sit with them and recognize that these are hard times and we need to grieve. And this pain only takes up part of our hearts. That our whole heart also contains celebration and laughter, joy and silliness. By giving space to our full range of feelings, we allow our hearts to fill - even when they are broken. That we lift those special moments up and recognize that our hearts are expansive. This year will bring both suffering and joy and we can and we must feel them both wholeheartedly. This is one of the great gifts we can give one another, and ourselves.

Shanah Tovah