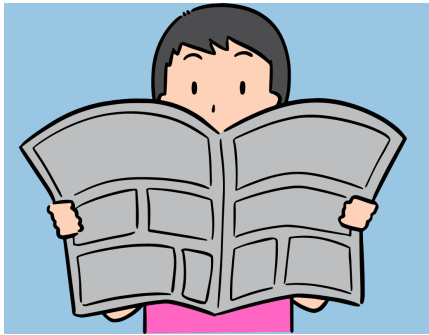


Finding Joy Amidst the Despair

When you get the newspaper in the morning - what do you read first? What's your favorite section?

I was waiting to hear someone say that they scroll through it on their phone OR they don't look at it at all.

* * *



As a child, I remember running outside to grab the sports section, relocate it to my room, and huddle over the box scores of every baseball game, memorizing everyone's batting average.

I gave the rest of it to my dad.

When I was a young adult, I dove into the front section before the sports section.

As I got older, it was the front page and then the op-eds; no sports.

In recent years, I find myself jumping from a quick glance at the headlines to the obituaries, following my father's ritual of doing the same.

These days I have developed a weird habit: I average the ages of those who have died to get a sense of how many years I have left.

I know, it's a bit of an unusual way to start the day.

But habits are habits.

As a rabbi, I deal with death relatively frequently.

But, I feel differently about it now.

Perhaps after losing a dear friend, losing my own father, and the losses of the pandemic, my own mortality feels more present.

* * *

Today, Yom Kippur, is our yearly encounter with death, our own inevitable deaths.

While Tisha B'Av comes each summer to remind us of our communal loss, the destruction of the two Temples and Jerusalem, Yom Kippur is different.

It's not about a nation or a group or a people as much as it's about ourselves.

How do we cope with our mortality?

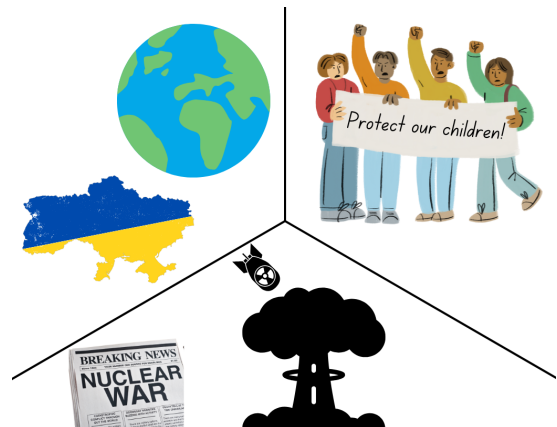
How do we face the inevitable?

The sense of finiteness.

The awareness of our own flawed nature and existence can bring a measure of sadness.

And in recent years, there are many more reasons that can lead us toward despair.

The list is overwhelming: the war in Ukraine with its multiple effects, including the potential of a nuclear escalation, authoritarian regimes like Russia, Iran, and North Korea, not to mention China, the relentless gun violence in our society, racism, anti-LGBTQ sentiment, attacks on abortion, the risks to democracies – ours and others, the growing anti-Semitism that



is back in a way we have not seen in decades, the dangers to Israel from so many directions - Iran, Lebanon, Gaza, Hamas, anti-Israeli memes and college confrontations. There are worries about our economy, the increase in mental illness, and overlying all of that: climate change. Will we pass on a livable planet to future generations?

And lest we forget, the rise in extremism.

Even in Sweden!

Closer to home, there are the losses of community, of customs, of practices, of traditions, and connections that the last few years have taken away.

It's a lot.

It's enough to make us crawl into bed and hide under the covers.

Sometimes, we might just want to give up.

* * *

Of course, our tradition does not sanction that. We are, rather, enjoined not to give up.

Rabbi Tarfon famously teaches in the Mishnah -

לא עליך המלאכה לגמר, ולא אתה בן חורין לבטל ממנה

It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.
(Avot 2:16)

We do what we can - we work hard to perfect this world, to address all these problems, even though we know we will not complete the task.

Which still leaves me with a feeling of despair.

I do what I can, but the sorrow remains.

Today, I want to address the deeper issue, which, for me, is how do we live our lives in the suburbs of Boston during this time of crises?

We may work, donate, or volunteer to address some or all of these concerns, but for most of us, our daily life is relatively fine. While we might be coping with the stressors of modern life, caring for family members, or dealing with illness, most of us in our community are blessed.

We live in this strange time, in this strange space. Second Isaiah explained that God and the universe contain both good and gloom. As he writes:

יוצר אור ובורא חֹשֶׁךְ עֲשֵׂה שָׁלוֹם ובורא רָע אֲנִי יְהוָה עֹשֶׂה כָּל-אֵלֶּה:

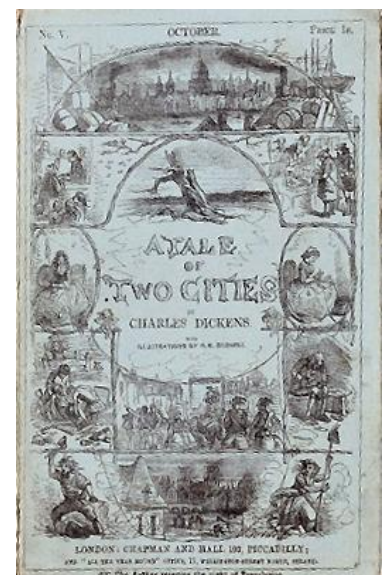
I form light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I, Adonai, do all these things. (Isaiah 45:7)

Beneficence and badness are all interwoven into every moment, and we live in this space within them.

While we may look around, read the paper and get depressed, we cannot, no one can, live in a state of pervasive despair; we must find moments of joy.

I could never explain it better than Charles Dickens did in 1859:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” (A Tale of Two Cities)



So, the question is, how do we live in that space? How do we negotiate all of this?

Our tradition has insights.

Our ancestors faced challenges - different for sure, but similar in intensity. The loss of Jewish sovereignty twice was devastating, and yet they found a way to focus on hope.

* * *

We need to find joy amidst the tears.

As a child, I remember going to a *shivah*, a very sad one. It was the *shivah* for a friend's father. I must have been about 13 years old, and I went with my parents. Her father had died of a brain tumor far too young, and the sadness hung in the air like an invisible blanket that made it hard to breathe.

And suddenly, little kids came running into the room; their smiles, their screams of delight changed the entire tenor of the space. The sadness was not gone, but it was as if the room took a collective sigh and started to breathe again.

After attending hundreds of *shivahs*, I can say that this phenomenon is not unique.

While *shivah* creates a vessel to hold the mourner, and there can be tears, there is often laughter - retelling an old story, remembering how Grandma could not drive, and we thought we would crash. A funny picture that makes us smile.

Sadness is present at a *shivah*, but there can also be a healing release. A hug that transforms. A hug that conveys the sadness, the empathy, and the love that is felt in that moment.

* * *

Our rabbis understood this psychological balancing act.

“Our Sages taught: When the Temple was destroyed for the second time, large numbers in Israel became ascetics [who decided] neither to eat meat nor to drink wine. Rabbi Joshua got into conversation with them and said to them: ‘My sons, why do you not eat meat or drink wine?’ They said to him: ‘Shall we eat meat which used to be brought as an offering on the altar which is now abolished? Shall we drink wine that used to be poured as a libation on the altar, which is now abolished?’ He said to them: ‘If so, we should not eat bread because the meal offerings have ceased!’ [They said ‘Yes,] we can manage with fruit.’ [He said:] ‘We should not eat fruit because there is no longer an offering of first fruits! [They said:] ‘We can manage with other fruits.’ [He said:] ‘We should not drink water, because there is no longer any ceremony of the pouring of water!’ They were silent.

“He said to them: ‘[Listen] My sons, come and I will tell you. Not to mourn at all is impossible (because the decree has been decreed). [But] to mourn too much is also impossible because we do not impose a decree on the community which the majority cannot endure...

Rather, thus said the Sages: A person may stucco his house, but should leave a little corner bare... A man can prepare a banquet, but he should leave out an item or two... A woman can prepare all



her ornaments, but leave out a small item... As it is said [in the book of Psalms]: 'If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I remember you not, if I do not place Jerusalem above my greatest joy.'" (Psalms 137:5-6).

"What is meant by 'my greatest joy?' Rabbi Isaac said: 'This is symbolized by the burnt ashes which we place on the head of a groom...' (Bava Batra 60b).

I find this to be one of the most insightful passages in our tradition. Not to mourn is impossible. But we cannot live like that.



There must be joy amidst the despair.

What could be more joyous than a wedding?

But the custom was that the groom would place ashes on his forehead, chanting a verse of sadness. These days, I have offered a slightly less intense approach to remembering the brokenness of the world as I link it to the breaking of the glass.

And the other example is also meaningful: if we are renovating our house, we leave a corner unfinished; its imperfection reminds us of the Temple's destruction, which has come to remind us of all the brokenness in our world.

I have worked hard to fulfill this tradition by leaving piles of books and papers all around my office :-)

I'm not sure if it's quite the same.

* * *

The rabbis taught that we should *gilu b're'adah* - we should rejoice with a sense of trembling - appreciative of the joy of the moment, but also aware of the fragility and tenuous aspects of our existence.

In fact, the rabbis understood that it's easier to slip into sadness, so they privileged joy, inviting us to prioritize happiness.

The Hasidic tradition picked up on this with the great 18th-century rabbi, Nahman of Bratslav, teaching, "It is a great mitzvah to be happy always."

Rebbe Nahman himself had a tendency to slip into hopelessness and depression and understood both sides intimately.

And so, we live with both.

Chemistry has this notion (my son Matan is studying chem this year, so let's see if I get this right - any errors are my own!). When an atom loses an electron it becomes a positive ion. The atom that gains an electron becomes a negative ion. But then the positive and negative ions

attract each other and form an ionic bond.

IONIC BONDS

Out of the loss - here, the loss of an electron - comes the opportunity to

make an ionic bond, a stronger bond.



Out of loss can come new wholeness.

* * *

The last few summers I have played in the Lexington *senior* softball league; one of my non-Jewish teammates told me he was working for an Israeli company.

He asked me for a quick rundown of all the Jewish holidays of this season.

He was leaning on one leg, reminding me of Hillel and Shammai being asked to teach all of Judaism to a potential convert who was standing on one leg. So I tried to cram in as much information as possible before his next at-bat.

When I came to Yom Kippur, I explained to him that it is a solemn day - we don't wish each other a happy Yom Kippur, but it is not really a *sad* day.

And it's not; it's not Tisha'h B'Av; we are not sitting in mourning.

We are wearing white, a sign of holiness and purity associated with a wedding or welcoming Shabbat every Friday night.

Today is a day of hope, of renewal; today is a day of possibility. Imagine a tapestry with strands of joy and strands of sadness. They are intertwined in every moment, in every instance.

The ruptures of hurt are addressed. The tears in the fabric of our relationships are mended. We forgive.

The Talmud states: "Yom Kippur is a day of joy, because it is a day of pardon and forgiveness, and moreover, it is the day on which the last pair of tablets were given. (Bava Batra 121a)

The Midrash teaches that today is not festive merely for us, but also for God, who gave this holy day with "great love and joy."

God sings to nature: "Celebrate with Me! Let all rejoice, for I am forgiving Israel's sins!" (Seder Eliyahu Rabbah).

And that's why we go right into Sukkot and Simhat Torah, holidays that celebrate this renewal. But again, we acknowledge the other side of life, with the leaky roof of the Sukkah.

Sweetness and sadness.

They went even further, declaring that on Yom Kippur, young women would go out into the fields wearing white, looking for potential mates.

The Talmud states that "Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: 'There were no days as joyous for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur, as on them the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in white clothes [...] and dance in the vineyards.

"And what would they say? Young man, please lift up your eyes and see whom you choose for yourself for a wife." (Ta'anit 26b)



Yom Kippur was the J-Date of its time. We would not expect a day with the motifs of life and death hanging in the balance to be a good time to find a spouse, but apparently, it was.

Perhaps the very notion of mortality reminds young people to look to the future.

Perhaps the magnitude of the day needed a release, an easing off the pedal of intensity that dominates our prayers.

Each year, I feel this softening as the day progresses, as the fasting intensifies.

A sense of calm, a sense of happiness builds throughout this day - yes, our existence is tenuous, it can make us despair, but as the sun sets, we also feel that we are going to make it.

Yom Kippur contains a spiritual high embedded within its rituals of self-denial.

We feel the fragility of our lives, but we try not to let it overwhelm us.

Solemnity is balanced with celebration.

As we reach the “climax of forgiveness,” aware of our limited time on this earth, aware of the brokenness, we forgive and are forgiven, allowing ourselves to experience this feeling of greater wholeness.

* * *

So let's hold them both - as best we can.

Let us live in both realities.

In every moment.

Let us embrace this paradox of our existence.

It's challenging.

Today, we are acutely aware of the pain and suffering within ourselves and throughout the world, but also that blessing and joy are woven into the very fabric of our existence.

We human beings will inevitably experience illness, loss, pain, and suffering, and yet, there is so much beauty in our world. Every moment contains both.

Joy amidst the despair.

