

# Joy and Sadness All At Once

## *Aharei-Mot/Kedoshim Sermon 5783*

Weddings are so magical.

There is such love and intensity.



It's an incredible moment as two people walk into a room - each with separate legal status - and then they come out, bound to each other; their relationship changed in the eyes of both religious traditions and the legal system.

It's powerful.

No matter how many weddings I have attended or officiated at, I am always swept up in the emotion - which often brings tears.

Last Saturday night, I was officiating at a wedding of a former student - something that is

particularly special for me.

As the music played, the bride walked down the aisle, and her groom walked down to meet her so they could walk the last few steps together to the huppah, the wedding canopy, together.

The smiles and tears were there. Everyone was standing - part of this intense moment.

And then the band stopped playing the music.

The couple and I just looked at each other as this was the moment when they were supposed to be circling each other with the music.

There was some tension and confusion in the air.

Quietly I whispered into the mic: "Keep playing."

The band restarted.



Everyone just smiled, and the couple relaxed. The tension broke as the circling began.

Weddings are filled with a holiness that is easy to access. As it builds, it can overwhelm, so, moments of laughter, of smiles, also exist along with the intensity.

The intensity, the sanctity, and the holiness co-exist with the feelings of joy and happiness.

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There is another palpable dichotomy at a wedding: there is intense joy mixed with sadness. I have been blessed to have Rabbi William Lebeau as a teacher, friend, and mentor for three decades; he installed me as the rabbi of Temple Emunah almost 20 years ago.

As my wife Sharon and I prepared for our wedding, he was our spiritual guide.



He taught us the rabbinic notion of “*Gilu B’re’adah* - rejoicing with awe.”

The words come from the book of Psalms: “עבְדוּ אֶת־יְהוָה בְּיִרְאָה וְגִיל׃  
בְּרַעְדָּה׃

Serve Adonai with awe and rejoice with trembling.” (Psalms 2:11)

The rabbis in the Talmud asked what does this mean exactly?

How can one rejoice with trembling?

“Rav Adda bar Mattana said that Rabba said: One may not experience unbridled joy; even where there is rejoicing, there should be *re’adah* - trembling.” (Berkahot 30b)

Even at a wedding, or especially a wedding, pure, unadulterated, happiness does not exist. Weddings include another side - a layer of intensity, even sadness.

Perhaps we remember those who are not there, the fragility of life and of all relationships. Even as we think of what we hope will be in store for this couple, there is the worry, the fear of what we hope will not be in their future.

This gets picked up in the custom that we see in some traditional weddings where the groom actually places ashes on his forehead and recites the psalm: “If I forget you O, Jerusalem, let my right hand wither.” (Psalm 137:5)

Joy and sadness.

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The same idea was presented in the fascinating recent film: *Everything, Everywhere All at Once*, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture. This fantastical film explored the multi-verse, imagining a world where we can travel between alternate universes, alternate realities.



Underneath the disorientation and action of this film was the story of a family - the joy and sadness, the hurt and the love that exist, especially in our most intimate relationships.

I was struck by that.

The multiverse could be understood as the ability to be in more than one place at the same time, but I understood it to mean that we can inhabit different spaces, different feelings all at the same time.

We can be, as the title suggests, “everywhere all at once.”

Perhaps that is the essence of life.

Every moment encompasses many feelings.

We are invited into the complicated, but essential space of being present with varied emotions, even emotions that seem so different, but beneath the surface, they are similar.

Joy and sadness are powerful emotions, felt by being rooted in being present in the moment.

Sometimes they are too intense, and we slide too far to one side, or we are overwhelmed and push our feelings away.

But holding both can deepen our experience of life.

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Similarly, this morning’s Torah reading points to this dichotomy.

As Aharon is being instructed in the intense rituals that bring atonement, we are reminded of the death of his two sons: “*Aharei-mot sh’nei b’nei Aharon* - after the death of two of Aharon’s sons. ” (Lev. 16:1)

Why is this detail important to add?

Why, at this moment when Aharon is invited to be close to God, are we reminded of this tragic loss?

Perhaps because when we feel closeness the most - in a moment of blessing, we also instinctively feel the other side: our loved one’s absence, how fragile our existence really is.

Joy and sadness all at once.

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A modern analog of this occurred this past week as we marked two modern days of significance on our Jewish calendar.

First, Israel’s Memorial Day, followed immediately by Israel’s Independence Day - this year, its 75th.



Unlike here in America, where our Memorial Day is separated from July 4th, in Israel, the connection is made explicit. People died so that others can live in freedom.

Their sacrifice makes celebration possible.

Of course, this is also quite challenging.

Imagine an Israeli family who visits the grave of a precious child who gave his life defending his country, followed that evening by a party with music and fireworks.

Emotionally wrought for sure, but a reminder that sadness is intertwined with joy.

All the time.

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That is what the *parashah* is describing - the rituals that are enjoined upon Aharon are to be performed on Yom Kippur: a day of intensity, of contemplating our mortality, but also a day of rejoicing.

Yom Kippur is seen as a wedding between God and the Jewish people.

As in a traditional wedding where both partners wear white, the groom wearing a white kittel over his clothes, we wear white on Yom Kippur.

Just as the partners who are getting married do not eat on the day of their wedding until just after the ceremony, we do not eat on Yom Kippur.

Just as the partners recite the Vidui, the confessional prayers before the wedding, we recite them on Yom Kippur so we can enter the new year with a "*tabula rasa*" - a clean slate.

We descend into the awareness that life is fleeting, but as the day closes, we are filled with hope, with joy that envelops us during *Ne'ilah*, culminating in the final sounding of the Shofar.

Amidst all the sadness that exists all around us, we carve out a moment of happiness.

All at once.

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This is a challenging way to live - but so real.

So honest.

It is what it means to be a human being.

The wedding concludes with this. Just before the couple embraces, with the joyous singing of Mazal tov, a glass is broken.

We are reminded of the brokenness of the world, the fragility of life, the other side of life, right at this moment of sanctity and joy, of wholeness and love as in the Garden of Eden.

Joy and sadness all at once.