

Yom Kippur. We hear its name in concert with adjectives like “serious” and “solemn.” It is a day for atonement and for self-reflection. It is a day we spend mostly in synagogue, praying that God will forgive us for all the things we did wrong. It is a day upon which we are supposed to afflict our souls — to abstain from eating and drinking, to abstain from the wearing of comfortable leather shoes, and to skip bathing and washing. And just between you and me, this robe is not as comfortable as it looks.

And yet — in the Talmud, Rabbi Simeon Ben Gamaliel wrote that “Yom Kippur is the most joyous day of the year.”

We may have a difficult time finding the joy.

We are solemn. We are hungry. Even if our fast is only a few hours old, we are aware of just how long this day is and how hard it is to continue.

As the day goes on, we get tired and cranky. Or *more* tired and cranky, depending on how you felt yesterday!

We spend the day in synagogue beating our chests and listing our sins. We spend the day praying for forgiveness with liturgy that reminds us that our lives are fragile. It feels less like a day of joy, and more like a trial.

For most of us it would be a leap to call this day joyous.

But for Rabbi Gamliel it was the happiest day of the year and he explains why “Yom Kippur is the most joyous day of the year,” he wrote, “because it is a day of forgiveness and pardon.” And so it is.

This is the day that God forgives us. We should feel as if a weight has been lifted off our shoulders. The burden of guilt and shame that we have been carrying around has been taken from us. If we have made amends with others — if we have truly repented — this is the day that we are forgiven.

Yom Kippur gives us each a fresh start, and Rabbi Gamaliel saw the joy and the relief in starting over.

There is much to be relieved about today – even, perhaps, to be happy about. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that “we are not prisoners of the past, held captive by it. In Judaism, sin is what we do, not what we are. We are able to acknowledge our failures and then move on.”¹ This day should bring us joy because in facing our past we are better able to move forward in our future.

And Yom Kippur certainly reminds us that we have to make the best of our future. Many bestselling books, like *Tuesdays with Maurie* and *The Last Lecture*, are written about someone who faces death and in facing death learns how to really live. There’s

¹ Jonathan Sacks, *Koren Machzor*, p. xxvi

something about human nature which makes us believe that it takes dying to allow us to see the big picture — to recognize what is important in life and to change ourselves for the better. Yom Kippur is joyous because if we do it right, it can be that experience for all of us. On this day we are hyper-aware of how short life really is, how little time we have here on earth, and how vulnerable we really are. Yom Kippur can be, and should be, a life-changing experience.²

Imagine with me what it would be like to approach this day with with joy instead of dread, with happiness and hope for the future instead of the fear of never measuring up. It changes what Yom Kippur can mean to us — it changes what Yom Kippur can do for us.

If you let it, Yom Kippur can change your life.

You do not need a brush with death to take stock of your priorities. Yom Kippur asks us to act on this day as if we were dead: not to eat or drink or take any pleasure, not even in the shoes we wear. At the same time, we're focused on recognizing our faults, atoning for them, and praying for forgiveness. And of course, we're also seeing this as the chance for a fresh start... if only we knew how to begin. It is daunting to consider that we may not, in one lifetime, be able to achieve everything we wish to achieve. And

² Jonathan Sacks, Koren Machzor, p. x-xi

yet, this life is all we have.³ It puts incredible pressure on us to use it well — not to give up, but to start over.

And yet, I'm sure many of us find ourselves setting the same goals every year at this time, seeing the same patterns repeated over and over again, unable to break with the past and forge ahead on a new path. How many of us are repeating the same promises we made last year, to take care of our health, to spend more time with our family, to be a better person?

So what is holding us back from the lives we want to be living? Simply put, we are afraid of change — because change is difficult and, by its very nature, unknown. We keep things the way they are, even the things we are unsatisfied with, because at least we know what they're like. Change is scary.

Rabbi Harold Kushner suggests we live as if there is an eleventh commandment: the commandment not to be afraid. He writes that this commandment “is meant to keep us from missing out on... the blessings of life that are accessible only to those who are able to face their fears, see them clearly, and stare them down.”⁴

³ Jonathan Sacks, *Koren Machzor* p. xxvii

⁴ Harold Kushner, *Conquering Fear*, p. 24

Of course, that's easier said than done — we have so many reasons for our fear. One of the problems we have is something called “loss aversion,” a concept discovered by a pair of Israeli Nobel Prize-winning economists.⁵ Loss aversion is the idea that in decision making the pain of loss is greater than the joy of gains. We go out of our way to avoid losing anything — to avoid giving up something we have — even if we could gain more by giving it up; even if it is something not worth holding on to.

Our fear of loss goes hand-in-hand with the “endowment effect”: we tend to value things that we already have more than things we don't have. “Under the influence of these biases, loss aversion and the endowment effect, we commonly overvalue what we have and we consider giving it up to be a loss. Losses are psychologically painful, and, accordingly, we need a lot of extra motivation to be willing to give something up.”⁶ This is more commonly expressed as “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.”

So, how can we face up to the dangers of loss aversion and the endowment effect? We look, as we always do, to our tradition — to our Torah.

When you visit Israel and travel to the Dead Sea, you can see a pillar of salt named “Lot's Wife.” Actually, you can see *several* pillars called Lot's Wife, depending on who your tour guide is.

⁵ Loss aversion was first convincingly demonstrated by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman.

⁶ Ariely

The Torah tells us that before God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, God warned Lot and his family to get out of the city and not to look back. Even knowing what kind of communities Sodom and Gomorrah were — inhospitable places which were cruel to strangers to begin with, and now were on the verge of being destroyed — Lot and his family were still reluctant to leave. When they do finally leave, Lot's wife looks back at the city and is turned into a pillar of salt.

Why salt? Rabbi Kushner suggests that “she turned to salt because it is a preservative. To live preserved in salt is the fate of people who are so bound in the past or so unsure of their ability to cope with the future that they continue to do what they have always done, even when it no longer fits the new circumstances in which they live.”⁷

We can sympathize with Lot's wife. We all know how hard it can be to leave a place, even a place we don't want to be. We know how hard it is to change jobs, move to a new neighborhood, or end a relationship. We understand why she looked back — it can be very tempting to look back. We can understand in the emotion of the moment, leaving her home and all her friends behind, heading into the unknown without so much as a satchel of belongings from her old life, we can see how she could not resist turning around for one last look.

However, the decisions we make out of emotion can shape our future decisions. We often make decisions based on our emotional state. That's not news; you already know

⁷ Harold Kushner, *Conquering Fear*, p. 73

that how you are feeling and the mood you are in affects the decisions you make. What you may *not* know is that once we make a decision, our one-time emotional state can affect our future decisions as well.

Another Israeli, Behavioral Economist Dan Ariely, likens this to imitating ourselves, similar to how we imitate the behaviors of others. Just as we take cultural cues from others in figuring out what to eat or wear, we also look at our past decisions to guide our future behavior. “If we are likely to emulate people we don’t know all that well,” he writes, “how much more likely are we to follow someone we hold in great esteem — ourselves?” Once we’ve made a decision — even subconsciously — our brain assume that we must have a good reason for acting as we did, and so we do it again. And again.⁸

Are you wondering if you do this? Trust me; we all do. How many of us always park in the same spot? How many of us are sitting in your usual section of the sanctuary? (I know / am.) How many of you have been irritated to find someone else already sitting in your seat?

We use our past actions as a guide for future decisions — we think about what we have done in the past when we choose what to do next.

⁸ Dan Ariely, *The Upside of Irrationality*, p. 262-263

Think about how you spend your day. Are you spending your time doing things that are important to you? Are your actions consistent with the kind of person you want to be, or are you doing just what you have always done? Yom Kippur is a day of joy because it is a day when we realize that if we are not happy with the answers to these questions, it is not too late to change.

A more modern prophet, Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, wrote about how the knowledge that his time was limited changed his life:

Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart. Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition.⁹

Let this Yom Kippur be a day of joy for us. Let us find the courage to change. Let us emerge from this long day, from our fasting, to celebrate life.

⁹ <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505.html>

Because that's what Yom Kippur is, in the end: a day of joy at the prospect of change, at the prospect of being who we always wanted to be. Today is a day for consideration and for courage and for choices.

May we find the joy in all that we do today, as we look within for our true selves, for what truly gives us meaning. May we have the courage to become the person we have always wanted to become. May we find joy today, tomorrow, and as often as we can for the rest of our days. And may we be sealed for good — for joy — in the Book of Good Life.

G'mar hatimah tovah.