

Yizkor 5785: Crying on Shabbat

Today is both Shabbat and Yom Kippur... Which do we wish one another first? It's Shabbat AND it's Yom Kippur... It's actually traditional to say the REGULAR thing first... when you have a regular part of the Jewish calendar and a special part of the Jewish calendar, we put the regular thing first. *Tadir v'she'eino tadir, tadir kodem*. The regular, the all-year observance of Shabbat matters MORE in some ways than YK.

Shabbat is the most countercultural idea of the Jewish people... instead of racing and building, and striving and reaching, on Shabbat, we JUST rest. On Shabbat we're not even supposed to ask for anything... we just ARE. We're supposed to PRETEND, at least, that for the moment, we have everything we need.

Shabbat is meant to be a day of joy... Oneg Shabbat. We are not supposed to ASK for anything or even cry on Shabbat, if we can help it.

So then why would we put Yizkor today, on the Shabbat of Shabbats? Or for that matter, why put Yizkor on ANY joyful day... Yizkor is said on Passover, on Sukkot and on Shavuot... on deeply joyful days, the rabbis have us doing memorial prayers. How is that permissible, if we're meant to be joyful on these days? Don't these prayers make us cry, and isn't it the case that, to paraphrase Tom Hanks, THERE'S NO CRYING ON SHABBOS??

But of course Jewish law provides exceptions.

וכן מי שיש לו עונג אם יבכה כדי שילך הצער מלבו מותר לבכות בשבת

Rema, Shulchan Aruch 288:2

According to Rav Moshe Isserles, for some people crying IS Oneg Shabbat. Crying IS joy... because the Tzaar will leave his heart if he lets it out. The rabbis understood that sometimes CRYING is actually healing and it allows us to FEEL GOOD... and they made it permitted to cry on Shabbat WHEN the crying will bring about healing.... I love that. If it's a good, healing cry, which will lead to feeling better, THEN it's permitted and it's even a GOOD thing.

How Jewish is that?????

I love how countercultural Jewish tradition is, in so many areas, how Jewish law and Jewish practice just GET IT in a way. And this is nowhere more true than in the way that we deal with death.

Instead of pretending that joy looks a particular way, this idea suggests that in fact, crying... acknowledging our pain and sadness, can be the only way to a fuller life. That sometimes, in the TRUTH, in the existential reality of loss, death, hardship, we find our way to a different kind of ONEG, a different level of possibility and joy.

As Rabbi Simcha Paul Raphael writes in his prodigious work on death, dying and the many understandings of the afterlife in our tradition... we needn't be afraid to talk about death... instead we face it head-on in so many ways. Of course, in all of Yom Kippur's traditions, we have a clear reminder that we live and we die... that it's all so deeply fragile and short-lived, and we better make the most of the time we have. By experiencing that fear and, yes, sadness, we have the option to live better, to have more joy...

And think about how HEAD-ON we face death itself. At our funerals, we ourselves bury the dead with the dirt around the grave. And we live out our grief in public, saying Kaddish in a minyan, a quorum of ten... and, of course, reciting Yizkor in community.

As Raphael writes, "we always recognize that we are a community of bereaved. For Judaism life and death are interwoven into the very fabric of the universe. We don't deny death because we don't deny life; we affirm that life and death are sacred dimensions of human existence."

This year more than ever. We are a community, a nation, of the bereaved. But that is not all we are.

The thing about crying is that sometimes it all just feels so hopeless. It all just feels so pointless. But maybe we can allow our crying can be a different kind of crying.

I'll never forget many years ago... I was despondent about a loss I was experiencing. There was one afternoon where I couldn't stop crying. And I couldn't imagine that I would ever feel better. Thankfully, I was at the home of a wise friend... She said to me, "May this crying not be in vain. May it lead to healing. May it be part of the process of getting to the other side."

I'll never forget that moment, because I do believe it changed something in me. It made me feel that the deep feeling of loss could change, that it didn't always have to be that way.

And it made me feel that the crying could be TOWARDS something, instead of a falling into a hole of hopelessness and despair...

Maybe that's what Rav Moshe Isserles meant when he suggested that for SOME people crying can be an ONEG, a delight, because it moves the sadness out of the heart.

Maybe his idea could be a bit of a prayer for us... to imagine that with every cry, with every feeling of despair, something could move in us, something could shift in our loss. Something USEFUL could

be happening, even in our deepest sense of loss. And that would be worth doing on Shabbat or on a holiday, or in this moment of Yom Kippur.

How do we make our tears “useful”? What action might we take in our grief that would move us forward? Where are there lessons from those we miss that we are meant to learn? A legacy that we are meant to live?

My friend Rabbi Melanie Levav founded an organization called the Shomer Collective, dedicated to helping people plan for and live out end-of-life conversations. She points to a quote from *The Cancer Journals* by author Audre Lorde.

“In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences.”

One way of making our tears USEFUL and even perhaps JOYFUL is to let them spur us to our deepest values... Rabbi Levav asks: What are the words you do not yet have? Don't wait. Say the four things: Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you.” What do you need to say this year in particular? How can you use words to make memories into blessings?

This is a countercultural moment. Even on Shabbat, we are allowed to cry... IF it can lead us towards a new emotion, if it can lead us towards something better.

Let's not be afraid to buck the trends, to be real, to acknowledge life's hardest moments, to cry when we need to and to speak when we have something to say. And in so doing, we can also ask God, or even our lost loved ones, for help in the process... offering a prayer that we be guided to know HOW to use these tears, to find ways to move from despair to a new feeling... to let these tears be channeled towards HOPE, possibility and even, who knows? Maybe even ONEG SHABBAT, joy.