

An Exploration of Joy

Rosh Hashanah is our annual opportunity for Re-Set. Remembering who we are in relationship to all of Creation; remembering what our work is; why we are here; what's really important; what are the values that we want to live by? Stepping out of our habitual ways of being and reacting to our world, we step back on Rosh Hashanah and say to ourselves, each other and God, "How am I doing? Where might I be caught in patterns of negativity, narcissism, pettiness, self-loathing, stinginess or small-minded survival strategies? How might I have lost my connection to the big picture, the wider perspective?"

After this honest assessment, we can step back and share a vision of self-realization; imagining together how we might fulfil the potential that is hidden within us and between us.

The key component in this work of Re-Creation is JOY. Not the fleeting joy of a passing mood or reaction to good fortune, but the deep inner wellspring of Joy that comes forth when we are being true to a soulful purpose. This kind of Joy gives us an abiding sense that all is well. When we have access to this inner wellspring, we just naturally enjoy simple pleasures. We find the humor in things. We allow joy to carry us through the painful times. We take ourselves lightly and remember to play.

"Whatever life gives to you," Brother David Steindl-Rast explains, "you can respond with joy. Joy is the happiness that does not depend on what happens. It is the grateful response to the opportunity that life offers you at this moment."

עֲבֹדוּ אֶת־יְהוָה בְּשִׂמְחָה בְּאוֹר לְפָנָיו בְּרִנְנָה

Psalm 100:2 ... Serve God (do your holy work) with Joy. Come into that Divine Presence with exultation.

(Oren Jay Sofer) “To do any kind of work—and especially work of service, healing, and social change—requires both external and internal resources. We need resilience to face pain. We need strength to persevere through challenge. And there’s nothing quite like joy to bring resilience and strength to the heart.”

Joy is the indication of inner spiritual freedom. Joy blossoms with the recognition of the overpowering truth of the miraculous nature of existence. I touch upon this truth and then lose sight of it EVERY day. The truth is I am wired to look for and notice what’s wrong. I don’t think this is just a Jewish thing, but having a long history of catastrophe might just make us more vulnerable to the patterns of catastrophizing.

The Italian says, “I’m thirsty. I must have wine.” The Frenchman says, “I’m thirsty. I must have cognac.” The Russian says, “I’m thirsty I must have vodka.” The German says, “I’m thirsty. I must have beer.” The Mexican says, “I’m thirsty. I must have tequila.” The Jew says, “I’m thirsty. I must have diabetes.”

If we are to serve God with Joy, then clearly we need to do some serious re-wiring. Because of the miracle of Neuro-plasticity (the capacity of the brain to reorganize itself and create new neural pathways), I approach this project with a sense of hopefulness, and I also know that I am faced with some serious work. My spiritual practice becomes the essential vehicle to do this work of re-wiring, of opening to the miraculous and accessing that wellspring of Joy that is in me. Deep down I know that Joy is the natural state of my soul. Our

celebration of Rosh Hashanah opens the possibility of stepping on to a new path, fueled by Joy. We're here to inspire each other on that path.

Last Spring, I doubled down on this work and spent a couple months doing what I called the "Joy Experiments." Rachmiel and I have decided that we need to get out of town to escape the Juniper allergy season, so we rent a small shack on the beach in San Diego, right on the boardwalk. Each morning I take a long walk and encounter a wide range of humans and dogs. As I took in the variety of creatures that shared my beach, I began watching my own inner patterns of judgment and reactivity. There was a homeless camp of scruffy and sometimes scary characters. There were the stiff, starched and slightly bland Jehovah Witnesses, the shirtless young surfers showing off to their bikini clad admirers, the college kids who had been partying all night, the overweight vacationers looking for safe and familiar pleasures. I watched my mind get caught up in its preferences and prejudices... and I was having a pretty good time. But I was curious.

What would happen if I just decided to enjoy everyone? I began by entertaining the hypotheses that this was possible.

The next morning (and every morning after that) I left our cottage and waved goodbye to Rachmiel saying, "I'm off to do my Joy Research." Then I set a firm intention to enjoy each and every being on the beach. There I went... same beach, same characters, but a radically different stance towards it all, embodying an attitude of curiosity, adventure and openness. A smile bloomed from deep inside and was reflected in the world. After a while I noticed the falling away of judgments, a dissolving of my defenses, a new permeability. Being an introvert with a somewhat shy personality, this was all new territory. It began to feel as if the whole world was blessing me, and I was opening and quenching my thirst for that blessing.

It reminded me of my joyful response to seeing wildlife when I travel. That muskrat peeking out at the edge of the pond, that giant moose looming in the forest, that eagle gracefully swooping down along the river- I am filled with such joy at these encounters.

This same joy began to rise in me as I witnessed the raw animal wild aliveness of the people on the boardwalk. Their pure being-ness overshadowing anything I could notice about them. The miracle of their existence overriding all of my likes and dislikes or my stories about them.

After a couple weeks I came home one morning, with such a look of surprise on my face and said to Rachmiel, "It feels like I am re-wiring my brain." I liked who I was becoming through this joy experiment. And I was also filled with remorse. "Why haven't I been doing this my whole life?!" I had a taste of how that wellspring of joy in me could be unlocked, how it could change everything, allowing alienation to be replaced with a sense of connection to all living beings.

I proved to myself that I know how to do this. And I know that my joy is contagious and this is what I want to spread. And yet... so often, I forget to enjoy what is right in front of me. What gets in the way of accessing this joy that is in me? I get distracted. I fall into habit. I go unconscious. I become fearful and then cover up my fear with judgment. I become overwhelmed or discouraged. I become a victim of circumstance.

Today I want to remember that my best self loves a challenge and will joyfully step up; My best self is jubilant with the possibility that I can be of service. Our re-set can set us on this path of joyful service.

Rosh Hashanah is an opportunity for that re-set, accessing that inner wellspring of joy. It's a time for remembering and reminding each other that it's not "out there"; it's inside us, waiting to be revealed.

On Yom Kippur we will read from Deuteronomy which reminds us: It's not too hard and it is not far off. It's not in Heaven or beyond the sea. It is so close; it's in your own heart, awaiting your discovery.

Even though it often seems our lives and this world are filled with *Tzuris* (trouble), Rosh Hashanah is the time to look inward and discover the joy that is in you.

Desmond Tutu, who has experienced an abundance of *Tzuris* (trouble) in his life, tells us, "Discovering more joy does not save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken." (Desmond Tutu)

On Rosh Hashanah we call out the words of Jeremiah, a prophet like Tutu who also had his share of *Tzuris* as he witnessed the fall of Jerusalem and our journey into exile. And yet God spoke through him, saying "I will turn their mourning into Joy."

וְהִפַּכְתִּי אֲבֵלָם לְשִׂשׂוֹן

V'hafachtí evlam l'sason

I will turn their mourning into Joy.