

# Be Happy. Yom Kippur.

*Julie Hilton Danan*

MY FATHER HATED YOM KIPPUR. WITH ITS SOMBER atmosphere, minor key, and ritualized breast-beating regret, who could blame him? Although Dad had long since traded the mumbled *al heits* of his East Coast youth for the high synagogue High Holy Days performed under the dome at our classical temple in South Texas, he had not grown to love the day any more. So perhaps it was fortuitous that his role as a physician sometimes called him away from the annual observances, in order to save a life.

I'm sure that I was influenced by my father's dim view of atonement day, and for good reason. Yom Kippur is not, of course, fun. The instructions of the day are to "afflict your souls" [LEV. 16:31], which we accomplish with a full day fast (for healthy adults and teens) including abstention from food, drink, bathing, anointing the body, sexual relations, and wearing leather shoes. Combine that physical deprivation with a program of five services that center on lengthy communal confessions of our annual wrong-doing, throw in Yizkor to remind us of our personal losses and a gory martyrology to recall our people's sufferings, and you have the perfect recipe for a twenty-five hour ordeal. Modern liturgies do not necessarily detract from the traditional guilt and grief, but build on it. My own congregation piles modern day environmental and social sins on top of our confessional, and uses the *Kol Haneshamah* Mahzor that offers a martyrology with forty-eight pages of tragic stories from the Roman Empire through the Holocaust.

Raised with this doleful view of Yom Kippur, I was understandably surprised, at the age of nineteen, to arrive at my future husband's Moroccan Sephardic synagogue in Ashdod, Israel. Worshippers stood, hands outstretched and eyes uplifted like Jewish evangelicals, actually smiling as they sang together by the hour in an energetic upbeat way, almost as if delighted

that we had sinned because that gave us the beautiful opportunity to be forgiven by God. *Hatanu lifanekha rachem aleinu!* / We have sinned before you, have mercy on us!<sup>1</sup>

And I am not the only one for whom synagogue music opened the gates of Yom Kippur joy. “When Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik first came to Germany in 1926, he was shocked when he heard the joyful tunes that were sung there as part of the Yom Kippur liturgy. He then realized that it was quite appropriate because ‘there is also great joy on the day that our sins are forgiven.’ Soloveitchik noted that the community recites the Al Heit prayer “with a sense of confidence and even rejoicing.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg has written about her happy surprise during Rabbinic school, to attend a Jerusalem synagogue where singing and even dancing on Yom Kippur was the norm, which opened for her a whole new experience of Yom Kippur as a joyful day of forgiving, letting go, and living in the moment.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Jewish tradition has long recognized the joyful aspects of Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is not considered a mournful day; like a festival it cancels sitting shivah [MISHNAH MO’ED KATAN 3:6]. As on a festival, we also say Shehecheyanu [B. ERUVIN 40B]. Medieval Kabbalists even posed the paradox that Yom Kippurim (its Hebrew name) is somehow Yom Ke-Purim, a day “like Purim.” Various commentators have used that play on words to note that they are both days on which fate and free will intersect, days on which we expand our consciousness to grasp a bigger picture of reality.

Further, the Babylonian Talmud relates that Yom Kippur was historically a day of utmost elation for Israel:

Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel said: There were no finer days for Israel than Tu B’Av [the Fifteenth of Av] and the Day of Atonement, during which the daughters of Israel would go out in borrowed white garments — so as not to embarrass she who had none. The garments required ritual immersion for purity.

The daughters of Jerusalem would go out and dance in the vineyards. They would say: “Young man! Lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself” [or] “Don’t set your eyes on beauty, but set your eyes on a (good) family. Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain; a woman who fears the Eternal, she will be praised.”

And [Scripture] continues, *Give her of the work of her hands and let her deeds praise her in the gates* [PROVERBS 31:30]. And thus [Scripture] also says, *Go out and see, daughters of Zion, King Solomon with the crown that his mother gave him on the day of his wedding, the day of his heart's joy* [SONG OF SONGS 3:11]. "The day of His wedding" means the giving of the Torah. And "the day of His heart's joy" means the building of the Holy Temple, may it be rebuilt soon in our day! [TA'ANIT 4:8, B. TA'ANIT 26B, CF. B. BABA BATRA 121A-B]

According to Rashi, the reference in Song of Songs to King Solomon, *Ha-Melekh Shlomo*, hints at none other than God, the "King of Shalom/Peace," while his "mother" refers to the People of Israel, *Knesset Yisrael*. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz explains in his Talmudic commentary that God's joyful occasions signify Yom Kippur, when tradition has it that the Torah was given a second time with the second set of Tablets. The following day Moshe announced the building of the Mishkan (the first "Holy Temple"), and Yom Kippur was the dedication day for Solomon's Temple as well.

In the continuation of the Talmudic passage [TA'ANIT 30B-31A], the discussion circles back to the mishnah: "Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel said: There were no finer days for Israel than the Fifteenth of Av and the Day of Atonement." *Bishlama*, sure, the rabbis nod, we can easily understand why Yom Kippur would be a day of joy, because "it holds forgiveness and pardon, the day when the second set of Tablets were given." However, the Fifteenth Day of Av (Tu B'Av) needs a long explanation to show that it, too, is a day of forgiveness and reconciliation.

For me, the Rabbis' problem here seems backwards. Tu B'Av as a day of dancing and courtship? *Bishlama*, of course! Tu B'Av, with its warm summer full moon, its midsummer's night's dream, has become recognized as the favorite day for Jewish weddings, and even in modern times as Jewish Sweethearts' Day. But Yom Kippur as a day of romance? That calls for some justification. I learned from Rabbi Yitz Greenberg to see the Day of Atonement as an enactment of our own deaths (fasting, wearing shroudlike white, seeing ourselves tried for capital crimes, *viduil*/confession, shouting out the Shma), or as Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi puts it more gently, "a non-fatal death," in which we get an opportunity to "begin our new incarnation" during this lifetime. It's harder to see this day of self-denial as a wedding celebration. (On

the other hand, Jewish weddings have picked up some aspects of Yom Kippur: pious couples fast on their wedding day and are considered forgiven of sins, while brides wear white and grooms traditionally don the same *kittel*/robe worn on Yom Kippur.)

Yet somehow the Talmud hints that Yom Kippur is a cosmic wedding. The Second Tablets, carved after the sin of the Golden Calf, are the quintessential symbol of reconciliation and renewal, the wedding contract with our creator, while the Holy Temple is our wedding canopy. The feminine principal courting the masculine, the woman crowning the man, have overtones of Sephirothic secrets and messianic equality. Tractate Ta'anit caps off with more explication of the dancing girls and their courtship lines, which is suddenly bound up in a concluding messianic vision:

Said Ulla Bira'ah in the name of Rabbi Elazar, "The Holy One, Blessed Be He, will in the future make a dance for the righteous, as He sits in Gan Eden, and each one points with his finger, as it is said, *In that day they shall say: Here is our God; we trusted in Him, and He delivered us. This is the Eternal in whom we trusted; Let us rejoice and exult in his deliverance!* [ISAIAH 25:9]

The borrowed garments of the dancing maidens, the female initiative, recall that on Yom Kippur all are equal before God. This theme is prominent on Yom Kippur. We start our Kol Nidre prayers by calling on divine and earthly permission to pray "with the transgressors," meaning all of us. Our prayers are in the plural, all Israel responsible, one for the other, sinners and saints alike. The circle of the dance is a symbol of equality, each dancer, each point connected equally to the divine center, what Buber called "their true You."<sup>4</sup>

This image of the girls in their white, purified garments recalls the purification of Yom Kippur, and the dancing of the ancient women and the eschatological Tzaddikim merge together and whirl us into the impending joy of Sukkot and Simchat Torah, with their endless rounds of circling hakafot and dance with lulavim and Torah scrolls. At my synagogue we begin Kol Nidre with what I've been told is a Hasidic custom of a *hakafah* /circling with the Torah scrolls, drawing a taste of the joy of Simchat Torah into Yom Kippur, while singing, *Ohr zarua la-tzaddik u-l'yishrei lev simchah / Light is sown for the righteous and joy for the upright of heart*" [PSALMS 97:11]. While the Temple stood, Sukkot reigned as *heh-chag* — the premier holiday of the year — and

Yom Kippur was on one level the necessary cleansing needed in order to celebrate the harvest, the fast preceding the feast.

Why not be joyful on Yom Kippur? We start the day with Kol Nidre, untying the knots, releasing the vows, a ritual demanded by the folk despite rabbinic consternation. The words vary but scarcely matter; the power of its melody is the real key to our unlocking. Yom Kippur is a day of being fully seen and fully forgiven, of being judged with divine eyes and still received in boundless mercy by the One whose thirteen compassionate attributes we chant again and again. It is a day of knocking on one's own heart as if asking it to open wider.

Why not be joyful on Yom Kippur? It's a survivable ordeal that brings a measure of transcendent satisfaction, like running a distance race or embarking on a vision quest. To be sure, it is a day of afflicting the *nefesh*, for Kabbalists meaning the life-force connected to the body. (Tip: the best way to be gentle on the body is to gradually withdraw from caffeine from Rosh Hashanah and be well hydrated and fed the day before the fast.) But for the *neshamah*, the higher soul, Yom Kippur is a veritable day spa, twenty-five blissful hours of purely spiritual pursuits. Rabbi Shlomo Riskin explains that even the mitzvah of not wearing leather shoes ideally gives us a sense of being

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like Moses at the burning bush or the High Priest at his service, a state of immediacy and wonder. The lightheadedness of fasting, the chanting and repetition of words that are not there “for more information,” as Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi teaches, shift us into a different state of being. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev said that fasting on the two full fast days of the Jewish calendar was really no problem, for on Tisha B'Av, the day on which the Holy Temple was destroyed, who *could* eat, while on Yom Kippur, who *needs* to eat?

What's not to be joyful? OK, maybe it's also because I'm a small-town rabbi, and almost everyone is at shul today, drawn by the magnetic pull of the Day itself, the day that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called, “our Holy of Holies,” our indestructible shrine. No one suggests it would be more conven-

ient to hold the fast on another date, the way some people move their Passover Seders to accommodate out-of-town guests. I live in a town with a tiny, somewhat isolated Jewish community, but on Yom Kippur we feel connected to Jews around the world, gathering to pray across every time zone on the great circle dance of the planet, even those fasting while skating round the emptied streets of Tel Aviv.

On Yom Kippur I particularly appreciate the intimacy of a small congregation. Not what Reb Zalman calls a “jumbo-jet” temple with Rabbi and Cantor as co-pilots and passive congregants in rows belted in for the duration, but close enough to see everyone, with chairs rearranged like theater in the round. Music is a big part of the joy. Our band plays lively, upbeat melodies and everyone sings and claps along. My husband leads beautiful Moroccan *piyyutim*/poems and another congregant embodies the Ashkenazic cantors of old. We respond to the admonitions of Isaiah with *divrei Torah* from members who engage in community service, as our empty stomachs give us a miniature experience of the hunger and suffering of those in need. The afternoon lull brings time for discussion and meditation for the stalwarts, and some bibliodrama on the book of Jonah even draws laughs. Hopefully today there are some small acts of reconciliation, some grudges and quarrels that are gently released.

But amidst the coziness, the questions are stark and existential. Are my actions deserving of this divine gift of life? Have I honored my relationships? What values am I willing to die for...and do actually I live by them? Some of us have devoted the season to such reckonings; some strive to engage with them every day. But at least for today, we stop and withdraw from the world, paradoxically to engage most fully with Life.

And not only the living are in attendance today. We stop to sense the presence of our departed at Yizkor and to share our memories with a hug or a tear. The day is more haunted than any other Jewish holiday. Unlike the festivals it is not a commemoration of a discrete historic event, but an echo of countless reconciliations and returns. Here I feel the superimposition of all ages at once, all the generations crowding around the bimah: priestly officiants, protesting prophets, medieval martyrs, Soviet dissidents. I think I see Franz Rosenzweig out of the corner of my eye in an obscure Berlin *shtiebel*, deciding to keep the faith, and there in another corner I spy Rudolf Otto in a humble North African synagogue, encountering the Numinous. Across time and space

we all dance, circling the invisible center, pointing at it from our different points in the wheel of time.

Flashes of my own past lives within this incarnation come up, too. As a teenager in 1973: standing at the temple in San Antonio as the congregation buzzed with news of an attack on Israel. Little did I dream that at the same time in Ashdod, Israel, a young Air Force man was being called out of prayers for unexpected duty, my future husband. Days after 9/11/2001: comfort trickles into the cracks of my broken heart when I see that a Muslim friend has joined us all day in fasting and prayer. As darkness falls, a young woman named Sabrina blows the shofar longer and more powerfully than I have ever heard, later explaining, “I felt like it came through me.”

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Finally, there is Ne'ilah. Like all of life, a sense of anticipating a desired goal competes with the sense that our time is running out. The very word *ne'ilah*/locking evokes the irrevocable clang of gates behind me, of a past that can never be recovered, and paradoxically an opening to the greatest exaltation, *ne'elah*/the peak experience. Since our congregation breaks the fast together, the shul is packed, and congregants are full of emotion. We've broken through the wall, we have our second wind. We stand for the whole service if we can, holding one another up, pouring out our souls in prayer with one more Avinu Malkeinu, one last blessing. Whatever is happening in life is magnified here at Ne'ilah. Last year, two miracles: standing again with my husband the cantor as he slowly recovered from a stroke, and seeing one daughter putting her hand on her pregnant sister's belly as our first grandson jumped inside to the music. The final *Shma Yisrael* and *Adonai Hu Ha-Elohim* transport us to Mt. Carmel with Elijah, take us to the very edge of our lives, bear us on the shofar's final wail to the end of days or the cry of a newborn infant. Next Year in Jerusalem!

A moment ago we stood at the Temple Mount. Now we are back at summer camp. Someone dims the lights as the next Bat/Bar Mitzvah kid holds the giant braided candle. Exhausted but smiling, almost laughing with relief, congregants sing Havdalah and Eliyahu Ha-Navi, arms around each

other while the kids wave glow sticks. Released, cleansed, renewed. My husband and I embrace; with God's help, we've done it again. The lights go up, the enchantment dissipates. Everyone is hurriedly folding up their *tallitot*, hugging one other, rushing off to the overflowing break-fast buffet.

I stand here for a moment, soaking it all in. Happy.

NOTES:

- 1 Examples of Moroccan music for Yom Kippur recorded by my husband Avraham Danan can be found at <https://soundcloud.com/avrahamdanan/sets/days-of-awe-moroccan-prayers-and-piyutim>.
- 2 "Why Yom Kippur is Also a Day of Joy: Its Implications for the Philanthropic Community," Michael Bohnen, [ejewishphilanthropy.com](http://ejewishphilanthropy.com), October 6, 2011
- 3 <http://danyaruttenberg.net/yom-kippur-and-joy-2896>
- 4 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Touchstone, 1971), 163.



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