

Shabbat Shalom. And moadim l'simcha.

On this Shabbat of Sukkot, we're in a kind of limbo vis-a-vis our ritual rhythms. We're already in a new year, but we haven't yet finished *last* year's annual Torah cycle. And if *last* week we read the penultimate parsha in the Torah, this week we're back to Exodus for a special Sukkot reading, prolonging the final part of Deuteronomy by a few days so we can save it for Simchat Torah...next week. And even then, we'll try to access the *joy* of Torah by reading one of the saddest parts of the narrative, which is to say the death of Moses. So here we find ourselves, as we do each year right about now, literarily adrift and dysregulated in the midst of our joyous festival.

That disorientation is in some ways a metaphor for what many of us are feeling tonight more broadly. As we read the thrilling and historic news of a ceasefire and hostage deal between Israel and Hamas, my sense is that many of us are also holding a mix of feelings. Joy, of course, for both Israelis and Palestinians. Trepidation, perhaps, that someone or something will throw a wrench into the plans, God forbid. Excitement that the remaining hostages will soon be home, but aware that they are not yet. And many of us are hopeful that this deal could augur a renewed peace process between Israelis and Palestinians, even as we remain cautious about so many important details that have yet to be agreed upon.

It is undeniably a time of hopefulness and joy. And at the same time, as we face the magnitude of this moment in history, we're confronted by our own smallness. Our inability to say definitively what will happen next, and aware that our hopefulness feels fragile.

Enter Sukkot, which is a holiday devoted to all of those things: the ways in which we're vulnerable to forces beyond ourselves, symbolized by the sukkah. The fragility and impermanence of life itself, as emphasized by our annual reading of Ecclesiastes. And also, of course, Sukkot is famously z'man simchateinu, the season of our joy, in which we are commanded to

express joy even if we don't feel exclusively joyous for any number of reasons.

Probably each year on Sukkot, I give a drash about *either* fragility or joy. But given the fragile joy I feel right now, I'm thinking about how both of those themes – fragility *and* joy – might interact with one another.

As Jews, we have a cultural predisposition toward never being too happy about anything. After declaring something positive, we sometimes say “kinna hurra,” to make sure we're not tempting the evil eye. And, as we know, when we expect something good to happen in the future, we don't say mazel tov, but “b'shaah tovah,” may it come at a good time. As if to reserve celebration only for when we know absolutely that something good has already happened. My guess is that this approach to good news...is an evolutionary holdover from when Jewish life was more challenging than it is today, and when it might have protected us to never get too accustomed to things going our way.

But Sukkot comes in as a kind of corrective to that emotional script, insisting that we stop while we're ahead and enjoy what we can in this life.

“You shall hold a festival for the Eternal your God for seven days,” we read in Deuteronomy. V'hayita Ach Sameach, “and you shall have nothing but joy.”

In this moment, I imagine God taking on the tone of a parent saying, “you're gonna have this festival and you're gonna like it!”

But Rashi's reading is gentler than that one, while also retaining a parental flair. He says V'hayita ach sameach is the language of assurance, as in, don't worry, little one, you're going to be happy. It's going to be OK.

And so, today, following Rashi's reading, I'm trying to accept that assurance. Trying to notice the good and just embrace it without explaining it away. Allowing myself to have hope.

In the words of Ecclesiastes: b'yom tov, heyeh v'tov. In a day of fortune, rejoice! And for those of us who aren't feeling it, the verse goes on to say, Uv'yom ra'ah, re'eh. And on a day of misfortune, reflect. It's a beautiful wordplay. Uv'yom ra'ah, with an ayin, re'eh, with an aleph. On a bad day...look! Reflect! Meditate!

In other words, if the news is good, do your best to enjoy it. And if the news is bad, look inward. Not necessarily because it'll be any better inside, but by reflecting on what's really going on, we create the conditions for ourselves in which we actually *can* feel joy...at some point in the future.

When I read *this* verse of Ecclesiastes, I'm not channeling a parent so much as I'm imagining a therapist. Uv'yom ra'ah, re'eh might as well be the motto of psychoanalysis. To look inward, not to change the feeling, but to see the feeling. To really feel it, and move through it.

It's not a brilliant psychological conclusion, but it is an important one nonetheless: that there's no way out of our feelings but through them. Once we feel our feelings, with a little luck, we move beyond them. And this is the bittersweet truth of Sukkot. For better or worse, nothing lasts forever, Ecclesiastes reminds us over and over again.

Hevel havalim, the scroll begins. Utter futility!—said Koheleth—All is futile! What real value is there for a man In all the gains he makes beneath the sun? One generation goes, another comes.

It's so melodramatic. But at its core is the idea of acceptance.

Accepting when we feel happy. Accepting when we feel sad. Accepting that we aren't actually all that in control. No matter how much we try to physicalize our joy, through the lulav and etrog, or through feasting on Sukkot, we're just not that in control of what we feel.

Instead, it may be that the emotional purpose of Sukkot is *leshev basukkah*, to *sit* in the sukkah: fulfilling the mitzvah of Sukkot by allowing ourselves to *dwell* right now with whatever we're feeling. With an awareness that it won't last. A kind of "this, too, shall pass" mentality, per Solomon, who supposedly wrote Ecclesiastes. To really *feel* all the feels. To become aware that whatever feelings we bring *into* the sukkah are as temporary as the structure itself. For it is in this way, that we can truly live.

One of my favorite parts of the Talmud's treatment of Sukkot is the way in which the rabbis cleverly try to reinterpret the meaning of *pri etz hadar*, the fruit of a majestic tree. According to Leviticus, we are supposed to celebrate this holiday with a *pri etz hadar*, but what is that, really, they ask? An etrog is where they end up, which is to say the fruit of a beautiful tree or the beautiful fruit of a tree. But they go on and on, wondering, "is it really hadar, is it really beautiful, if it's a discolored etrog? What if it's blemished or pierced? And what if hadar refers to the tree and not to the fruit itself?"

But Rabbi Abahu comes in with a mic drop moment. Do not read *pri etz hadar* as the beautiful fruit of a tree, he says, rather read it as *pri etz haDAR*, with an emphasis on the final syllable, which is to say, the fruit of a tree that dwells. An etrog, the rabbis explain, dwells on its tree for a very long time.

Centuries later, Rambam would point out that an etrog stays fresh long enough for us to complete the holiday, unlike, say, asparagus. The etrog is, therefore, a symbol of what *dwells*. As produce, it also doesn't last forever. So it's a perfect prop for the impermanence of Sukkot. But it stays in place for just the right amount of time, allowing us to move through this holiday by holding it.

So may it be for us, with whatever we're dwelling *on* (or in) right now. Whatever feeling we're bringing into this holiday and this Shabbat will not last forever. Including joy and hopefulness, of course. About the world. And including any trepidation we may also feel.

But if we allow ourselves to *dwell* in this imagined Sukkah, on whatever feeling we're having – we might actually get through it. Even as we approach these days with a disorienting mix of fragility and joy, accepting that everything is fleeting, and none of us is control of the world...may we also discover enduring insights that stay with us, nourishing our lives in 5786 and for a long time thereafter.

Shabbat Shalom.