



Rabbi Scott Goldberg

Fun is Holy

Rosh Hashanah Morning Main Sanctuary Service 5784 - September 15, 2023

Shabbat shalom and shana tova.

A couple of months ago, Liz and I had the privilege of enjoying dinner with wonderful Leo Baeckers. During dinner, we shared about worldly travel plans and summer camping adventures. We also seemingly struck every conversation that has drenched our country and our world this past year, if not this past decade. We spoke about:

- ChatGPT and its implications for our world;
- our extreme climate, each and every year, with devastating heat, storms, earthquakes, and floods;
- and Israel and the United States, our ancestral homeland and our home right here, both veering closer toward extremism and chaos and further from democracy.

Each one of these exchanges could have developed into a relevant and necessary High Holyday sermon. We are all talking about them. Case in point, last night.

Near the end of our meal, I was asked a question for which, in hindsight, I should have been better prepared: “Scott- now that you have been a rabbi, our rabbi, for one year, what do you think? Any reflections?”

I found myself lost in thought, then, articulating how this past year has been meaningful for me, professionally and personally. I feel so blessed to have lived one year around the sun in a community that prioritizes learning, justice, acts of kindness, togetherness. This year has been exploratory and fulfilling. This place, and you who inhabit it, are special.

That evening, however, I failed to articulate two additional insights from my first year in the rabbinate, which I want to share today:

First, I witnessed too many moments of despair and sadness. Here, in this sanctuary, many of us have experienced loss this year. There has been grief. Illness. Recovery, back to illness again. Personal tragedy. Like our ancestors mourned and fasted for the destructions of our Temples in Jerusalem--exile, inquisition, expulsion, rinse and repeat--nor can we avoid despair in our own lives. Throughout my tenure, I have acutely learned that we are a people who cannot avoid suffering.

Second--and this was most challenging to reconcile with the first--I also failed to articulate that this year has been incredibly fun.

I would be remiss to omit that I have had fun: leading Shabbat and holiday services, singing and playing music with you; I have had fun Bubbling Up, learning how to meditate, and watching you choose to live a meaningful Jewish life together. I delighted in frying latkes and playing poker together. I enjoyed traveling with our teens to Washington DC to lobby important issues on Capitol Hill. And, if you can believe it, one of my most fun experiences: dressing up like a medieval prince, dancing around the Outdoor Chapel, making the sounds of a rooster...

In all seriousness, I believe that Judaism gives us space to hold suffering. It must, because suffering is ever present. We cannot run away from suffering. At the same time, I also believe that Judaism gives us space to have fun, as well.

As the shofar blasts *tekiah*, our *machzor* invites us to joyously call out: הַיּוֹם הִרְתָּ עוֹלָם, *hayom harat olam!*¹ Today, Rosh Hashanah, is the birthday of our world! Today is a day in which all of God's creations reflect on and celebrate accomplishments and joyous occasions!

Many of us may associate today with the gravity of the season, with repentance, with yearnings to be written into the Book of Life. Be that as it may, our biblical tradition goes so far as to associate Rosh Hashanah with precisely the opposite of gravity: *fun*. Torah teaches: on one Rosh Hashanah in the middle of the 5th century BCE, after having finished writing the very first Torah, Ezra the Scribe gathers those who returned from the Babylonian Exile to the Temple's main courtyard. Ezra stands atop a wooden tower alongside other officials in the Jewish community. They hold up the Torah scroll, chant the Aliyah blessing, and read Torah publicly, for the very first time.² Ezra convenes everyone to instill a great spirit of joy, camaraderie, and fun amongst the people. We know this, because "Ezra and Nehemiah tell the people *not to have sadness or grief on [Rosh Hashanah]*, but [rather] postpone their fasting and tears for after Sukkot."³ **Today is a day to elevate fun... and we are transgressing the call of Rosh Hashanah if we do not.**

On this massive communal birthday, we have a responsibility to understand that Judaism does *not* only comprise the serious. We have a responsibility to understand, and embody, that Judaism encompasses everything--from the gravity, all the way to the levity. Fun is important. Fun is necessary. **In the wake of crumbling devastation, all the more reason we must uplift fun.**

I must share one important caveat before moving forward: we only hold capacity for fun if our basic needs are met: sustenance; rest; shelter; physical, mental, and emotional safety. Other

¹ Rosh Hashanah Liturgy, Shofar Service

² Adapted from Nehemiah 8

³ Nissan Mindel, *The Complete Story of Tishrei*, 1982, Revised Edition, Brooklyn, p. 21-22.

forces may make it remarkably difficult, if not infeasible, to prioritize fun: sickness, poverty, trauma, job insecurity, general feelings of languishing. These struggles may need to come first. And, after they do, Rosh HaShanah, the birthday of our world, has the potential to be the ultimate celebration for all of us.

Based on her qualitative research including thousands of people around the world, contemporary science journalist Catherine Price identifies fun as the confluence of three primary psychological states- **playfulness**, **connection**, and **flow**.

Playfulness, for Price, as she penned in the New York Times this summer, “[...] isn’t about playing games. It’s a quality of lightheartedness that allows you to do things in everyday life just for the pleasure of it.”⁴ In my eyes, playfulness is about embracing a spirit of freedom and releasing ourselves from the notion that we must be perfect in all our doings, or we must achieve something with all of our time. I envision this spirit of freedom in our tradition when the Israelites escape slavery from the narrow straits of Egypt and cross the Sea of Reeds. Miriam takes a timbrel in her hands and leads the people Israel to play instruments, dance, and sing!⁵ That is freedom. That is release. Price notes a tangible benefit, with various studies reporting playful people exhibiting reduced levels of stress in their daily lives. Seeking playfulness is paramount.

Connection refers to an emotional state in which we embody a shared, special experience with another person or a group of people. A set of 19th century Hasidic teachings describes a common scene: a gathering of Jews with their rabbi, all driven by the shared purpose to seek the Divine. The Hasidic teaching goes: “The [Divine Presence] dwells among all gatherings of ten Jews.”⁶ Surely, if there are more than ten, then the [Divine Presence] is even *more* revealed [...]!”⁷ Every person will feel heightened. Elevated. We need not state-of-the-art programming in order to experience connection. A walk, a snack, coffee or tea, discussing an article... they all suffice in bringing us together. Like 20th century philosopher Émile Durkheim’s coined term “collective effervescence,” connecting with one another enables us to experience magic, sensations of the sacred, sometimes incomprehensible. Connection is vital to fun.⁸

Flow. Have you ever felt so entirely focused in an activity to the point where you have lost track of time? You may have been exercising, or gazing at a Dodgers’ walk-off home-run, or playing a musical instrument. That is flow. Flow exists in our tradition, too, and it’s not any human character who exhibits this trait... it’s God: Our Talmud teaches that when the Temple was

⁴ Catherine Price, “We All Need To Have More Fun,” The New York Times, 2023

⁵ Exodus 15:20

⁶ Mishnah Avot 3:6; Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 39a

⁷ R. Kalonymus Kalman Epstein of Krakow, 1842. Translation from the Institute for Jewish Spirituality.

⁸ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 1915, as translated by Joseph Ward Swain in 2012, London

destroyed, the world's inhabitants lost more than just the Temple: they lost their ability to laugh. However, even in the midst of the most destructive war in Jewish history to date, God still laughs. We read that God laughs as God studies Torah... teaches children..., and rides a chariot, visiting eighteen thousand worlds. God laughs while sitting and listening to choirs of angels, and playing in the ocean with the great *Levyatan*, a multi-headed sea serpent. These are not activities that God enjoys every now and again--God experiences all of these... every single night.⁹ Riding around on a chariot and playing games with a sea serpent, losing track of time, being present? That is flow.

According to Price's research, fun that is not trite... that which we might call today *deep fun*... is a "fun" that embodies those three elements: playfulness, connection and flow. Deep fun is shown to have a measurable impact on our moods and our mental health, reducing anxiety and negative self-talk, increasing laughter and feelings of connection to others and to one's authentic self.¹⁰ And if that is not enough, *if God has fun*, then deep fun, therefore, is also godly. **Fun is holy.**

Not everyone agrees that fun should be central to living a Jewish life. Some might even sense something trite in centering "fun" on Rosh Hashanah. With great seriousness, medieval commentator Maimonides teaches: "Synagogues and houses of study - we do not behave frivolously in them [...]: joking around, making fun, or empty conversation. [...] [W]e do not eat in them, we do not drink in them, we do not benefit from them, and we do not stroll in them [...]."¹¹ Maimonides succinctly states: Judaism should not be fun. Perhaps from when we were children, we may remember someone who impressed upon us that Judaism should not be fun. We may have our own Maimonides.

Today, let us heed the call of Rosh Hashanah by honoring "fun." Let us give ourselves the gift of authentic, holy, deep fun. To do so, I propose that we follow an acronym that I created all by myself: F-U-N. (Five years of graduate school!):

F- Find flow

U- Unlock our passions

N- Navigate the calendar

Find flow. Flow, being utterly engrossed in the present, is one of the most critical aspects of deep fun, and yet one of the most challenging to grasp. Flow is *not* passive, like kicking off our shoes and watching Netflix, browsing the internet without purpose, or taking a nap. Flow *is* following in the footsteps of Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlov by going on a mindful walk, noticing the birds chirping, the hard concrete, or an ankle's twitch. Flow *is* falling into a book or article without acknowledging the passing of time; eating slower than usual to observe the tastes,

⁹ Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 3b

¹⁰ Catherine Price, "We All Need To Have More Fun," The New York Times, 2023

¹¹ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Prayer and the Priestly Blessing, 11:6

shapes, colors, smells, and textures otherwise unnoticed. Flow is feeling entranced during the Hashkiveinu. Find flow, and invite it in.

Unlock our passions. There is no need to leave this sanctuary and become a professional skydiver. I am not recommending that. I am not *condoning* that. To unlock our passions, it can be best to imagine and bring forth memories of when we ourselves had playful, connective, flowy fun. What was that activity? Who else was present? What made the experience so enjoyable? Is it replicable, even in small doses? Responses to these questions can help identify how and with whom we should spend our precious time.

Navigate the calendar. Deep fun--playful, connective, flowy fun--can be difficult to prioritize. Sometimes we do not know deep fun is happening until halfway through the experience itself. That said, we can at least set ourselves up for success by making time for those who make us laugh and for activities we find enjoyable. There is no better time than today, on our new year, to map out that which brings us connection and joy. I invite all of us to take some time today, maybe after this service, and make a date with someone you've been meaning to connect with. It might be the fun we all need.

F-U-N. Find flow. Unlock our passions. Navigate the calendar.

This new year of 5784 might feel like a strange time... or at least a pretty difficult time... to prioritize fun. War. Famine. Climate disasters. Corruption. Why fun, now? My answer: I can assure you that we would not be the first to laugh in times of despair. Talmud teaches that Rabbi Akiva, one of our tradition's most prolific sages, and his colleagues are walking about the ruins of the Second Temple of Jerusalem, destroyed by the Romans. Among the ashes, the rabbis come across a small fox prancing about. Immediately, his colleagues burst into tears. But Rabbi Akiva begins to laugh. "Why are you laughing?" his colleagues ask him. "Do you not know that the Torah's prophecy has been fulfilled, that God's home on this earth has been plowed like a field?" Rabbi Akiva responds, "That is exactly why I am laughing: for, if you believe that your Torah's prophecy has been fulfilled, then I also believe that my Torah's prophecy shall be fulfilled as well, because it is also written that all people shall dwell in the streets of Jerusalem once again."¹²

If there can be catastrophe, then there can also be laughter. Even amid catastrophe, there *must* be laughter.

A prayer on this Rosh Hashanah day, for all of us:

Eloheinu v'elohei avoteinu v'imoteinu, O God of our ancestors, may we merit a year of hope. Despite it all, because of it all, may we gift ourselves excitement and joy.

¹² Talmud Bavli, Makkot 24b

May you rid us of pain, challenge, and suffering

On Isaac's great day of fear and sacrifice, may we redeem his namesake, *yitzchak*, with laughter!¹³

Grant us opportunities to connect and learn and grow over breakfast and coffee, phone and Zoom. Grant us with passions, and space and time for them: more guitar; more chess; more painting, Mah Jongg, and Bubble Up; more walks, potlucks, and jokes. May we embody deep fun: playful fun, connective fun, flowy fun.

F-U-N. Find flow. Unlock our passions. Navigate the calendar.

Shana tova v'keifa, a healthy and joyous year ahead for all.

¹³ Adapted from Genesis 18 and 21