

A Day Like Purim

Note: Included pictures were displayed during that particular part of the sermon.

I want to describe two moments of joy.

Sept. 28, 2009, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Yom Kippur morning. Despite the façade, Julia and I were **not** excited. On a day reserved for contemplation of past deeds and solemnity, our minds



could not have been further from the significance of Yom Kippur. I left the house to go lead services at the University of Pennsylvania, with my phone fully charged and the back-up rabbi's number easily accessible. There's already a somber mood associated with our Day of Atonement, but my *al chet* that day was only directed towards one thing – my failure to take the rabbinic busy-season into consideration when Julia and I had thought about our own family planning. A day of contemplation became a day

of personal condemnation. And so the joy? The joy was that Kayla waited until the day *after* Yom Kippur to arrive in this world.

March 6, 2004, Jerusalem. Purim. Now, that was a great day. There was something special about a group of 20-somethings, all studying to be rabbis and cantors, drinking, singing, and celebrating in the narrow streets amidst bustling bars in the holiest city in the world. Jews of every variety – Haredim with *hamentashen* crumbs in their beards, secular Israelis with flasks in hand, young schoolchildren with elaborate costumes, all dancing together in the streets, blurring lines that are



so often razor sharp during the rest of the year. That was the year Purim became more than just an opportunity for carnivals and costume parades; it became a staple in my yearly cycle of celebrations.

Unfortunately, we don't rent out Royce Hall for our Purim celebration. We don't pack the seats donning costumes, use this stage to re-enact the story of Purim, or create a cacophonous racket with our *groggers* – but how amazing would that be?! Instead, we rent this space to observe a day usually remembered for its somber tone, it's pounding headaches from caffeine withdrawal, it's laboriousness, and its attempt to re-align our spiritual and emotional spines.

But why am I even mentioning Purim *today*, the holiest day of the year? Why even draw a comparison? Besides the fact that they are both Jewish holidays, there's not much that connects the two. On one, you eat and drink excessively; on the other, you refrain from all sustenance. One is the holiest day of the year and the other is generally described as the "Jewish Halloween". On one, we feel compelled to show up, and on the other... maybe we stop by the carnival or bid on a few auction items.

But what if I were to tell you that these holidays are two sides of the same coin? The ancient rabbis taught that when we celebrate holidays, we are mandated both to perform religious duties towards God and *also* to enjoy ourselves in physical ways¹.

In other words, there are two halves to each holiday – half dedicated to tradition and God, and the other half focused on how you can physically enjoy yourself during the holiday – that usually translates to what foods we're going to eat.

There are two holidays during the year, however, that focus on only half the experience. We actually have it all wrong when we put all our religious weight on one but neglect the other. In fact, I think we have completely misinterpreted the meaning of both and need to completely re-envision why we're actually sitting here today.

Today is not supposed to be a day of sadness, of looking back on failures and faults, but a day of optimism, of celebration, of rapture!

So maybe now you're thinking that Purim and Yom Kippur are related because:

1. Someone's always passing out by the end of both.
2. On Yom Kippur you don't drink and after Purim, you swear you'll never drink again.
3. One has Kol Nidre, the other has someone dressed up like Dr. Dre.
4. The phrase 'the whole megillah' seems like it was created specifically to describe Yom Kippur services.
5. Sneakers make any rabbi look like he is in costume.²

¹ BT Beitzah 15b

² <http://www.bangitout.com/articles/viewarticle.php?a=885>

But really, it begins with names. While we call this day Yom Kippur, it has a different name in the Torah.

אֶד בְּעָשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה
יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים
הוּא מִקְרָא-קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם וְעִנִיתֶם אֶת-נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם...:

Lev. 23:27 Mark, the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be a sacred occasion for you: you shall practice self-denial...

In the book of Leviticus, it says, *Ach b'asur la'chodesh ha'shvi'i hazeh, yom ha-kipurim who mikra-kodesh yi'hiyeh lachem v'eenitem et nafshoteychem*. Translated as “Mark, the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be a sacred occasion for you: you shall practice self-denial.” The word for “Day of Atonement” is actually Yom Ha-Kippurim³. That’s a slight grammatical difference from the way we say it today – the biblical version adds *ha*, meaning ‘the’ and an *im* ending, which makes the word plural – ‘Day of the Atonements’ is a more direct translation.



In 18th century Lithuania, a well-respected and highly influential rabbi, called the Vilna Gaon by his followers, made a connection between Yom Kippur and Purim by using this biblical name of Yom Kippur - Yom Ha-Kippurim.

³ Lev. 23:27

Yom Ha-Kippurim does not mean “Day of the Atonements,” according to the Gaon. In Hebrew, the letter *chaf* can be used as a preposition at the start of a word, meaning ‘like’ or ‘as’. In other words, Yom Ha-Kippurim should be translated as Yom Ha K’Purim, ‘A Day Like Purim’. It’s an incredible re-allocation of holiday significance. According to this interpretation, celebrating Yom Kippur is an attempt to mirror the holiday of Purim. Two days that seem completely

incompatible become inextricably linked to one another, with emphasis placed on the holiday we tend to ignore as a day of masks and flasks.

One midrash, rabbinic commentary, states, “When all the other festivals are abolished in the messianic age, Purim will remain.”⁴ In other words, even in an age of perfection, the holiday of Purim will remain – not Yom Kippur, not Rosh Hashanah, not Passover, but Purim.

So, let’s just briefly review of Purim – Esther hides her Jewish identity when she marries the king of Shushan, Ahasuerus. By the way, the name Esther comes from the Hebrew root, *Hester*, meaning ‘hidden’. And besides Esther’s identity, there is one other hidden aspect of Purim – God. God is not mentioned even once in the Book of Esther. The king’s right-hand man is Haman (*BOO!*), who becomes livid when Mordechai, Esther’s uncle, doesn’t bow down to him. Haman decides to wipe out all the Jews in the kingdom, gets the king’s permission, and chooses the date of annihilation by drawing a date out of hat. That day, the 14th of Adar, becomes the day on which all Jews are to be massacred. When Esther hears that her people are to be killed, she gains the courage to reveal her identity to the king, who in turn has Haman killed and the decree reversed.



⁴ Midrash Mishlei 9:2



When Haman chooses the date for destruction, he does so by drawing ‘lots’, basically, by choosing a date out of a hat. The Hebrew word for ‘lots’ is *purim*, hence the name of the holiday. Purim, celebrated on the 14th of Adar, is a celebration of fate reversed; the upending of expectations – we were supposed to be wiped out, annihilated, but instead, we were spared, we were saved. It is a day when we recognize that much in life is luck of the draw.

We dress up, we act crazy, we laugh, we throw parties, all to exclaim, ‘we are alive!’ A Latin phrase seems most appropriate to describe our Purim mindset – *carpe diem*. On Purim, we celebrate by living as if there is *no* tomorrow.

But on Yom Kippur we celebrate that there *will* be a tomorrow, that we have made it this far. Yes, today is supposed to be a day of celebration! The world was born on Rosh Hashanah, but we are *reborn* on Yom Kippur. It is our day of resurrection. Today, our soul is offered another chance, urged to enter the world tomorrow as if it were brand new. And maybe that’s why we have trouble seeing this as a day of celebration, because to be authentically reborn is no party. It requires the scorching heat of self-scrutiny. It requires a sun-drenched magnifying glass to focus in on our heart and our intentions. Obviously, the intensity of the day is amplified by its physical characteristics, which in many ways, are supposed to make us feel as though we are participating in a rehearsal for death. Instead of donning masks, we don white clothes and *tallitot*, similar to those items in which we are buried; we put away our finery (the luxurious leather and sparkling studs), because no physical objects accompany us into the next world, only our deeds and our failures; we don’t eat or drink, because we don’t require sustenance when we’re dead. We spend the day offering prayers that remind us of the fragility of life.

But the process of being reborn began **ten** days ago on Rosh Hashanah.

By the way, that holiday has another name as well – Yom Ha-Din – Day of Judgment. Day of Judgment sounds more ominous than Day of Atonement, in my opinion. It’s on Rosh Hashanah when we first recite the Unetaneh Tokef prayer – who shall live and who shall die? Who by water, who by fire, who by stone, who by beast? It’s on Rosh Hashanah that we recall one of the most riveting and troublesome stories in the Torah – the Binding of Isaac. What an unsettling and provocative day and yet we treat Rosh Hashanah as though it were as celebratory as New Year’s Eve, midnight on December 31st or as enjoyable as a birthday party.

By now, we have had more than a week to examine our past actions, missteps, and mistakes. But today is not about the past; it is about the future. *B’rosh Hashanah yikateivun, uv’yom tzom kippur y’chateimun* - “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed.” Our time to examine the past has expired. Contrary to popular belief, last night, when we recited Kol Nidre,

we were not asking God to forgive our past vows and mistakes, we were actually asking God to forgive our *future* misdeeds, the promises we won't keep in this upcoming year. So we begin the process of looking ahead by asking to be forgiven for the mistakes we **will** be making.

This is not supposed to be a sad day, because even though this is a rehearsal for death, we are not dead!



We are alive! We made it to today. No matter how challenging, disappointing, damaging, dreadful, disastrous, obnoxious, or horrible this past year was for us, the reality is, somehow, we made it through. We survived the pain, loss, tragedy, regret. And surviving is something to celebrate. "Judaism is life intoxicated," says Rabbi Harold Schulweis. And it extends well beyond the familiar toast *l'chayim* – to life. According to the rabbis in Pirkei Avot, "One hour in this world is better than the entire world to come."⁵

We just read from one of the final portions in the Torah, Nitzavim, and towards the end, God states, "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life – so you and your offspring may live."⁶ We read this on Yom Kippur because today is the day we're faced with our mortality and we have a choice – are we going to go into the new year walking around like a zombie, or are we going to act like someone who is truly alive - vibrant, exuberant, tenacious, active, driven, curious.

This summer, I went to a matinee of 'World War Z', a thriller about an outbreak that leads to zombies taking over the planet. I went to see it because of a New Yorker review of the movie that I read while sitting at Starbucks earlier that morning. The reviewer asked, 'what is our obsession with the undead lately?' It's so true – there are zombies everywhere – in the bookstores, movie theaters, on television – the hit television show, The Walking Dead, a movie,

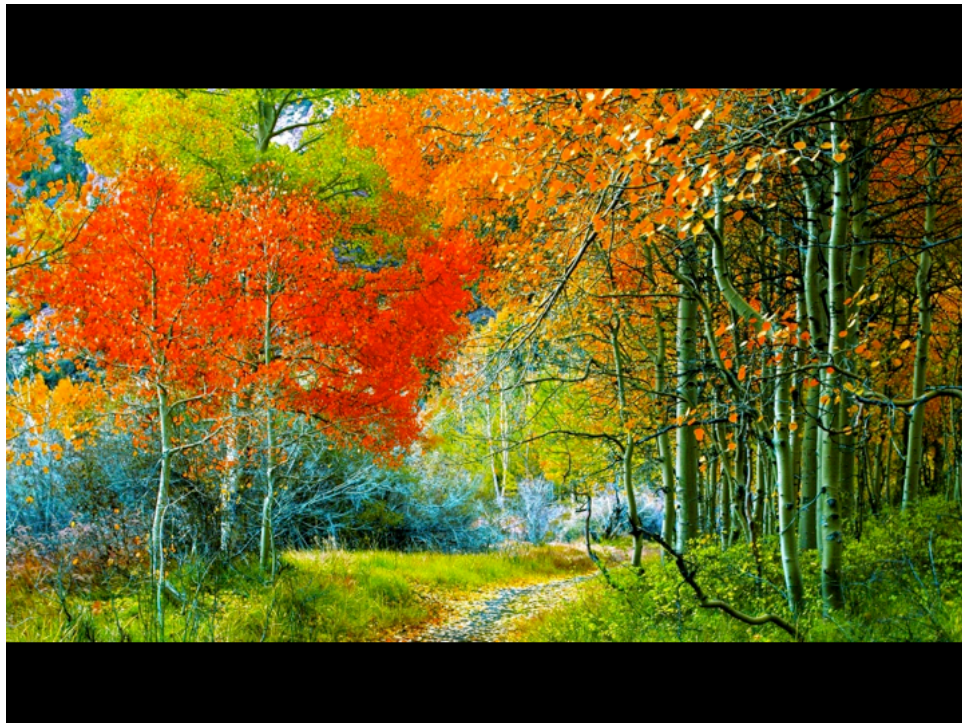
⁵ Pirkei Avot 4:22

⁶ Deut. 30:19

Warm Bodies⁷, which came out around Valentine's Day, about a zombie who falls in love with a human – I hear it was a huge success with teens and even some adults. But what really got me to leave the comfort of the coffee shop to head over to the movie theater was when the reviewer posed two questions –

“Are [zombies] what we fear we might become if we let ourselves go—soulless vessels of pure appetite, both ravaged and ravaging? Do they represent our apprehension of what hostility lies behind all those blank faces in the office, at the mall, across the dinner table?”⁸ Yes! Our obsession with zombies is linked to our realization that it has become so easy to walk through the day, the week, the year as lifeless, yet functional, creatures. We see those people all around us and we fear that we could become one of them.

We're not supposed to sit here all day, until the end of Neilah out of blind obligation. We're here all day because when the figurative gates close at the end of Yom Kippur, we're supposed to walk out of here and have a plan in place. We're supposed to know exactly what we're going to do when we wake up tomorrow morning. We're supposed to know how we're going to live. And we can't figure that out just by sitting in these seats for a couple of hours – we need to take the whole day, and that's on top of the ten days leading up to today in which we should have been thinking about all of this with great intensity. So I really hope you don't just plan to go back to business as usual when you walk out of this service. We have a lot of work to do between now and sundown.



⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvIBS9YPxYc>

⁸ http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2013/07/01/130701crai_cinema_denby?currentPage=all

There's a story about a man who had been wandering in a forest for several days, not knowing which was the right way out. Suddenly, he saw a man approaching him. His heart was filled with joy and he thought, "Now I'll definitely find out which is the right way." When the two men got close to one another, he asked the man, "Excuse me, brother, can you tell me which is the right way? I've been wandering about in this forest for days."

The man said to him, "Sorry, but I don't know the way out either. I've also been wandering about for many, many days. But *this* I can tell you: don't take the way I've been taking, for that will just lead you astray. Now, how about we look for a new way out together."⁹

I'd like you to ask yourself this question – is the path you are following leading you astray? Because **now** is your opportunity to look for a new way.

And on Yom Kippur, the possibility of finding a new way should be filling us with so much excitement!

There's a passage in the Talmud where Rabbi Gamliel declares, "There were no better days for Israelites than the 15th of Av and the Day of Atonement. For on those days Jerusalemite girls go out in borrowed white dresses, so as not to shame those who owned none...And they go out and dance in the vineyards and declare, 'Oh fellows, look around and see – choose what you want! Don't look for beauty, look for family. Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who has reverence for God will be praised (Prov. 31:31).'"¹⁰

This is pretty shocking stuff. Gamliel is declaring that Yom Kippur is a day of joy and celebration; along with one other day, Tu B'Av, which can only be described in the simplest terms as the Jewish Valentine's Day. And what happens on this day?! All the single ladies go out into the fields in borrowed white dresses and cavort with all the young bachelors. And while they prance around, they tell the boys that they shouldn't choose based on looks, they need to choose a girl based on her value-system and her family. On Yom Kippur, of all days, young men and women would ask themselves one of the ultimate questions about how they wanted to live – with whom do I want to spend the rest of my life? What values matter to me? What an incredible way to celebrate Yom Kippur! Talk about entering the new year feeling absolutely invigorated!

And there's something extra special about Yom Kippur this year. There happens to be one other name for today – who would have thought Yom Kippur could have so many names!

⁹ Agnon, S. Y. Days of Awe: A Treasury of Jewish Wisdom for Reflection, Repentance, and Renewal on the High Holy Days. Pg. 22.

¹⁰ BT Taanit 4:8

**Yom Kippur = *Shabbat*
Shabbaton = Shabbat of all
Shabbats**

***Oneg Shabbat* =
Delight of Shabbat**

Yom Kippur is also called Shabbat Shabbaton¹¹, which translates as ‘the Shabbat of all Shabbats.’ You’ve heard of Oneg Shabbat, of course. But do you realize that Oneg Shabbat does not mean ‘the time to eat lots of food after Shabbat services’? It really means ‘the delight of Shabbat’. Isaiah declares in today’s Haftorah, of all places, “call the Sabbath a delight”¹². Every week, we are commanded to enjoy Shabbat, to celebrate our day of rest. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav said “the joy

of Shabbat is the gateway to true freedom.”¹³ If Yom Kippur is the ‘Shabbat of all Shabbats’, then Yom Kippur is supposed to be the day of ultimate delight. It should be a day of celebration surpassing the joy we receive from a typical day of rest. And this year, that Shabbat of all Shabbats is happening on Shabbat!

It is time for us to reclaim the joy of Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement, our Day like Purim! “Both the joy of Purim and the feeling of Yom Kippur are grounded in the essence of life itself. On Yom Kippur a person feels that he is being given a chance to live in the future, despite his imperfect past. The joy of Purim, on the other hand, is for life itself.”¹⁴ Purim serves as our platform for physical enjoyment and Yom Kippur for spiritual fulfillment. In that way, these two holidays are two sides of the same coin.

Both these holidays center around the joy of being alive, of recognizing the incredible feeling of knowing that we have lived to today and that we better take full advantage of tomorrow. Please do not go to sleep tonight without answering this question - How am I going to celebrate life this year?

So let’s make a deal. Come up with an answer for that question – how am I going to celebrate life this year? – and let’s check in on March 15, 2014. Purim starts that evening. It’s almost exactly six months from today. I won’t be dressed as Dorothy this year, but I will be ready, with drink in hand, to hear how you’ve been living. *L’chayim*.

¹¹ Lev. 16:31

¹² Isaiah 58:13

¹³ Likutey Moharan II, 17

¹⁴ <http://www.morashasyllabus.com/class/Purim%20Unmasked.pdf>

Chiri Biri Bam (Yiddish Folk Song)

Translation of the Yiddish

When I say "Day of Shabbat"
You say "Chi-ri bi-ri Bim"

When I say "Day of Rest"
You say "Chiri Bi-ri Bam"

When I say "Chiri Bim"
You say "Chiri Bam"

When I say "Chiri Bam"
You say "Chiri Bim"

When I say "Jerusalem"
You say "Chi-ri bi-ri Bim"

When I say "Holy City"
You say "Chiri Bi-ri Bam"