

*This Is A Sermon About Joy – Rosh Hashanah Morning
September 12, 2026 – 1 Tishrei 5787
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith*

This is not a sermon about division and polarization. It is a sermon about joy. About the joy of being together as a group. A group of fans when the team wins. A group of kids singing the camp song. A group of friends sharing old jokes like they happened yesterday. A religious group sharing worship or faith or ritual. A group of Jews tapping into our feeling of connection and unity with a loved one in a chair above a dance floor at a simcha, with the taste of the brisket that you know is the best, with that cloying drop of Manischewitz wine that is too sweet to drink and gives the worst kind of hangover and somehow still tastes like the holidays and grandma's house and the warmth of Pesach or the joy of a stolen sip at your childhood temple's kiddush.

This is not a sermon about our people's long history of struggle. It is not about what Salo Baron called the lachrymose view of Jewish history, one of an ever-dying people, a people cast about at the whim of host nations and mercurial rulers.ⁱ No, this is a sermon about joy. About seeing that our people, for 3,000 years, developed and lived and thrived through vitality and culture. Through skimping all week to enjoy a real meal on Shabbos. Through dancing at weddings. Through a love of learning. Through artwork and music and food – so much food! Through a vital religious life and a real sense of responsibility for one another and for the joy of knowing that a whole community has your back. Ever dying people? No! Ever living people! Ever joyfully living people.

This is not a sermon about sociology or neuroscience or positive psychology – all of which are great, by the way. But this is a sermon about joy, the kind of joy that you know in your bones. It is the joy that peeks through even in bad times or scary times or anxious times. Because things have never been all good. How could they be all good when the world is filled with humans? But the lack of utopia need not cancel out moments of joy, objects of joy, feelings of joy. As Viktor Frankl observed in the concentration camps, even in the darkest of places, moments of beauty, humor, love, and yes, joy could sustain the human spirit.ⁱⁱ Indeed, joy reminds us of people's capacity for goodness even when everything is not good. If we have faith in nothing but that then we have a strong faith, indeed!

This is not a sermon about the Akeida, the binding of Isaac, or the Unetaneh Tokef, our who by fire prayer, or the Avinu Malkeinu or any of the themes that we commonly associate with High Holy Day worship. No, this is a sermon about joy. Which, perhaps, is perfectly paradoxically appropriate for what we call the Days of Awe, or translated just a bit differently, the Days of Terror. Yes, we read about Abraham almost killing his son. And we have festive meals with our families. Yes, we contemplate who will die and who will live. And we dress in beautiful clothing that makes us feel good. Yes, we consider our smallness in the great scheme of things. And we dip apples in honey to recognize the sweetness of life. This holiday embodies Judaism's religious commitment to the fact that seriousness and joy are not opposites, that we often find them tightly woven together, two sides of the same coin, of the same spiritual tender we collect and spend throughout our lives.

This is not a sermon about the fall of 2023 when Israel was attacked and Emanu-El had one or two funerals a week and antisemitism spiked even in Westchester. No, this is a sermon about joy. It is a sermon about the kind of joy that came to my home with the adoption of Yofi, our mini goldendoodle of Emanu-El fame. You see, Yofi knew nothing of the stress from outside. He knew nothing of the profound loss within our congregation. No matter the day I had had, I came home to a puppy thrilled to see me. A puppy with his tail wagging who wanted to play with the soccer ball in the backyard and go on walks and explore our local parks. Yes, he was a puppy who pooped in the house and woke us up at ungodly hours, but he brought so much joy that overwhelmed those little annoyances, joy that soothed my stress, joy that refilled my spiritual batteries so that I could comfort the bereaved and advocate for our homeland and work with partners near and far to ensure our society is one for all people.

This is not a sermon about the seemingly permanent state of hypervigilance that we seem to live in today,ⁱⁱⁱ the state of waiting for the other shoe to drop, the state of wondering who will say what and when, the state of tucking in our Jewish stars and looking suspiciously around the subway car. No, this is a sermon about joy. The joy that bubbles up and blocks out the news alerts and headlines and texts. The joy that comes seemingly out of nowhere and – no matter how serious we feel we should be in a moment – the joy that makes us laugh or smirk or even stifle the laugh. That joy cools our nervous system. (Uh oh, I guess this sermon does have a drop of neuroscience but it's important because even hundreds of years ago Maimonides knew that the body and mind are connected.) And today our nervous systems are on edge and ready for something to pounce. But joy says to our nervous system, "You are okay." When that happens cortisol levels go down, fight or flight fades, perspective returns, our shoulders drop, our jaws unclench. That joy is the best medicine for nervous systems coiled tight as can be. This is a sermon about that kind of joy.^{iv}

This is not a sermon about Trump or Mamdani or Netanyahu or Schumer or Johnson or any other politician whose name will trigger assumptions about your rabbi's political leanings or political agenda. No, this is a sermon about joy. A long time ago, 2,000 years ago, a different political ruler, a Roman ruler, decided to sack Jerusalem and burn our Temple and end our sacrifices and exile us from our sacred city. Jerusalem lay in ruins, and one day four rabbis walked on the Temple Mount itself, the place on which the Temple had stood, the hill held up on the west side by a retaining wall that we now call the Western Wall. Those rabbis walked on the mount observing the burnt stones of the Temple and neared its center, neared the place where the Holy of Holies had stood, the inner sanctum where God's earthly presence had dwelled when the Temple stood. A fox ran from that very spot and three of the rabbis burst into tears, bereft that God's dwelling place had been reduced to a fox's den. But Rabbi Akiva? Rabbi Akiva smirked, and then giggled, and then laughed until tears of joy poured from his eyes.

"How can you laugh in the face of this devastation?!"

"Don't you see?" asked Akiva, "Prophecy told us that the Temple would be destroyed and our people exiled. The prophecy has been fulfilled."

"What on earth is joyful about that?"

“If that prophecy was fulfilled then we know that the prophecy of our redemption will also, surely, be fulfilled.”

And the others understood. “Akiva,” they said, “you have comforted us. Akiva, you have comforted us.”^v

Akiva's joy had not rebuilt the Temple. It had not undone the destruction. It had not made their grief disappear. But it had changed what they could see from where they stood. They realized that joy could brighten even the bleakest moments, changing our perspective, helping us refuse to let our present circumstances have the final word. That is a joy that sustains and uplifts and depends not on our circumstances or the events of today but on how we approach the world, on having faith that our perspective can lift us above, can help us transcend even the most challenging circumstances.

This is not a sermon about loss and mourning, fear and uncertainty, about the losses of October 7th or 9/11, about the fear of antisemitism, the uncertainty of where we fit in when so many of us feel that the people and groups in which we used to thrive no longer want us, no longer want our full selves,^{vi} that kind of loss and mourning, fear and uncertainty that cause paralysis and lead to inevitable failure and further loss. No, this is a sermon about joy, about working that joy muscle so that, even in moments of heartbreak, we can access joy. I am privileged to witness the power of this when I plan funerals. Not every time I plan a funeral but most of the time, I get to see a family seemingly lost in grief begin to laugh at the hijinks of the loved one they are mourning. Their grief has not disappeared. For that moment, the joy simply sits beside it. And somehow that joy helps us endure. Sometimes that joy just comes. But we can also learn to make room for it, to fight against the inevitable feelings of despair in the face of so much loss, to grasp the glimmers of joyful light when they appear, when they are possible, and allow them to fuel us and push us forward. That kind of joy expands the soul and pushes it toward the heavens.^{vii}

Where do we find this joy? Where do we find the kind of light that can illuminate the dark, lift our spirits, give us clarity and purpose and a sense of hope? We find it in friendship,^{viii} the real cry-on-their-shoulder-be-vulnerable kind of friendship^{ix} and the don't-I-know-you-from-kids-soccer friendships. We find joy, too, in the amazing natural world around us.^x We find it in the endless shades of green we counted on that hike at camp with the jaded 12-year-olds who had to admit a bit of wonder that so many greens could appear on one riverbank. We find it in the flower growing in the crack in the sidewalk. We find joy in music,^{xi} in art,^{xii} in dance.^{xiii} We find it in communal art to redeem the pain of captivity and in your grandchild's finger painting. Joy is the bliss of your favorite band playing your favorite song in your favorite venue while dancing next to your favorite people. And we find it in things, yes, things. Cherry blossoms and bubbles, swimming pools and tree houses, googly eyes and sprinkle-covered ice cream – these things bring joy to everyone across all lines of age and race and place and gender and politics.^{xiv}

Our world is hard. Living is hard. That is not new. And one of the reasons that we Jews have persevered for 3,000 years is because we know how to rejoice in the face of this hard world. We rejoice around holiday tables and at simchas, joyful lifecycle events. We rejoice at Jewish services and Jewish classes and Jewish programs and Jewish travel. We are known for our humor, a humor that now the whole nation laughs along with, a humor so much of which was

born out of hardship and anxiety. We are a people who face the real challenges of life head on, face them without blinking, face them not as some kind of puzzle or hidden blessing, but face the challenges and sadness in life for what they are. And we are able to do that because we know that one of the most important ingredients in our spiritual reserves is joy itself.

This year, 5787, let's commit ourselves to joy. Yes, we should by all means read the news and protest and vote and argue our values. We should take care of our health and our business, our schoolwork and our relationships. We should do all the hard work that these ten Days of Awe demand, all the hard work that life itself demands. But we should do it all while seeking bits of joy to refill our spiritual and emotional reserves: that chair above the dance floor, the camp song, a vase of roses, a puppy wagging its tail, a spray of bubbles blown for a toddler, a beautiful painting, a transporting piece of music. The world does not have to be joyful for us to experience joy. Our lives do not have to be whole for us to experience joy. For 3,000 years, Jews have refused to give suffering a monopoly on the Jewish story. Joy is one of the ways we survive without allowing what threatens us to define us. We have never waited for the world to become whole before we danced.

כן יהי רצון

May this be God's will

ⁱ Salo W. Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation: Shall We Revise the Traditional View?," *The Menorah Journal* 14, no. 6 (June 1928): 515–528. Baron challenged the "lachrymose" view of Jewish history as primarily a story of suffering and persecution.

ⁱⁱ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), esp. Part One, "Experiences in a Concentration Camp."

ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce S. McEwen, "Protective and Damaging Effects of Stress Mediators: Central Role of the Brain," *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 8, no. 4 (2006): 367–381. McEwen describes the cumulative "wear and tear" caused by chronic activation of the body's stress response as "allostatic load."

^{iv} Samantha Dockray and Andrew Steptoe, "Positive Affect and Psychobiological Processes," *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 35, no. 1 (2010): 69–75. Research associates positive affect with lower cortisol and favorable cardiovascular and stress-related biological processes.

^v Talmud, Makkot 24b, adapted

^{vi} American Jewish Committee, *The State of Antisemitism in America 2025*. 31% of American Jews reported feeling uncomfortable or unsafe in at least one social, political, professional, educational, or other space because they were Jewish.

^{vii} Judah Loew ben Bezalel (Maharal of Prague), *Netivot Olam*, Netiv Gemilut Chasadim, ch. 4. The Maharal contrasts distress, which produces constriction, with joy, which creates *harvacha v'hitpashtut*, spaciousness and expansion.

^{viii} *Proverbs* 27:9 — "Oil and incense bring joy to the heart, and the sweetness of a friend comes from sincere counsel."

^{ix} Brené Brown, "The Power of Vulnerability," TEDxHouston, June 2010, video published by TED, January 3, 2011. Brown explores vulnerability as essential to human connection, belonging, love, and what she describes as wholehearted living.

^x Talmud, Berakhot 43b — "He who goes out in the days of Nisan [spring] and sees trees blossoming says: 'Blessed is He who left nothing lacking in His world, and created in it goodly creatures and goodly trees to give pleasure to mankind.'"

^{xi} *I Samuel* 16:23 — "And whenever the spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the harp and played with his hand; so Saul was refreshed and felt better, and the evil spirit departed from him."

^{xii} Exodus 35:31-32 — Describing Bezalel, the artisan of the Mishkan: "And He filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge in all crafts, to design artistic designs..."

^{xiii} 2 *Samuel* 6:14 — "And David danced before the Lord with all his might," expressing pure, uninhibited joy.

^{xiv} Ingrid Fetell Lee, "Where Joy Hides and How to Find It," TED2018, April 2018. Lee explores the tangible, sensory qualities - including color, abundance, roundness, elevation, and surprise - that evoke joy across people and cultures.