



## “INSPIRING JOY”

Appropriately, our attention has been focused on Iran this summer. This evening, allow me to share a Jewish tale from Persia, ancient Iran. The debate about Iran is important, but this story is more uplifting.

A certain Rabbi Beroka lived in the Persian province of Khuzistan. Rabbi Beroka shopped in the market of the provincial capital, a loud and busy place. Surprisingly, the prophet Elijah would often appear to the rabbi in the market. Once Rabbi Beroka asked: “Elijah, is there anyone in this market, who has earned a place in the world-to-come?” Elijah looked around for a moment and replied: “No.” The next moment, two men walked by them. Noticing the men, Elijah said: “Actually, those two will have a place in the world-to-come.” Rabbi Beroka was quite interested. He walked over to the apparently blessed men and asked: “What do you do?” The men replied together: “We are jesters. When jesters see people who are depressed, we cheer them up. When we see people fighting, jesters work hard to make peace between them.” (Babylonian Talmud Taanit 22a)

It probably doesn't surprise us that these jesters merit redemption, in a traditional sense, according to this story. Certainly, we are well familiar with the weight that Judaism puts on the pursuit of peace. This summer has seen a debate about how to work towards peace, but no disagreement about the ultimate value of peace. However, let us imagine that this story concluded that the jesters' value came primarily from their bringing joy to sad people. Peace is among our highest priorities, but Judaism embraces joy as well. As we gather for these serious days of repentance, let us not forget the value that Jewish tradition places on simcha, that is—happiness, and on hope. Yom Kippur is a heavy day of self-reflection, but Rosh Hashanah ushers in this season with a balance of joy and of repentance.

As our new prayerbook offered before our candle lighting:  
“Creation's brightest light, the mystics say,  
was hidden at the dawn of time.  
But on this sacred night, this night of hope and joy,  
a glimmer of that light is here.”  
(Mishkan HaNefesh Rosh Hashanah, page 10)

The candles we lit at the beginning of service are not only ritual items, appropriate for Shabbat and other holy days. The candles are symbols ripe with the possibility for interpretation and meaning. Their light is meant to inspire us to look into ourselves, to look towards the Ner Tamid, the Eternal Light, representing God's presence, and for the broad sparks of possibility in our world. Rosh Hashanah's goal is not only to be open to uplifting melodies and emotions. Rather, we should allow Rosh Hashanah to be a primer, helping to prepare us for a year during which we are open to the positive in life. Yom Kippur encourages us to take our lives and actions seriously, but seriousness does not preclude happiness. As another reading in this new machzor encourages:

“This is the season of the soul—  
a time to rejoice  
a time to reflect.” (page 12)

For some, life has been sweet and easy, but for so many we are leaving a year that has included difficulty and trial. Rosh Hashanah reminds us to search for the good in our world and our lives. These High Holy Days should remind us that Jews have been willing to rejoice since ancient days. The rabbis tell a story about the great Biblical David, who preceded them.

“Every night, King David would hang his harp over his bed in Jerusalem. In the middle of the night, the north wind would begin to blow. The wind would move the harp's strings. Slowly, slowly, a melody would emerge. When that happened, David would wake up and sing along with his harp. He would add words and create his psalms. These psalms were David prayers.”  
(Babylonian Talmud Brakhot 3b, as told by Joel Grishaver, *Stories We Pray*, Torah Aura, Los Angeles, 2012, p.9)

Let us remember King David not only as a warrior or a ruler; let us recall that the Bible first presents him as a musician, entertaining others. It was not far-fetched for the Rabbis to consider David as the author of the Book of Psalms. Today, most scholars believe that many different authors wrote the Biblical Psalms over a span of hundreds of years. However, the depth, the angst, and, yes, the splendid rejoicing of the Psalms were animated by King David's spirit. Standing here before our ark, we should be inspired by King David's willingness to “whirl with all his might” before the ancient Ark. (2 Samuel 6:14)

Jewish worship is filled with Psalms and references to Psalms. Already tonight, we have sung *Esa Einai*, Psalm 121, and “*May the Words of My Mouth*,” from Psalm 19. Our prayers throughout these High Holy Days and each Shabbat overflow with the passion that fills the 150 Psalms in the Bible. The Psalms were the prayerbook of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. The Rabbis then used them as the foundation of the kind of prayer that we know. Individual Jews often turn to the Psalms for comfort. Actually, the Christianity also drew from the same inspiration in constructing their worship.

Actually, tonight's Rosh Hashanah worship will be enriched by a treatment of the Psalms that was composed for a cathedral's music festival. It is fitting work, in part, because the rendering maintained the original Hebrew and the composer was Jewish. This summer marked the 50th Anniversary of Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*. Bernstein fulfilled a commission brought to him for the 1965 Music Festival at Chichester Cathedral in Sussex, England. (We sing it tonight, in part, because Jimmy Galdieri, BHC's Music Director, spent most of the summer studying and singing in England.) Tomorrow morning, we will hear from Psalm 131 and 133, Psalms that draw from the depths of the Psalms self-critical spirituality. This evening, we will hear from Psalm 108 and the unbridled praise of Psalm 100, “*Hariu L'Adonai Kol Haaretz*,” as the score translates it, “*Make a joyful noise unto the Lord all ye lands.*” “*Iv'du et Adonai b'simha*, Serve the Lord with gladness.” All these sentiments are fitting for the High Holy Days. Our festivals should combine the depths of self-reflection and the heights of praise.

In a 1965 poem about Chichester Psalms, Leonard Bernstein described the composition as: "...my youngest child, old-fashioned and sweet." (published then in the New York Times) Bernstein's loving phrase, "old-fashioned and sweet" also brings us directly to Rosh Hashanah. Sweetness is traditional at the beginning of the Jewish New Year. We eat apples and honey, and other good things. We wish each other, 'L'shanah Tovah U'm'tuka, May you have a good and sweet New Year.' Our prayers are filled with hopes for goodness in 5776. We hope to part with the past year with its sweet memories as well. Our prayerbook introduces the Rosh Hashanah Kiddush, saying:

"Lift this cup for the year that is gone.  
For mountaintop moments and the taste of joy;" (p.78)

We don't pretend that any year can be entirely sweet, but Rosh Hashanah reminds us to prepare for and savor goodness when we encounter it. I plan on listening to Chichester Psalms this Rosh Hashanah, but I did sing the piece with my high school choir. In that, I take a reminder from the story of Elijah and the Jesters (a good name for a band). The Jewish approach to joy is not just that we should each grab happiness for ourselves. Our tradition teaches us that we increase our joy but lifting up others with us. Thus will these Psalms help set our year towards sweetness. The value of our future goodness is balanced by the hope, joy, and, yes, the peace, that we can help to bring to others and to the world. Hariu L'Adonai Kol Haaretz, may all the world feel a reason to raise their voices in praise. May our actions in this New Year help increase our sense of sweetness and joy. L'shanah Tovah U'm'tuka