When Joy Waits

We are living in a holding pattern — suspended between anguish and anticipation.

As reports emerge that hostages may be released in the coming days, our hearts hold both hope and heartbreak. It is not yet certain. We have been here before — waiting, praying, trying to breathe.

And how fitting that this moment arrives as we reach Shemini Atzeret — the festival whose name literally means to pause, to linger. God says to us, kasheh alai preidatchem — “your departure is hard for Me.” Stay one more day. Don’t rush away.

Shemini Atzeret is a day between festivals, between Sukkot and Simchat Torah, between joy and the return to ordinary time. It is the sacred art of holding — the moment before the dance, the breath before the song.

Judaism has never been afraid of complicated feelings.

We know that joy and oy often live side by side. At weddings, we break a glass even as we shout mazel tov, because no happiness is complete while the world is still broken.

We carry sorrow into our celebrations, and we carry blessing into our grief.

Our tradition doesn’t flatten emotion; it sanctifies its complexity.

But sometimes we lean too far toward the oy.

Kohelet’s words echoed through our sanctuaries just days ago, “a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.”

This weekend we will stand precariously, hesitantly between them; between the tears that still fall and the joy that waits to be released.

For two years, we have been living with heartbreak — wars, loss, abandonment, unbearable waiting. We have learned how to mourn. I hope we have not forgotten how to rejoice. Because life without both is not fully living.

Sukkot, the holiday that will conclude in these next few days is called *z’man simchateinu*, the time of our rejoicing. Not the time of our comfort or our certainty, the time of our rejoicing.

To rejoice is not to deny pain; it is to insist that pain will not have the final word.

In English, the word rejoice isn’t just “to feel joy.”

It literally means, “to joy again”.

The prefix re- signals something that returns, something recovered, rediscovered, rekindled.

So when we rejoice, we don’t create joy out of nothing; we return to joy that was once ours but has been buried by pain or time.

To rejoice is to find joy again after its absence.

The same truth lives in Hebrew.

The word simchah (joy) shares its root with sameach (glad) and s’mach (to gladden) — forms that, like verbs of movement, imply flow and return.

They are not nouns of permanence; they are actions, responses to blessing.

Hebrew verbs unfold in time — something happens, and we respond.

Joy in Judaism is temporal, cyclical, and renewable.

It is not a possession we keep; it’s a practice we repeat.

As Psalm 126 says:

> “Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.”
> Joy comes after — it follows the tears.
> It doesn’t replace them; it answers them.

Grammatically and spiritually, rejoicing always assumes there was something before, something we survived.

To rejoice is to practice resilience.

It’s the human way of saying: I have felt sorrow, and I still choose joy.

When the exiles returned to Jerusalem in the days of Nehemiah, they gathered to hear Torah read for the first time in generations. They wept as they listened, realizing how much they had lost. But then something remarkable happened:

> “And all the congregation of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths, for since the days of Joshua son of Nun the Israelites had not done so. And there was very great gladness.”

(Nehemiah 8:17)

There was very great gladness.

Not because the exile was over, the city was still in ruins.

Not because everything was fixed, it wasn't.

Their joy came from the decision to celebrate anyway, to re-enter sacred time even with broken hearts. They did not wait for wholeness to rejoice. They rejoiced in the act of rebuilding itself.

That is what z'man simchateinu teaches us: that joy is not the opposite of sorrow but it's the sequel to it. And in this rare instance the sequel is better than the original.

Now, as the Jewish calendar turns to Shemini Atzeret, we are asked to pause before rushing back into the world.

The rabbis teach that while seventy offerings were brought on Sukkot for the nations of the world, on Shemini Atzeret there is just one, and offering for Israel alone. It is an intimate day, when God whispers, "Stay with Me."

This year, that whisper feels like the voice of our own hearts. The world holds its breath, hoping for release and reunion. We live this Atzeret as it was meant to be lived, in patient (or impatient) hope. Not yet dancing, but not despairing either.

To dwell in this day is to live the faith of Nehemiah's generation, to rejoice not only in resolution, but in resilience. To trust that holiness can dwell even in uncertainty.

If and when the hostages are freed, we must not be afraid to celebrate.

There will be time enough for mourning, reflection, and tears. But when light breaks through, we are commanded to let it shine.

Just as the Maccabees celebrated the Sukkot they had missed, we too must celebrate the joy we have deferred. We must let joy stand on its own, without apology, without dilution, without oy.

To rejoice fully, even after trauma, is an act of faith. It says: the human spirit can still rise; love is not extinguished; God has not departed from us. It is the embodiment of L'chaim, our ancient call, to celebrate life, because we know better than most just how precious, fragile, and sacred it is.