SWEET AND SOUR

Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – September 24, 2021

It has always fascinated me that we can fill the sanctuary for a Yizkor/Memorial service but Simchat Torah, Sukkot or Purim – holidays centered on JOY not OY draw sparse numbers.

Why do we travel miles and time zones for funerals at a moments notice but skip simchas – we were invited to months before?

What's more important to honour the dead or to celebrate the living?

One could make a reasoned argument for either position.

This contrast is highlighted this weekend – as it is every year with Simchat Torah and the Yizkor of Shemini Atzert – the 8th day of sukkot.

Sunday night this sanctuary will be full of children – carrying flags and dancing with joy – because that's what children do so well.

Free from the worries and stresses of adulthood, play some music, add some candy or sweets and it's a dance party.

Come Monday (cue the Jimmy Buffet song) – adults will fill these pews, they will take time off of work to recite kaddish for their loved ones.

We have separated the two events largely because to combine them as the tradition directs us seems like ham and cheese on a bagel, it just doesn't seem right.

But western sensibilities be what they are, we are doing it wrong.

In Israel, *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simhat Torah* are celebrated together. Which is actually the reform model as we too follow the Israeli practice of only 7 days of a Chag. Though we add a pediatric element that further relegates Simchat Torah to the Tot Shabbat crowd.

In any event it makes for an interesting juxtaposition of moods as Hakafot and the celebratory calling of Hatan Torah (the last aliyah of Deuteronomy) and Hatan B'reshit (the first of Genesis) – Hatan by the way means bridegroom - give way to the mournful tones of Yizkor.

The calling of the bridegrooms to the Torah is actually the echo of a tradition that takes place on the Shabbat immediately following a young couple's wedding, while

the memorial prayers recited for the dead call to mind the funeral services of our loved ones.

It is very odd, indeed, on this one day to -- symbolically speaking -- attend a funeral and a wedding all wrapped into one service. The Israeli writer, Aryeh Avivi, describes this scene in one Israeli synagogue:

The merriment stops, overpowered by a change in the climate; nevertheless, here and there, are still seen signs of "rebellion" against the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of tears. The people obligated to recite Yizkor gather in the vicinity of the reader's lectern; and in the western part of the synagogue others are assembled and drink, toasting each other "*l'hayyim*!" Life and death are face to face; there is rivalry between tears and mirth. At one moment mourning seems dominant, at another gladness. So it is, life and death meet, joy and

sorrow are coupled, a tear and glee kiss. The order of life and the shadows of the dead are mingled. The recalling of the souls of the departed and the rejoicing of the Torah are as one. Is that possible? Indeed, it is . . .

Truth be told Judaism seldom asks us to do the easy thing, rather what makes our tradition a way of living so endearing to many is that it challenges us to go beyond our comfort zone, to resist our natural inclinations and aspire to greater things, and greater things are often harder.

So the mixing of *simchat torah* and *yizkor* of Joy and Oy together on the same day is quite intentional – it is to place before us the reality of life, the sweet and the sour and compel us to live with both simultaneously.

Juxtaposing sorrow and joy has deep roots in Judaism. Every year the festival of Purim reminds us how,

according to the biblical book of Esther, the Jews of ancient Persia were saved from annihilation, the day before the carnival-like festivities is marked as a day of fasting. We're bidden to recall the perennial threat of destruction as a prelude to giving thanks for redemption.

Dow Marmur, Rabbi emeritus at Toronto's Holy Blossom Temple teaches that, "among the many definitions of what it means to be a Jew perhaps the most telling suggests that a Jew is a person who weeps with one eye while laughing with the other. What may be physiologically impossible has become historically and psychologically factual. Jews all over the world — especially those who witnessed and survived the Holocaust, and those who experienced Israel's wars — testify to it in their daily lives."

This may also be part of the Jewish message to the world: though tragedy is, alas, inevitable and must

never be denied, salvation and triumph are also at hand. To live to fully, individually and collectively, is to acknowledge, and yes celebrate, both.

This emotional quandary is the direct result, and direct expression, of what Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik terms our "dialectical existence" - an existence defined by conflicting emotions.

The Rav as Soloveitchik is known explains that in order to effectively respond to the complexity of our existence, an existence that "abounds in dichotomies and contradictions," we must apply the complete table of our emotions - engaging
"the totality of our emotional life."

Furthermore, he explains that we must realize that our emotions make up a continuum, such that every emotion "is born out of a previous emotional experience

and points toward a new experience into which it will gradually pass."

He explains that an emotional experience is made up of more than a single primal emotion (Joy or Sadness), and that an experience obtains a depth of meaning when contrasted to various, even antithetical, emotions.

We laugh at funerals as we remember our loved ones. We are greeted with a ting of joy at a shiva when we see friends we have not seen for years, perhaps friends we have only because the deceased brought us together.

We have a moment of sorrow and melancholy as we look around the joy filled seder table and realize who is no longer there. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Torah passing that skips a generation or misses a bubbie or zayde who would have loved this moment.

The Rav writes that "the spectrum of emotions manifests... in an all-embracing experience. ...In each emotional experience there is the center-directed glance and the peripheral look. ...While emphasis is placed upon the central theme of one's experience, the joy or the sorrow, the attendant peripheral motifs are nevertheless relevant and meaningful."

In simpler terms what the Rav is saying and what Judaism is teaching through the combination of Simchat Torah and Yizkor is that not only can you not have joy with out sorrow in life, but you cannot truly appreciate the meaning of one without the other. It is their relation to each other that makes them so poignant and powerful.

Joy without context, without an appreciation that there could be sorrow in this moment is hilarity – which is mindless.

And similarly sorrow without appreciation for the joy that waits on the other side is a dark and deep depression.

Judaism says life is lived with both, not in the balancing of both – this is not so simple to say it is all about balance. Rather life is lived holding both even if one weighs more at a given moment.

There is a Zen Buddhist teaching that the hardest thing to do in life is to carry two equally precious things in your hands at the same time. It comes from the same root as our tradition of Simchat Torah and Yizkor. Both are precious life and death, joy and sorrow – both teach us the intrinsic value of life and each precious moment – we must hold them both – even if it is hard. In fact because it is hard.

The psalmist declares, "those who sow in tears will reap in joy." (Psalm 126:5) a fitting verse for a Simchat Torah

and shimini atzeret – both of which take place during sukkot the time of year we celebrate the harvest.

In life you never get one without the other – but through both joy and sorrow – life, like a field bears fruit – brings forth meaning.