



Solemn Joy and Sweet Sorrow

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This year we have an awkward convergence. Tisha B'Av—the day for mourning the woes of our nation—falls on Shabbos—our day of spiritual delight when it is generally forbidden to mourn (at least publically, as we'll see). There is a range of opinions about how to negotiate this tension.

On one extreme is Rebbi who would recite the traditional Tisha B'Av *kinot* (dirges) even on Shabbat.¹ Then there's the Mishna Brura who also emphasizes the mourning component, but rules that it should stay hidden. We must honor Shabbat as usual—with delightful foods, meats, wine and clothing—but our inner attitude should be grief.

We should sit dejectedly without joy, not eat together with friends²...and after midday, study only those portions of Torah that are permitted on Tisha B'Av.³

On the other end of the spectrum are the chassidic customs that emphasize the joyful spirit of Shabbat over the mournful mood of Tisha B'Av. Usually, when Shabbat enters, we assume an attitude of: “כל מלאכתך עשויה—*All your work is done*...This moment is perfect... The world is perfect...There is nothing missing.” And so, according to Chassidic custom, even on this (otherwise) somber day, Shabbat prevails, for the Temple whose absence we mourn, is already here (on the inner planes) and on Shabbat we can taste it. These rabbis rule:

“On the convergence of Shabbat and Tisha B'Av we eat, drink and rejoice as is customary—and even more so.”⁴

Rav Tsadok HaKohen charts a middle path which, true to style, is also a paradoxical path. He explores the question of “What is the inner emotional posture that properly mirrors the complexity of this day.”⁵

The Talmud informs us that HaShem used to be a happy G-d (so to speak) but “since the Temple was destroyed He doesn't laugh any more” (TB Avoda Zara 3b). The rabbis take this to heart. How can we get lost in merriment when our God weeps (so to speak) for our destroyed Temple and all that devolves from it, which (by some counts) includes the sufferings of the Jewish people (and really of humanity) from that point on. The Temple radiates a protective shield that kept malignant forces at bay. Without it we're more vulnerable to harm.

The rabbis conclude that laughter (even in the most holy occasions) should be tempered with solemnity, an emotional posture epitomized by the verse, “Rejoice with trembling (גילו ברעדה).”⁶ The Talmud brings a story to prove its point:

Mar was hosting a wedding feast for his son when he noticed that his colleagues, the rabbis, were extremely merry...excessively so, by his standards. Mar stood before his guests with a crystal goblet and smashed it on the ground.

His plan worked. Their merriment dampened and, as you might suspect, this is the source for our custom to break a glass beneath the wedding canopy.

The Talmud concludes its discussion with a proof text from Psalms 126, the *Shir HaMa'alot* that precedes *birkhat hamzon* on Shabbat. Its second verse reads:

Then our mouths will be filled with laughter and our tongue with glad song.

אז ימלא שחוק פינו ולשונונו רנה:

R. Shimon bar Yochai explains that NOW it is forbidden for a person to fill his (or her) mouth with laughter. Only THEN (אז), in the future, will we be

permitted (even encouraged) to laugh without restraint.

When is this “אז” (this future “THEN”) that opens the gates to unbridled laughter? The psalm’s previous verse answers: “When HaShem redeems the exiles...when Zion is restored [both the people and its central hub—the *Bet haMikdash*]...” THEN, together with HaShem, we will laugh without constraint. Until *THEN* our joy is tempered. This applies even to holy laughter, to *simcha shel mitzvah*, and so we break a glass beneath the wedding canopy.

Yet R. Tsadok notes a glaring exception to this rule. The Gemara (Brochot 9b) tells the story of R. Berona, a rabbi distinguished by his enthusiastic pursuit of mitzvot. The Talmud reports that “once he succeeded in joining *geula* to *tefilla* (redemption to prayer), and laughter did not leave his lips the whole day.” The Gemara here considers his unbridled glee a praiseworthy thing. R. Berona was laughing all day and there is no critique. No one breaks a glass to temper his bliss.

What is it about R. Berona’s uninhibited joy that makes *it* permissible even *now*. Clearly, says R. Tsadok, it has to do with the cause of his joy—that he “joined *geula* with *tefila*.” But what does that really mean?

In halachic works the term refers to the practice of not interrupting (even with an *amen*) between the last word of *emet v’yatziv* (the prayer following the morning Shema) and the first word of the *Amida* (the Standing Prayer of 18 Blessings that comes next). There are lovely explanations for this practice.⁷

Yet, as the gemara notes, everyone does that. It’s built into the liturgy. So what does it mean that R. Berona *succeeded* in joining *geula* to *tefilla* and it was such an achievement that he laughed all day?

R. Tsadok explains that it has to do with holding the experience of fullness and the experience of lack in one’s heart at the same time. It’s about bearing paradox—about holding the tension of contrary (and incompatible) truths without compromising either one. But that level of integrity takes work. You can’t cruise on automatic pilot. You must decide, in each circumstance, how best to apply the (paradoxical)

factors at hand. The temptation is to relieve the uncertainty (along with its anxiety) by picking one side and rejecting the other. When one of the “truths” gets labelled, *false*, the insecurity disappears. You always know the right choice, and you’re backed by a whole gang of supporters who also dropped the paradox and proclaim the same half-truth as you.

Rav Berona resisted that temptation. He held the paradox of *geula* and *tefilla*, and his heart was joyful the entire day. Let’s define our terms:

***Geula* (Redemption/גאולה)** – This moment is perfect. HaShem is good, and “and all that the Merciful One does is good.”⁸ The part of my soul that is merged with HaShem sees, feels, knows and surrenders to that good (hidden as it may be to the outer senses). I have all that I need to make my next step in personal and spiritual development. There is nothing to say, but thank you.

***Tefilla* (Prayer/תפילה)** – Oy. I am broken, the world is broken. Even with all the blessings in my life, there’s so many pieces missing. I can’t pay my bills, I struggle with my spouse, my kids are unruly, There’s so much illness. I can’t absorb the Torah I learn, I can’t concentrate in prayer. Causeless hatred is rampant in Israel. Jews are still being murdered simply for being Jews. Poverty and famine plague the planet. Even with all the blessings, the fact remains that *mashiach* is not here. There’s so much lack. There’s so much pain. There’s so much to pray for.

It seems that R. Barona, with his joining of *geula* and *tefila*, stumbled upon a mini version of what *we* are called to explore when Tisha b’Av coincides with Shabbat—*geula* being Shabbat consciousness and *tefila* resonating with Tisha B’Av. The Talmud declares: “Those who mourn Jerusalem’s ruin [*tefila*], will share in the joy of beholding her revival [*geula*].” This must be the joy that R. Barona tasted, that kept him laughing an entire day.

The Talmud is teaching that this particular joy—the hearty laughter permitted even now—is a joy that is only glimpsed on the other side of mourning. It is the deepest joy, but it is also a solemn joy. And

its power to touch the depths is acquired through the honest sorrow that precedes (or accompanies) it.

Furthermore, the Talmud declares, “Anyone who acquires *daat* (integrated *knowing*), it is as if he built the Temple in his days.” Now *daat* (the Torah’s euphemism for sexuality) is the embrace of *opposites*. To acquire *daat* is to acquire the capacity to bear paradox—whether that paradox be self and other, head and heart...*geula* and *tefila*...Shabbat and Tisha b’Av. And this mastery of paradox—learning to dance back and forth at rapid pace between its poles and applying those truths (in right measure) to the task at hand—that, says the Talmud, turns one’s life into a holy site. The Presence integrates down into one’s bones, HaShem becomes a little more revealed, and the world becomes more Temple-like. For that is the definition of a Temple: A place distinguished by its exceptional capacity to hold and reveal the Presence of God.

Joining *geula* to *tefila* in a way that affirms the truth of each, not only taps the special joy that lies

on the other side of mourning...it actively brings more *geula* into the world. You go to the gym to develop your biceps and you grapple with paradox to develop your *daat*. And every increment of progress (says the Talmud) brings the *Bet HaMikdash* down another notch. As the Temple emerges, HaShem shines through, and that’s the definition of *geula* and the cause of all *simcha*.

So I want to bless us, individually and collectively, that we rise to the occasion of this special day, and negotiate the tension of its polar truths without shortchanging either side. When Tisha B’Av falls on Shabbos their contrary forces are skewed to the max, and we must try to mirror them by spending time in each one’s chair and affirming its truth inside our soul. If together we acquire the *daat* that comes from that exertion, the promise is we really can bring *geula* NOW.

¹ R. Tsadok HaKohen, Pri Tsadik, Devarim 11; and Pri Tsadik, Chodesh Adar, 2, 4.

² 552:10:(23) ...Now although the author /of the Shulchan Aruch/ writes /of serving/ “the feast of Shelomoh,” one should nevertheless sit /at the meal/ distressed and should not act joyously. Therefore, one should not sit down /then/ to feast with friends. [M.A.]

³ MB 553:2:8. The MB also brings a range of contrary opinions that permit the study of all texts on Erev Tisha B’Av.

⁴ www.Chabad.org.

⁵ R. Tsadok Hakohen, Pri Tsadik, Devarim 16.

⁶ Psalms 2:11

⁷ For example: The *emet v’yatziv* prayer is also called *geula* (redemption) for two reasons 1) because it recounts in elaborate detail the wondrous miracles HaShem wrought for us in the Exodus from Egypt—the ten plagues, the

parting of the sea, the drowning of pharaoh, etc. and 2) because it ends with the words, “Blessed are you HaShem who redeemed Israel (*ga’al Yisrael*),” i.e., it ends with *geula*.

In reciting that prayer we are reminded that HaShem can do anything. There is no request that he could not fulfill. Our faith in the omnipotent capacity of HaShem is aroused, so we can then enter the *Amida* and pray with certainty that HaShem can make it all happen. Nothing can oppose His will. In order not to break that state of heightened arousal of faith, we don’t even say our usual, *amen*, when hearing the *chazan* recite the closing blessing called *geula*, which reads, “Blessed are you HaShem, who redeemed Israel.” Instead, we just start praying.

⁸ TB Brochot 60b.