

Dear Chavraya,

How difficult it is, and wrong, to tamp down joy, especially with children. Joy is so needed, so essential to living in this world. In part, it is so needed due to all that would deny joy, that would take from us the opportunity to celebrate. There is a tension that often inheres between realistic awareness of events in the world around us, events that call us to respond, and our natural desire and need at times to just let go and have fun. So too, in regard to “harsh passages” in Torah and Tanach, and in our sacred cycle of time that often marks painful moments in the telling of our story, and as we encounter the harsh passages in our own lives, with all of this how still to enjoy and just have fun?

It is a tension that plays out immediately in the unique reality of a disease that threatens the human family. We are all threatened, susceptible across all borders and differences, reminding us that in the most basic of ways of human biology we are all one. The Coronavirus does not distinguish based on race, or religion, or place of national origin. It does not distinguish between rich and poor or the folk and the famous. It does not respect borders, nor distinguish between migrant and citizen, vulnerable human beings all. An invisible virus is joining nations one to another in common concern, collective danger begging for a collective response and sharing of resources. All are equally vulnerable, neither military might nor economic power offering protection. In the way of the Biblical sabbatical year, when rich and poor, land owner and migrant, foraged for food shoulder to shoulder in ownerless fields, so too we are all in the field together foraging for a cure, seeking the way of health and healing. It is our challenge to learn and apply in positive ways the ultimate lesson of the Coronavirus, that humanity truly is one.

With the coming of spring and the natural joy that emerges with the flowers, exuberance is tamped down as together we face the Coronavirus. We learn to put aside the ways of human contact that are a source of connection and joy among us. We are faced with questions of how and whether to celebrate, whether to attend services, whether to hold Purim parties. As we do we our best to allow life to carry on in its usual ways, we make changes that in fact do tamp down the joy through the setting of limits in ways that feel awkward and inconvenient. In the ways of change enacted as an expression of compassion, new meaning and awareness can emerge. I am sensing such new meaning and awareness emerging in relation to precautions taken in response to the Coronavirus, however awkward, inconvenient, and disconcerting the changes are. In speaking with people and in reading of responses in various communities and settings, I am touched by an appreciation for community and for what it means to be part of something larger than oneself in which each one is important and looked after.

There is a certain quiet joy that can emerge through that awareness, and a way of connection that is felt in the very ways that limit direct contact. In not hugging or kissing or shaking hands with each other, even being careful in the ways that we handle our sacred objects, there is a reminder of how deeply we care for each other. In our looking after each other’s wellbeing, we realize that there is a depth of connection that is even stronger than as expressed with a hug or a handshake, as meaningful as these ways are. Our renewed awareness of how much we care

for each other as expressed so ironically through avoidance of direct contact can become its own source of joy. Once we can return to our more familiar and natural ways of contact and connection, I hope that we will hold the special insights gained in their absence, and so too the special way of joy that we can feel now, even as it would seem to be tamped down by the harsh reality of the moment.

I am feeling similarly in approaching the tensions felt in the Purim story. Purim is meant to be a moment of great joy in the Jewish calendar. It is a time of feasting and frivolity, of dressing up in costumes and turning reality on its head, of sending portions to our friends and giving gifts to the poor. These last two customs become their own way in the tradition of offering counterbalance to the harsh passages of the Megillah. Purim is a challenging holiday, a time of salvation for the Jewish people, and yet a story so filled with harshness, the mistreatment and demeaning of women, hatred for those who are different from prevailing ways, the hate of one who would destroy our people, the tremendous violence that we unleash upon others, beginning with the one who hates us, but extending so much further, endless cycles of revenge that play out through time.

How then not to tamp down joy, especially for children? Or, perhaps the question is how to indeed tamp down joy, how to infuse it with awareness of what would, and on a certain level should, deny it, and yet to be able to celebrate in a new and deeper key? I am troubled with approaches that give children incomplete stories, approaches that hide complexities from them; that sanitize the stories of our people and of life and the world. There is harshness in nature, at times fierce harshness, and yet there is so much beauty, the gentle power of flowers emerging into sunshine. We do not hide from our children these tensions that are part of creation. Nor should we hide the tensions that inhere in the human reality, the ways of good and evil. Nor should we hide these tensions as they play out in our own tradition and our own journey through time. In the farcical telling of the Megillah is a deeply serious opportunity to wrestle with some of life's greatest challenges. Our most serious failure is in holding only one part of the Purim story, remaining only in the realm of joy and celebration, or wanting nothing to do with it because of the harshness encountered.

Taking a deep breath, we asked the children and their parents of Mishpacha this week to take some time learning in *chevruta* with each other, probing selected verses of the Megillah that bring out the complexities of the story. They read about the banishing of Vashti for standing up for herself. They read about the refusal of Mordecai to bow down to Haman and the latter's wrath, wondering if it would have been better for Mordecai to bow down rather than endanger his people. They read about what really is the manipulation Esther, of putting her into a place of danger. They read about the slaughter of so many by our own people once empowered to protect themselves.

Acknowledging how complicated the Purim story is, we asked the children what lessons we can learn from it. We expressed what we really wanted to return to, that Purim is supposed to be a happy holiday when we celebrate and do good things for others. How can we hold the sad things about Purim, just like all the

sad things in the world, and still be happy and still celebrate? In the response of children I felt touched by a deeper joy than can be found in ignoring or being overwhelmed by the complexity of the story and of life. They took both so easily in stride, neither deterred from celebrating, nor afraid to confront the challenges. They spoke of what is wrong in the responses of those with power, of what is wrong in the mistreatment of women, of what is wrong in the hating and demeaning of others, of what is wrong in the use of violence. And then they raised their voices in joyful song, teaching us how to hold both, the pain and the joy.

On this *Shabbos Zachor/the Shabbos of Remembering*, may we remember both, the joy and the pain. In the face of disease and in the face of harshness, may we find joy in the caring that underlies our new ways of connection. In the gentle rising of light at the opening of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat T'tzaveh*, is a reminder that we are each able to give and receive light, each of us a source of hope and joy.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor