

Bless the Honey, Bless the Sting

When a wedding processional and a funeral processional meet at a crossroads, our tradition teaches, the wedding procession has precedence. Jewish law is very clear about instances like these. So, when I officiated at a wedding this summer and just before the joyous day, sadly one of the bride's mothers passed away, we continued with the ceremony as planned.

But one doesn't celebrate without the shadow of loss. This is true when the loss is recent and it is true when the loss is years in the past. One of the brides, wisely told me, "it is like eating salt with chocolate. The sadness brings out the sweet notes even stronger."

Perhaps that explains the salted caramels loved by both President Obama and as well as Rabbi Gutterman.

Our ancient rabbi's knew this truth as well. The Talmud teaches:
About (T. Brachot):

Mar bar Rabina made a marriage feast for his son. He observed that the rabbis present were excessively joyous. So he seized a valuable goblet and broke it before them. Thus he made them sober. ([Berakhot 5:2](#) or 31a)

From Mar bar Rabina's brazen action we gain a wedding ritual that is ingrained in our tradition--breaking the glass. Mar bar Rabina makes a

dramatic point. Rejoicing without proper perspective is only half the story. Just in case we didn't get the point:

After breaking the glass to curb the pure merriment, they invited another rabbi in attendance to sing for them. What did he sing? "Woe unto us for one day we shall die, woe unto us for one day we shall die!"

In other words, quoting Psalms, "where there is rejoicing, there should be trembling." (*gilah biradah*) We break a glass at weddings, realizing the fragility of our happiness in a broken and imperfect world. Our ancient rabbis wisely recognized that to be fully present even in our joy we must embrace and name these sacred contradictions. Joy without realizing its fragility is incomplete.

And so we enter this bright new year. On one hand, it is a blank slate, full of promise, a reason for rejoicing. Yet none of us is so naive as to deny the suffering around us. And still we greet this moment with anticipation and joy.

The challenges we face need not prevent this from being a good year and a sweet year. William Shakespeare captures this truth in *As you Like it* when he writes, "Sweet are the uses of adversity, which, like the toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in his head." (--*As you Like It* Act 2:1).

That is our task on this evening as we enter 5779. We can find the jewel. We are reminded that the world is not so simple that it is either terrible or wonderful. We are faced with both and invited to choose sweetness.

It is a decision to choose joy in the midst of experiences that are less than joyful.

In his poem, “A Brief for the Defense,” Jack Gilbert speaks of the suffering endemic in our world. Nevertheless, he writes, “We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world.” There is no denying we live in turbulent times. Each day we open the paper to news of new suffering. Gilbert counsels us to to summon joy despite it all. His is not a naive denial, rather a firm defiance. His “stubborn gladness” is a contemporary rendering of the rabbi’s wisdom. Rejoicing and trembling often go hand in hand knowing how quickly one can pass into the other. In that realization we embrace sacred contradiction that gives us permission to live, to love and to laugh with renewed passion.

New Yorker columnist Adam Gopnik writes about his daughter’ Olivia’s vivid imaginary friends and their trials and tribulations.¹ Olivia explained one day about the tragic demise of one of these friends. How did she die, Gopnik asked? Olivia responded solemnly, “She died of a disease called Bitterosity.” Unlike Olivia’s imaginary friend, we need not succumb to our own bitterocity.

¹ Through the Children's Gate: A Home in New York, Adam Gopnik, “Bitterocities.” p. 180

Take the story of Yisrael Kristal, for example. He was the oldest man in the world until his death just over a year at 113.² Kristal was the only member of his family to survive both the Lodz Ghetto and Auschwitz. When the war was over and his entire world destroyed, he married again. He and his wife, also a Holocaust survivor, had 2 children. They made aliyah to Haifa. There Yisrael Kristal began again in the confectionery business, as he had done in Poland before the war. He not only made sweets and chocolate--He experimented with new things. His creations were a first for the Jewish state: Carob Jam, Chocolate covered orange peels. If you have ever had those chocolates shaped like little bottles and filled with liquor you are enjoying his innovation. Those who knew him said he was passionate about his work as a confectioner because he only wanted people to taste sweetness. His life is a lesson teaching us that the bitterness we have experienced need not shape our existence.

The perfect (and tasty) melding of the bitter and the sweet is found in the Hillel sandwich at the Passover seder. The charoset mellows the sting of the maror and the maror brings out the sweetness of the charoset.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein teaches: Eating the biting, bitter maror and the sweet charoset all together, we savor the taste of life -- Bittersweet is the taste of life lived in full awareness of the passage of time.

Just as the seasons pass, one into another, so too do we both celebrate and mourn. We recite Yizkhor prayers not only on Yom Kippur but also during our shalosh regalim--festivals of gladness. Our lives are filled with

² Reported in [Haaretz](#). Rabbi Jonathan Sacks also references his [story](#).

transition as we end one part of our life's work we prepare to begin another. How many of us saw children off to college (or even preschool) with tears of joy in the last few weeks? Each of these endings and beginnings are bittersweet—we celebrate the joyful moments with an abiding awareness of how quickly they pass. Amidst the incongruities of our world, it is our essential task to find meaning, comfort and also abundant joy on our journeys.

Even after her death in 2004, Naomi Shemer is still known as the first lady of song and poetry in Israel. Her songs are part of the fabric of Israeli culture. She composed her 1980 song 'Al Kol Eleh' for her sister Ruthie, who had recently lost her husband. Her words reflect the poignant appreciation of life that sadness brings. "Every bee that brings the honey needs a sting to be complete, and we all must learn to taste the bitter with the sweet."

As we wish each other a Shanah Tovah u'metukah, a good and sweet new year, we rise up with joy: To find that jewel adversity brings. To celebrate every last bit of sweetness.

Naomi Shemer's words are our prayer as we step together into 5779:

Bless the sting and bless the honey

Bless the bitter and bless the sweet.

Shanah Tovah u'metukah

