

The Bitter and the Sweet
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The Reform Temple of Forest Hills
Yom Kippur Evening – October 4, 2022

It is curious that tonight's service is called Kol Nidre. We don't call Passover "*Ma Nishtana*," yet Yom Kippur evening is generally referred to by the prayer that began our service. And what a prayer. We take out and hold are Torahs. The words are mainly in Aramaic, not Hebrew, and are a mystery to many Jews. The translation declares that all the vows we make on this Yom Kippur are null and void if we are unable to fulfill them in the year ahead.

Vows are a serious matter in Judaism starting in the Torah. This prayer might have been to prevent foolhardy promises or to respond to a vow taken under duress from outside forces. Kol Nidre has historically been used by our enemies to repudiate the trustworthiness of Jews. The words are complicated and even confusing, so much so that early Reform Jewish leaders in Germany removed the prayer for over a century.

But not the melody. That haunting melody stayed. Other words, including Psalm 130, were offered as a substitute. It is a tune that makes the heart weep. Some claim the melody goes all the way back to Mount Sinai, and it can feel like we are in the presence of God during this incredible moment of spirituality. The melody for Kol Nidre is similar in most every synagogue around the world. It isn't the challenging words that have sustained Kol Nidre but the bittersweet sound.

The effect has been noted by Jews throughout the generations and even by non-Jews. In 1843, Austrian poet Nikolaus Lenau remembered his experience upon first hearing Kol Nidre. "I struggled with an inexplicable emotion. I sobbed convulsively while hot tears poured from my eyes. Then I ran out into the night; my spirit torn and purified. I believe in that never-to-be-forgotten hour no single stain remained upon my soul!"¹

Music has such a power to fill us with joy and sorrow, love and loss all at once. It might be Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. Or Leonard Cohen's Halleluyah. It might be the song you remember the first time your heart was broken or to remember a special moment or person. One study reports that people listen to a favorite happy song about 175 times in life, but a favorite bittersweet song 800 times.² The "profound beauty, deep connection, transcendence, nostalgia, and common beauty" of music touch the essence of our emotions all at once.

If only we allowed such a rich tapestry of poignant feelings to fill our daily lives. In today's society, most especially in the United States, we live a culture that Dr. Susan David of Harvard University has called a "tyranny of positivity." "When we push aside difficult emotions in order to embrace false positivity, we lose our capacity to develop

deep skills to help us deal with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be.”³ Despite living in a world full of complexity and pain, we hide behind a façade of needing things to appear happy, or at least not sad.

“We’re built to live simultaneously in love and loss, bitter and sweet,” writes Susan Cain in her new book, *Bittersweet*. A world full of nothing but joy and happiness would be unrealistic and dull. Popular culture knows this. The Beatles and the Beach Boys moved from peppy songs about holding hands to darker, more complex themes and melodies. The protagonists of comic books, children’s literature, and film are often orphans with dark backstories, including Batman, Harry Potter, and most every Disney hero.

Yet, we continually feel the need to put up a front that everything in life is great, or at least good. We scorn our tears, even when sadness is expected, such as at a funeral. Why do we apologize to others when we cry?

Think of how we greet each other. Nowadays, we say, “How are you?” The expected response is “Good!” or at least “Fine.” And often we respond just, “How are you?” Americans are known the world over for smiling so much of the time. In countries such as Japan, India, Argentina, and South Korea, “smiling is viewed as dishonest, foolish, or both,” implying “selfishness, shallowness, and an uninteresting mind.”⁴ And yet perfect strangers might tell us to cheer up as if happiness should be our default setting.

A few months after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, I went down to Ground Zero. It was still a chaotic destruction site with makeshift memorials and crews working in the wreckage. People visiting were taking photos, and in nearly every picture, the people were smiling. At the site where over 2700 people were killed just months earlier, their default was to smile at this death site. They were unable to let their pain show.

Judaism recognizes that life isn’t always a wedding celebration. In fact, even at wedding celebrations, we end the ceremony by breaking a glass, reminding us that there is pain and brokenness in our lives even as we rejoice.

But that’s not how we approach day-to-day. Teenagers who wallow in misery are shunned for it. We learn as adults to wear a mask to the outside world and to deny our authentic embrace of our own emotions, especially in public. Perhaps we should move away from greeting each other with “How are you?” unless we genuinely want to hear the response. Dr. Susan David suggests using the Zulu word “sawubona” instead. Literally translated, it means, “I see you, and by seeing you, I bring you into being.”⁵ Imagine being greeted like that. Our interactions need to be genuine and

heartfelt, not surface and bland. “You don’t need to know people in order to grieve with them. You grieve with them in order to know them.”⁶

The tyranny of positivity gets its most significant support from social media. People craft a perfect image of themselves, their families, their job, their pets, and everything about their lives. The Facebook recap of your beach vacation cloaks the family disagreements. That Instagram photo may have actually taken 47 tries, multiple filters, and a change of outfits. To the observer, it shows only a confident person staring into the camera, not the depression and struggle also underneath. We compare ourselves to the posts celebrating the best of someone’s life against our own challenges and the mediocrity of most days. Whatever the social media platform, we see others presenting their best selves unrealistically and without the reality alongside the ups and downs of our lives.

Such an attitude has been called “Duck Syndrome, referring to the ability of ducks to glide smoothly across a lake as they paddle madly below the surface.”⁷ Can we recognize that we are not alone? We are all struggling,⁸ desperately swimming from day to day.

Since we are all living with imperfection, we should embrace it. The origin of the term *Tikkun Olam*, fixing the world, refers to our fixing the shattered shard of divinity from a broken divine vessel. The perfect can suppress our desire to advance. How can we match up to something without flaws? The imperfect inspires us. It is the crack in the Liberty Bell that makes it more interesting than all the other boring perfect bells that no one has heard of. The Mona Lisa’s enigmatic smile is all the more compelling. It is from our struggles and even our failures that we progress and grow. Defeat and brokenness are also part of the fabric of human experience.

Acclaimed Italian chef Massimo Bottura recounts how he created his celebrated lemon tart. The first time he served it, his sous chef dropped the pastry on the floor. Upon reflection, Massimo decided the tart was better that way, cracked and imperfect, representing a better metaphor of life as a mix of the sweet and the savory. He immediately named the dish “Oops! I dropped the lemon tart” as a celebration of the imperfections within this perfect dessert.

How do we face the bitter and the sweet of life? What can we call that daily mix of emotions, pain, and possibility that truly fills our world? In the wake of the school shooting in Uvalde, journalist Dahlia Lithwick searched for a word to speak to that struggle. A friend suggested the Yiddish word *tzebrokhnkayt*, which means “the quality of brokenheartedness that gives strength in healing.” “At its essence it means that ‘we each carry our shattered pieces with us.’ The essential bit is that *tzebrokhnkayt* is not

something in need of quick fixing; it is instead honored. It means that we are obligated to gather up, tend to, and honor the pain, but also to take up the work of healing.”⁹

The words of Kol Nidre are about the promises we cannot fulfill. The melody of Kol Nidre is a reminder that our lives are not summed up simply into good or bad but are always a struggle of the bittersweet. “When we are brave enough to sit with our pain, it deepens our ability to sit with the pain of others. It shows us how to love them.”¹⁰

As we began our Yom Kippur evening with the music of Kol Nidre that connects us to hearts across time and space, we end with a song that is not quite as old but has a place in the souls of so many. Naomi Shemer, one of the greatest songwriters in Israel, wrote *Al Kol Eleh* to comfort her sister Ruth after Ruth’s husband’s death. “The song’s opening words, ‘*Al hadvash ve-al ha-oketz, al ha-mar ve-hamatok,*’ ‘For the honey and the sting, for the bitter and the sweet,’ have their roots in a Midrashic comment on the Book of Numbers.¹¹ The Midrash pictures a person who sees a bee, and cries, ‘Bee, get away from me! I have no use for you. I don’t want your honey, and I don’t want your sting.’”¹² Yet, we know that our lives are genuinely both the honey and the sting, the bitter and the sweet. We must find the path to recognize, feel, and respond to both the good and the bad, to our bittersweet lives.

Yom Kippur liturgy speaks in definitives – who shall live and who shall die. We live in the space in-between - continuously and simultaneously. May this coming year be one of reflection of our authentic selves. It isn’t always good or even okay. Often it’s fair and even bad. Or all of them at once making life that much richer and more meaningful. *Al hadvash ve-al ha-oketz, al ha-mar ve-hamatok.* For the honey and the sting, for the bitter and the sweet.

Thanks to Rabbi Andrea Goldstein for inspiring this idea.

¹ www.timesofisrael.com/how-the-haunting-kol-nidre-melody-harnessed-the-power-to-convert/

² Susan Cain, *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole*, 34

³ www.mindful.org/real-gift-negative-emotions/

⁴ Susan Cain, *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole*, 120-121

⁵ www.mindful.org/real-gift-negative-emotions/

⁶ Valerie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*

⁷ Susan Cain, *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole*, 134

⁸ Susan Cain, *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole*, 156

⁹ slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/06/uvalde-shooting-politics-is-the-poison-and-the-cure.html

¹⁰ Valerie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*

¹¹ Tanhuma Balak 6

¹² <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/al-kol-eleh-for-all-these-things-thoughts-on-israels-70th-birthday/>