

Purim 5774 - So Shall It Be For Us: Returning Optimism to Jewish Life

Turn the clock back to mid-February. I'm sitting by the pool in South Florida with my parents, sister and brother-in-law. My nephew, yawning away a late vacation wake-up, walks up and gawks over us with his already 6-foot frame. He has a tennis racquet in hand. "Does anybody want to play?"

I couldn't even remember the last time I played, beyond lightly hitting balls with my children 2 or 3 years ago. I hadn't *seriously* picked up a racquet since I damaged my back lunging for a ball in 1997. (I remember that date precisely because it was the last vacation I took pre-Amy.) I barely could walk for the next two months, and had even more trouble sitting. I remember vividly lying at the back of the carpeted classrooms at the seminary, stretching my back like Larry Bird at the end of his playing days, vainly trying to absorb the learning going around me.

It was awful, but I did not learn my lesson until I overdid it again three years later and ended up in an emergency room near Skyline Drive in Virginia.

I learned my lesson, perhaps too well, and applied it for the next 15 years. I gave up everything but controlled exercise, careful playing with my kids, and equally cautious roughhousing with them. What I did not realize until last month was that I gave up so much more – a not-insignificant part of me. I gave up the accomplished athlete, the competitor on the court, and, more than anything, the joy, fun and relaxation that came with.

For 15 years, I have been scared into submission by painful past experiences and fear of their recurrence. I have been sidelined by a multi-layered crust of doubt. I have been convinced of what comes with age – a virtual preacher about its physical limitations.

Despite myself, somehow, when my nephew approached last month, I said, “yes.” Had I not been so relaxed, so enjoying myself, I probably would have said no.

The rest, please God, is history. I had the best two hours of my recent life – letting go so much more than a good sweat. Last Sunday, I went over to the Sports Club and continued the reclamation of this joyful part of my identity. It’s been a bit painful the past couple of days, I must say, but boy did I have a great time. I even hit an ace past our own resident Roger Federer, Bob Breitman.

What lessons have I learned in this unexpected re-emergence?

1. Joy is precious. Grasp it, even at the risk of pain.
2. Both the memory and fear of pain stymie this process.
3. Create the circumstances and mood to experience joy.
4. Aging doesn’t need to restrict physical activity, it just requires us to use our mind to smartly guide our physical activity.

Other than #4, these lessons are also lessons of the holiday we celebrate this evening and tomorrow, Purim.

Megillat Esther is pock-marked with symbols of the haunting, existential dangers of Diaspora living -- of the Amalek whose memory and threat we never quite eliminate. An anti-Semite rises in power. The Jews remain quiet, afraid to rock the boat. Jewish survival rests of the vagaries of a sovereign. The sovereign is clueless, prone to manipulation. Jewish fortunes turn overnight. Powerless, the Jews turn to prayer and fasting in response.

In Megillat Esther, however, the pogrom never happens. One Jew has great connections, and another Jew implores her to use them. The Jews avert the evil decree and triumph, with the sovereign's imprimatur, over the very people who were going to put them to death.

As if to fully explode the monotonous, negative myth of Diaspora life, Mordechai parades in front of all Shushan in royal apparel, a pious Jew at the center of a public celebration. It is only at this point, in chapter 8 of Megillat Esther, that the Jews of Shushan recognized what had fallen onto their lap -- that *this* time, things were different. The mood had shifted, and the Jews were suddenly open to a range of feelings which have defined our ideal ever since.

ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששון ויקר.

The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor.

Hearing Megillat Esther over the generations, Jews heard what was for many their story. Yet, when they reached the end of chapter 7 and 8, they learned that their story could have a happy ending. That they could free and be freed from the harness of Diaspora life, its restrictions and dangers

to grasp unbridled light, joy, gladness and honor. That these positive emotions were their birthright as well, deriving from the merit of our foreparents all the way down through history. That, though not knowing what tomorrow brings, they were entitled to celebrate today.

In my contemporary imagination, the most amazing assertion of joy in the face both of sobering memory and an uncertain, perhaps painful tomorrow was the celebration of the passing of the Partition Plan in 1947. People, some just recently off the boat from Europe, most knowing that tomorrow meant war, gathered in city squares around the land of Israel and danced the hora. The video images are burnished onto my brain. Both at this and other moments, in myriad ways, Zionist pioneers helped all of us in the Jewish community restore our optimism about life, its opportunities, and its possibilities for joy. To put Haman, Amalek and the fear of their recurrence in our rearview mirrors.

On Purim, the vote also went our way.

Purim is an opportunity -- with a small "o" -- that falls onto our lap each year. We celebrate with gusto. One month later, on Pesach, opportunity again emerges -- but with a big "O." On Pesach, while remembering the past, we have the opportunity to shed the chains of negative memory and to see the world in a completely new way -- as empowered, free people, determining our own destiny. Happy with our lot -- שמחים בחלקינו -- and optimistic about our future. Purim is just a blip on the radar screen, a hint

of national transformation. Pesach *is* that transformation.

We'll see whether I truly re-emerge on the court, whether I can peel back the thick crust of 15 years of excessive caution, waiting for the other shoe to drop. We have a similar crust as a Jewish people, shaped by our history in the Diaspora. Purim reminds us of the problem, and gives us a taste of something very different. We celebrate, we restore our souls, and we restore our place as the people of hope, not of fear.

As we say not only in the megilla, but also at the end of Shabbat as we usher out its quasi-messianic presence,

ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששון ויקר.

The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor.

כן תהיה לנו.

So shall it be for us. This Purim, and well beyond.