



Meaningful Sermons

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

*"Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart"*

5771

Sukot 5771> The Hole in the Bagel

September 22, 2010

SUKKOT 2010

The Hole in the Bagel

ABSTRACT

Sukkot is called "the time of our rejoicing," so this is a good time to take a deeper look at the nature of joy. The Jews are a paradoxical people: We have suffered greatly, yet we celebrate life to its fullest. How do these two features work together? Is joy escapism or is it transcendence?

A two-part sermon on feeling the joy of Sukkot – the first focused on the challenges of feeling happy in a time of an economic downturn, the second explaining why it is not possible to reach the necessary state of joy without tears.

PART I: THE HOLE IN THE BAGEL

Why is it that the national food of the Jewish people has a hole in the middle? Is it an accident or did we choose the bagel subconsciously... for what it says about us?

Are we, or are we not, the people for whom something is always missing – who kvetch, complain and criticize? Or are we – as it so often appears – a resilient people, filled with wit and humor, able to cope, survive and even thrive through the greatest hardships? What defines the Jewish people – their misery or their joy? What, wonder the great bagel philosophers, makes the bagel – and what makes us: the "hole" or the "dough?"

Only those that experienced the "void" (the hole) can appreciate the "bread." Therein lies the astonishing power of Jewish survival, as well as the surprising approach to today's economic travails.

PART II: WHO NEEDS TEARS?

We are taught that what we can accomplish on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur through tears, we can accomplish on Sukkot through joy. But, if this is so, who needs tears? Why not just skip Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and go straight to Sukkot?

But here's the secret – you can't reach the necessary state of joy unless you cry first.

True joy is not about denial or escape. It is a celebration of the gift of life and the mission with which we are charged. Such joy comes hand in hand with accountability and responsibility. And it also comes with the need to be sensitive and, if necessary, to shed some tears over our lost opportunities and mistakes.

In other words, there is a time to cry and a time to rejoice, as a moving story from the Kovno Ghetto aptly illustrates.

PART I: THE HOLE IN THE BAGEL

1. The Bagel as Symbol of Lack

Why is it that the national food of the Jewish people has a hole in the middle? Is it an accident or did we choose the bagel subconsciously... for what it says about us?

Are we, or are we not, the people for whom something is always missing?

Yes, it's true that the donut has a similar shape, but if you go to a donut shop they will also sell you the holes – you know, those cute little balls with sugar glaze? Go to a kosher bagel shop – are they selling the holes? No. Why not? Because nobody would buy them. In fact, there, half the customers are asking them to hollow out the dough.

Did you hear about the Bagels of Chelm (a staple group of simpletons in Jewish folklore)? Finding Chelm's bagels lacking, a delegation of the town's sages decided they must act and find out why the neighboring town's bagels are tastier, crunchier and chewier.

"It's simple," says the neighboring town's bagel baker when they ask him, "it's the hole that makes the bagel."

"Please," say the delegation from Chelm, "can we have some of your holes so as to improve our bagels?"

"Of course," answers the baker and hands over a dozen or so holes which the sages place very carefully in their pockets.

Wending their way home in high spirits, they stop paying attention to the path. Suddenly all of them - to a sage - fall over the crest of a hill and roll down, the bagel holes falling out of their pockets as they gathered speed. Desperately they search the fields for these special holes but to no avail. Crestfallen they return to Chelm empty handed, unable to change the sorry state of the town's bagels.

Let's face it: Jews are the people who have mastered the art of the "hole." Jews know how to kvetch, complain and criticize. This may be a stereotype, but just because it's a stereotype doesn't mean that it isn't true. After all, stereotypes are based on certain tendencies. Several generations of Jewish stand-up comedians are supporting their grandchildren from this very fact - for, as we all know, a joke is funny precisely because it is an exaggeration of the truth.

Here are a couple of classics... but please don't kvetch if you've heard them before:

A Jewish grandmother, playing on the beach with her baby grandson, loses him to a giant wave. She begins to wail and plead with God. A moment later, another huge wave deposits him into her arms. She is overjoyed. And so, she turns to the heavens and says, "He had a hat!"

An elderly Jewish man is riding on a train. He begins to kvetch, "Oy, am I thirsty. Oy, am I thirsty." Finally, the person sitting next to him can't stand it anymore and goes to get him a bottle of water from the dining car. The Jew drinks it down in a couple gulps and wipes his lips with satisfaction. Everything is fine for a few minutes, but then he begins to kvetch again: "Oy, vas I thirsty. Oy, vas I thirsty."

Now, if we just dwelled on the "holes" in our lives, we would end up empty-handed like the Chelm "sages."

But the facts is, despite these "complainer" stereotypes, Jews are also a very resilient people, filled with wit and humor, able to cope, survive and even thrive through the greatest hardships.

So the big question is this: What defines the Jewish people - their misery or their joy? What makes the Jews - as the great bagel philosophers wonder - the "hole" or the "dough?"

2. Are Jews Defined by Misery or by Joy?

This question is especially apropos on Sukkot, which is called “the time of our rejoicing.” This is a good time to take a deeper look at the nature of joy. The Jews are a paradoxical people: We have suffered greatly, yet we celebrate life to its fullest. How do these two features work together? Is joy escapism or is it transcendence?

Can we rise to the occasion and transcend the persecutions of the past which have left an indelible mark on our genetic code?

A while back, a man was invited to a Shabbat dinner at the home of friends, and subsequently told this story:

The challah was brought out with great fanfare under a beautifully embroidered challah cover. But when the cover was removed, the bread was found to be crawling with ants... and the little beasts immediately ran off into the lace tablecloth. The hostess nearly fainted. The guests went into a state of mass pandemonium. How to get rid of the ants which were weaving their little feet into the lace and under the lace and over the lace? Could the challah be eaten or not? Would Shabbat be saved?

Then, one of the guests said, “Two thousand years of persecution and now this!” And everybody laughed. It broke the spell. The ants went their way, another challah was found, and all was well.

We might be complaining one minute, but we also know how to rise to the occasion.

3. The Jewish Secret: At Home with Paradox

The bagel teaches us the secret of Jewish survival: We never took ourselves that seriously. Thus, even our greatest pains were tolerable.

Like the simple bagel, Jews always knew that the hole – the void, the suffering, the difficulties – is a very real part of life and it shapes our experiences, but the hole does not *define* who we are. The hole exists, but it is a hole and nothing more. Unlike the Chelm geniuses, we never saw the hole as anything other than the empty center of the bagel of life.

They say that there is very thin line between tragedy and humor. Take Charlie Chaplin as “The Tramp,” or the classic image of the “tragic clown.” Countless Jewish expressions and jokes are about the irony of life – about seeing the negative in a positive light. Do we not cry out Mazal Tov when a glass shatters?

*When children were turning over the house, creating an absolute mess,
a good Jewish bubbe (grandma) would say: Oy, meine tayere ziskeiten:
A berocho oif aych! (“Oh, my dear sweethearts: a blessing on you!”)
And when yet another child would enter the fray, she would exclaim:
Nu, noch a tog yom tov! (“So, another holiday!”)*

This approach should not be mistaken as frivolity and lightheadedness. It actually captures the profundity and complexity of life in all its colors and shades – both the absurd and the rational. By calling attention to the humor in the tragedy and the tragedy in the humor – and making peace with the paradox – we achieve invincibility: Like a flexible reed in the wind, nothing can break us.

And where does this awareness come from? It is derived from the hole in the bagel – from the void in our lives. Only those that experienced the “void” (the hole) can appreciate the “bread.” But unlike the Chelm “sages” who thought that the “hole” was the secret (as an end unto itself) and thus, remained empty-handed, we recognize that though the hole is a very real part of life, it does not define who we are. We have suffered, but we are not a suffering people. We have wandered, but we are not wanderers. We have died, but we are not a dying people. We have been hurt, but we are not victims. We have a “hole” in our history, but we are not “empty.”

Instead of experiencing a setback or an emptiness as a final destination, instead of seeing tragedy as *the end*, we recognize – with humility in the face of a mysterious and unknowable God – that there is a bigger picture. That we, mere mortals, barely see the frame of our own lives – which is just one small frame in a far larger mural.

Why does every tractate of the Talmud begin on page two, leaving the first page blank? Isn't this a waste of valuable paper? To teach us an invaluable lesson: *Reishit chochma yirat Hashem*. “The foundation of all wis-

dom is awe of God.” Before entering and engaging in the intense intellectual debates of the Talmud – and they are vigorously brilliant indeed – we respect the “blank” page of humility: We recognize that it’s not all about us. There is something greater than our most brilliant ideas.

The “hole” is part of our existence, and may even be a key element in catapulting us to great heights (as the Torah tells us, “as they were oppressed they thrived and proliferated”). But if you deify suffering and hold on just to the “hole,” you will not have a bagel – nor anything else for that matter.

This is the message of the pause, of the blank page, of the hole in the center. It is telling us to get our egos out of the way – along with all our sophisticated machinations vying for control – and to put God above us, no force can take us down.

4. The Jewish Approach to the Economic Turndown

This attitude has implications in the current growing debate about consumption in the face of our economic challenges.

Some are arguing that the only solution to our problems is to reject the materialistic force of the American Dream. Faith cannot be reconciled with selfish drive to achieve financial prosperity. Either you are worshipping God or you are worshipping yourself.

David Platt, a graduate of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, makes this argument in a recent book called *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith From the American Dream*. Platt claims that there is no way to reconcile material success and religious belief. The material world is too soul-destroying. He writes: “The American dream radically differs from the call of the Gospel.” The American dream emphasizes self-development and personal growth, but the Gospel rejects the focus on self, and “God actually delights in exalting our inability.” The American dream emphasizes upward mobility, but “success in the kingdom of God involves moving down, not up.”

Platt calls on readers to cap their lifestyle. Live as if you made \$50,000 a year, he suggests, and give everything else away. Take a year to surrender yourself. Move to Africa or some poverty-stricken part of the world.

Platt's arguments are resonating for many in this post-excess period, when our past economic indulgence has been shaken to the core.

The Jewish attitude is quite different. I do not suggest that the Torah encourages indulgence and selfishness, but the solution to overindulgence is not necessarily rejecting prosperity.

Of course, if you indeed see your "self" as a force to contend with, then obviously your strong sense of "self" – and all that it brings along: self-interest, self-indulgence, self-ishness – will ultimately and inevitably clash with God's plan. And thus, there is no other choice, as Platt argues, than to turn away from the American Dream.

But there is surely another way to look at it.

If we appreciate the centrality of the lack – of the hole in the bagel – and don't take the "self" all that seriously, then our humility and not our deprivation becomes the ultimate solution to our spending excesses and our overindulgence in materialism. Enjoy life, God says in the Torah, but always know that "it was not your own strength and personal power that brought you all your prosperity. Remember that it is God who gives you the power to become prosperous."¹

Humility – symbolized by the hole in the bagel and the first blank page in the Talmud – is the only way to relieve the tension between affluence and service, between good and plenty, between materialism and spirituality. Once you are free of self-worship, then your self can be blessed with abundance in all.

The Book of Psalms teaches, "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy."² Only those that have gone through the void, who have wept in loss, can savor the God-given pleasures of life.

¹ Deuteronomy 8:17-18.

² Psalms 126:5.

PART II: WHO NEEDS TEARS?

NOTE: The following also works as a stand-alone sermon with sections #1 and #2 above as introduction.

5. A Sukkah in the Kovno Ghetto

Let me read you a story. It is from a book by Avraham Tory, the author of *Surviving the Holocaust: The Kovno Ghetto Diary* published by Harvard University Press. In this book, Tory tells what it was like in October 1943 in the Kovno Ghetto. The Jews were demoralized. By then, only a fraction of those who had been herded into the ghetto by the Nazis were still alive. And yet, and yet, some still found enough faith and hope *and joy* to celebrate Sukkot. Tory emotionally relates how it was:

This year, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur were very sad days. Before Sukkot, however, the mood in the ghetto relaxed somewhat... To celebrate the "Festival of Booths" some traditional huts were even erected, made from planks and covered in thatch...

On my way to offices of the Jewish Committee [Tory was the secretary to this governing body, which is why he kept a diary], I came across one such booth which had been erected near a large group of houses. This made me wonder about the Jewish will to live, which does not disappear, even in the ghetto. It seems that a sharp knife is at our throat, yet we do not lose courage. We do not cease being Jews...

In the afternoon, I was urgently summoned to the office. Germans from the city governor's office were waiting there. Walking quickly, I again came across a *sukkah*. Its door was open. Inside I could see a bearded Jew wearing a black hat on his head. He wore holiday clothes, and his face radiated joy. Several other people were in the booth with him. They were singing a hassidic song accompanied by the clapping of hands and the stomping of feet. They sang with devotion and enthusiasm, as if the ghetto and the German rulers did not exist.

The bearded Jew noticed me and came out of the booth. He took me by the sleeve and asked innocently: "What are you doing in our neighborhood at Sukkos? Peace be with you! A good and happy day to you!" He was in high spirits ... He did not listen to my reply, when I explained that I was hurrying to a meeting.

"Have you eaten in a *sukkah* this year?" the bearded Jew asked. "No," I replied. "I have not had the time. Excuse me, I am in a hurry." The Jew ... looked at me with uncomprehending eyes, as if I were a heretic. He grasped me by the arm and dragged me into the booth. "Please come in!" he said in a resounding voice. I repeated my explanation: "I must hurry to a meeting affecting the whole community." But my reply failed to produce any effect on the bearded Jew. "Come in just for one moment," he said, and forcibly seated me on a bench inside the booth...

[Though I continued to object] Zisman was not deterred. He signaled his wife through the booth window; she responded instantly by coming in with vodka and cake in her hands ... He asked me to drink a glass of vodka and to recite the blessing thanking God Who made us holy with His commandments, and Who commanded us to dwell in booths ... Needless to say I was asked to taste the cake. As we were eating, the other Jews present burst into song.

They sang: "If you say you are in trouble, the Lord's compassion will sustain you." These words carried a special and profound significance in this booth in the ghetto. The Jews in the booth sang - with devotion and faith - of the compassion of God. I forgot myself and my mission, and joined their chorus and their faith.

I was on tenterhooks nonetheless. But I could not leave the booth before I had fulfilled all my host's wishes and observed the commandments. At long last he said: "You have work to do on behalf of the community. We must not delay you." Seeing me off, he recited the traditional blessing: "The Lord will make you succeed; an errand of mercy is its own protection." He blessed me, wishing me to succeed in my errand and to bring good tidings, deliverance and comfort, so that we might be saved.

I arrived at the workshop late. The Germans from the city governor's office were waiting for me impatiently. I settled some minor matter with them and [continued with my duties of administering to the ghetto's many needs]. But throughout the day I remained under the good impression of the festive atmosphere in the *sukkah*. I admired those pious Jews and envied them their ability to set themselves free from the yoke of the ghetto, from the everyday troubles which keep pressing on each individual and on the community as a whole.

"If you say you are in trouble," sing the Jews filled with faith, "the Lord's compassion will sustain you."

Happy is the believer.

Yes, happy is the believer. Yes, the believer does not kvetch. But does the believer not cry sometimes?

6. Tears and Then Joy

We are taught that what we can accomplish on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur through tears, we can accomplish on Sukkot through joy.

The obvious question is, if you can accomplish the same thing with joy as with tears, who needs tears? Why not just skip Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and go straight to Sukkot?

But here's the secret – you can't reach the necessary state of joy unless you cry first.

True joy is not about denial or escape. It is a celebration of the gift of life and the mission with which we (the Jewish people) were charged. Such joy comes hand in hand with accountability and responsibility. And it comes also with the need, if necessary, to be sensitive and shed some tears over our lost opportunities and mistakes.

In other words, there is a time to cry and a time to rejoice, as we learn from the famous work authored by King Solomon, The Book of Ecclesiastes (*Kohelet*) which some have the custom to read during Sukkot.

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven – a time to be born, and a time to die... a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance...³

7. Cycles in Time

We need to discover how best to ride the rhythms of life. And this holiday season teaches us exactly that – because it is all about cycles. What particularly stands out is the cycle of seven::

- Tishrei, the Hebrew month containing Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Sukkot, is the seventh month counting from Passover.
- On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, all the important prayers are recited seven times.
- Seven days connect Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.
- Sukkot lasts seven days.
- On Hoshana Rabba, we make seven circles while reciting Hosha-na (“Save us please”).
- And finally, on Simchat Torah, we again make seven circles while dancing with the Torah scroll.

Seven is the cycle of time, the cycle of existence, the cosmic cycle. But it is not the only cycle.

8. The Leap Year

This new Jewish year is a leap year. That means, it will have an extra month added into it – an extra month of *Adar*, before Purim.

The reason for this is to reconcile the lunar calendar with the solar calendar.

As we know, the Muslims keep the lunar calendar which is why this past year, Ramadan, the month of fasting, fell during the middle of the

³ Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

summer, when the days are longest and it's the hottest season in the Middle East. Talk about kvetching?

And also, as we know, the Christians keep a solar calendar, which is the calendar that the entire Western World goes by, and for this reason their seasons are fixed.

But Jews ride the middle ground. Jews have found a way to have it both ways.

The Jewish calendar generally goes by the month. Jews celebrate *Rosh Hodesh* – the top of the month to you – when the new moon rises. It is a very important moment in the Jewish calendar for the new moon always speaks of renewal, of a new beginning. In the worst of times, in the darkest of nights, we always see a tangible sign that there will be light, there will always be another new moon rising. Thus the moon is a classic Jewish symbol. It returns each night to light up the darkness, changing its shape, waxing and waning, only to rise afresh after a cycle of 28 days. It testifies to the cyclical nature of life.

Did you notice that Rosh Hashana always falls at the beginning of the month, on a new moon, but most other holidays including Sukkot, fall in the middle of the month? And did you notice that Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Sukkot always fall in the Fall?

To keep things this way, the Jewish sages devised a system called “intercalation” which reconciles the lunar calendar with the solar calendar. This keeps the Jewish holidays in the proper season and allows Passover (for example) to always arrive in the Spring. (Jews thus avoid the Ramadan problem of a wildly fluctuating holiday.)

The Jewish method of intercalation adds an extra, thirteenth month, along a predetermined pattern – every third, sixth, eighth, eleventh, fourteenth, seventeenth and nineteenth years. This pattern – 3 years, 3 years, 2 years, 3 years, 3 years, 3 years, 2 years – is identical to the pattern of the musical scale. If there are musicians among you, you know what it is: whole step, whole step, half step, whole step, whole step, whole step, half step. Thus, the Jewish calendar has a cosmic rhythm, not a man-made one. ⁴

⁴ *In the Image of God* by Judith S. Antonelli, p. xxxvi.

The challenge of life is knowing this and aligning ourselves with the inner cycles and cosmic rhythms of existence. It means to know when to kvetch, when to rejoice, when to cry and when to dance. Because there is a time for everything.

9. Call to Action: Seize the Day

Now is the time to seize the opportunity that Sukkot presents, and spend as much time in a *sukkah* as you can.

When you are sitting in the *sukkah*, you're bound to become aware that something is surrounding you and everyone else who is sitting there with you. As King Solomon's romantic ode, the *Song of Songs* says of this time, "His right hand embraces me."

This sensation of embrace is the encompassing light of God. You sense that something beyond you is nevertheless with you. This is the time to open yourself to something greater.

But remember that a cup that's filled has no room for anything in it. You have to empty your cup a little to allow something new in. [Yet another lesson of the hole in the bagel.]

If you want change, you cannot be filled only with yourself and only with your solutions, especially if they haven't worked.

But being inspired to change is not enough. The power of inspiration is limited; if the inspiration is not integrated it drifts away.

Integrating inspiration requires hard work, and this is where other people can help. When two people commit to something, they form a bond and they become accountable to each other. The "four kinds" which are the hallmark of Sukkot – the palm frond, the willow, the myrtle and the citron – symbolize the different kinds of people, all of whom are necessary to make the world go round: the do-gooders, the intellectuals, the reformists, the traditionalists. We are all in it together, and we can use our particular skills and talents to help each other.

Use the days of Sukkot wisely. And most of all, as you rejoice in this holiday, concentrate on the area of yourself that you want to improve. The Divine Presence will be with you, and it will give you the energy to follow through with your plans for the rest of the year.

Chag Sameach!