

Joy in Tough Times

Joy in tough times is an oxymoron, a non-sequitur. Jews celebrated Passover in the Warsaw ghetto, while being exterminated. It is also true that Simchat Torah was a reaction to the near devastation of the Jewish world following the Crusades, just in case the Roman slaughter of between 1 million and 1.5 million Jews in the last two uprisings by the Hebrew patriots against the oppressive Romans was not enough. As the great Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written, Succoth and the last two days of the holiday period, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah, are all about joy.

Like most American Jews, my family approached the holiday issue with great trepidation. Were there going to be holidays? How would we celebrate them? What do we do with no guests and friends around?

We were in Israel for Passover, witnessing the birth of our third grandchild in Haifa. Passover was amazing. Although in lockdown, we went out to our balcony in Bat Galim, Haifa, and could hear the soldiers and other Israeli citizens singing the songs of the holiday. It was awe inspiring.

Back in America, we did not have the same confidence that all would go well. Thanks to the incredible leadership of Eli Gurevitz, the Chabad Rabbi at Haverford College, and to Rabbi Shraga Sherman and Rabbi Baruch Davidson at Mainline Chabad, not only were our fears trampled, like the beaten Hoshannas, but in reality, the experience was incredibly uplifting.

G-d cooperated. The weather was lovely every single day, except for a little rain one morning during Yom Kippur. Sitting under tents, without sides, in facemasks and socially distanced, was something no one could have imagined as being spiritually uplifting, but to me it was. I recollect growing up in Great Neck with a big green tent that was necessary during the holiday period because of the overflow crowds. The large cathedral like auditoriums had not yet been built, and during the holidays we considered ourselves communing with nature as well as Hashem. Those tents had sides, crowded aisles and were hot as Sodom and Gamora. The modern Covid-19 tent was more like a circus or wedding tent. Light, airy and each person had their privacy.

Walking from our townhouse in Haverford to Eli's Chabad was, for us, about as easy as it gets. It may be a three-hour drive from Williamsport, but to walk to Chabad is great. Eli's infectious warmth and love was heightened this year by the birth of twin boys. What a great Mitzvah, on the eve of the holidays. As a grandparent of twin boys, it is easy to share his not so subtle delight at his good fortune and that of his lovely bride, "Blumie."

For Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah, my spirit of Synagogue enthusiasm was tested. In the course of two days, attending Mainline involved approximately 22 miles of walking. Okay, I love to walk, but 22 miles in two days? However, it was well worth it.

The ruach and welcoming environment by Chabad at the Mainline can only be experienced, not described. It was marvelous beyond words to see the attendees circle the tent for the Hashkafos, socially distanced, in masks and well behaved. The set up was perfect. Behind the tent is an asphalt paved parking area for the automobiles. The weather was so supreme that men, women and children could stand and schmooze, while still hearing the melodious incantations of the spirited davening. Special arrangements were made for families and the vagaries of Covid-19 did not dampen the flow of alcohol by even the slightest amount. Even walking home late at night along the winding Montgomery Avenue with its perfectly lousy sidewalks, was hardly daunting fortified with the “intoxicating drink” that serves as a substitute for the Temple sacrifices. It seems as though I will never get over humming the tunes of the Hallel, and the familiar strains of our ancestral music. Sung behind masks, outside, in beautiful weather, the experience of euphoria and elevation was heightened.

Not only may we all be sealed in the book of life, health and prosperity, but may we all continue to have mazel. It would be difficult to have enjoyed the holidays the way we did in the Philadelphia Mainline and not be optimistic about the future. It seems as though Hashem was smiling upon all of us, permitting us to feel the irrepressible happiness that comes from being with our fellow Jews during the holiday period. Nary a raindrop fell in our Succah, while we never forgot to pray for rain in the Holy Land. This too is an auspicious beginning to the year which we hope will continue to provide a path of self-fulfillment for Klal Yisrael.

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