

Coming Up For Air

by Rabbi Debra Orenstein

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As I write this column, it is a week before Rosh Hashanah, and I have no idea how the High Holidays will go. Well, of course, I have *some* idea. I know that we will be reciting and singing prayers from the Machzor. I know that some people will be in our sanctuary in person, and others will attend via livestream. I know my plans for speaking. I know that we will have kids, again, on the bimah, and my heart sings at that prospect.

But it's unknowable in advance how the hybrid iteration of High Holidays 5783 has worked (by the time you read this) and what exactly unfolded through word, melody, communal energy, and divine inspiration. So much depends on the magic of the moment and on the choices we make in real time.

Despite all the uncertainties, the Torah (Deut. 16:15) makes a prediction about the aftermath - and after effects - of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: "You shall rejoice in your [Sukkot] holiday.... You shall be exclusively happy!" (Deut. 16:14-15) This verse is normally understood as a commandment or prescription, but it is equally correct to understand it as an assurance and forecast. This is how the year goes: after the challenging spiritual work of repentance and atonement, joy and happiness naturally follow.

Over Elul, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, the Jewish community does a deep dive into what's wrong and what each of us can do to improve ourselves and the world. The season encourages us to delve into the depths of our souls and of our conscious and unconscious intentions. It's not a coincidence that the entire period lasts 40 days - the same amount of time as Moses' days on Mt. Sinai and Noah's days in the flood. We commune with God. We immerse - and then emerge to a renewed world.

As you consider this analogy, imagine a literal dive into deep waters. During Sukkot, you finally rise to the surface, with your head above water, blinking in wonder at the sunlight, gasping and inhaling big gulps of life-sustaining air. Having been immersed for so long, it feels luxurious to take in the beauty, the oxygen, the shimmer of light on the sea, the sense of accomplishment at the dive and at the rising. As you look around, you discover others bobbing around you in living waters, having also been immersed in introspection and renewal. It's a community of deep-sea explorers. We have come up for air - and no one needs to tell us to be happy.

In outlining potential blessings and curses that follow from our free will choices, the Torah (Deut. 28: 48) says that curses occur "because you [do] not serve Adonai your God in joy and with gladness of heart over the abundance of everything."

תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עֲבַדְתָּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְטוֹב לֵבָב מְרֹב כָּל:

This is a truly radical and surprising idea! We all have *tzuris* - illnesses and external events that we do not choose and that impinge on our wellbeing. Yet the Torah is telling us that *most of our suffering comes from choosing suffering!* We become inured to blessings and take them for granted. We focus disproportionately on what is wrong or lacking, and then we miss the “great abundance of everything” that is right in front of us.

It is always acceptable, in trauma and crisis, in repentance and regret, to cry out to God and to our neighbors. It is even holy! But the world is out of balance in this respect: we attend vastly more to curses than to blessings. More people magnify their personal curses by revisiting and recounting them than mitigate those curses by seeking support, taking what action they can, and fully absorbing, with open hearts, the beauty of the “abundance of everything.”

In the abundance of our fall harvest festival, Sukkot, and in the aftermath of spiritual reckoning and renewal, joy beckons. Yom Kippur is a cleansing day; it removes tarnish, muck, and mire to reveal holiness and happiness. Now it's time to join the ancestral guests in the sukkah, breathe in the fresh air, look up at the heavens, celebrate with community, and enjoy the fruits of our labor.

We don't always get a choice. “Who shall live and who shall die?” “Who by fire and who by water?” But when you *can* choose, the tradition invites you to *remember* that you can. And the Torah instructs: choose joy; choose blessing; choose life, “that you and your descendants may live.”