

A WEDDING AND A FUNERAL

Erev Rosh Hashanah, 5784

Westchester Reform Temple

They switched their dress shoes to heavy boots in preparation for their somber march through the cemetery's rain-soaked mud. They lined up single file, passing umbrellas to incoming guests so they could weather the storm too.

And then, they saw the bride and groom waiting on the other side of the road! The mourners' hearts turned to the pair like sunflowers shifting to catch the rays of sun. It was they, the mourners, who sang from the *sheva b'rachot*, the traditional wedding blessings:

שִׂמְחַת תְּשִׂימַח רַעִים הָאֲהוּבִים כְּשִׂמְחַתְךָ יְצִירְךָ בְּגֵן עֵדֶן מְקוֹדֵם

“The loving partners shall rejoice,” they shouted,

“as You caused Adam and Eve to delight in the Garden of Eden.”

Our Sages taught when a funeral and a wedding coincide, the funeral procession must yield before the wedding procession.¹ Some rabbis have concluded from this teaching that weddings are more important than funerals. But, many Jewish laws argue the opposite. I believe both of these conclusions are flawed – joy and sorrow do not eclipse one another; rather, they enhance and inform each other. Life is meant to include sorrow *and* joy, *both* highs and lows.

¹ Ketubot 17a:9.

And this teaching acknowledges that rarely do the two ever materialize in neat, isolated ways.

Life ebbs and flows beyond our control. I learned this firsthand this summer, when, just two weeks before I stood under the *chuppah* to marry my now-husband...my grandmother died. During the days leading up to our wedding, it felt impossible to switch gears. Every touch of happiness felt wrong, both out of place and even immoral. What helped us successfully hold these incompatible feelings in balance was our community – the friends and family, many of you included, who kept us company in the valley of grief and quickly thereafter gave us permission to rejoice in life and love. Whether it was a visit at *shiva*, a thoughtful letter in the mail sending condolences or congratulations - and sometimes both, these caring gestures and heartfelt words enabled us to embrace both the mourning and the dancing fully and gratefully.

I've seen the same confluence of events manifest in your lives, often unexpectedly, as you have faced loss and pain on the verge of celebration. I feel blessed to have witnessed the way you care for one another, showing each other the same grace you offered me. Enduring these experiences underscored for me that our greatest treasures in life are the relationships we nourish. Relationships make our lives richer. They make us feel more alive!

Unfortunately, these recent years of COVID have strained our capacity to connect with each other. At times, even our family members have posed a threat to our health or vice-versa. We were robbed of the opportunity to hold a loved one's hand before dying. Many of us were isolated for weeks in our homes. And though Zoom and Facetime gave us the gift of communication, neither could ever satisfy

our longing for a friend's embrace, a grandchild's touch. And although COVID is not the same crisis it once was, **we are still feeling lonely.**

United States surgeon general, Vivek Murthy, writes that even before the pandemic, “the country was experiencing an ‘epidemic of loneliness,’ driven by the accelerated pace of life and the spread of technology into all of our social interactions. With this acceleration, he said, efficiency and convenience have ‘edged out’ the time-consuming messiness of real relationships.”² You would think after the pandemic, we would try to be closer to each other, but many of us barely pick up the phone anymore. We rely on text messaging because it takes less time. We do not call anyone after a date because we are afraid that will make us look desperate. We go to a restaurant, say hello to the waitstaff, but then order our food from a digital tablet on the table. And when we do sit with company, we are often separated by a virtual wall because each of us is glued to a phone or an iPad. And I am just as guilty as everyone else.

Our Jewish tradition recognizes that loneliness is a natural human experience. In fact, loneliness was embedded in the human condition from the beginning of Creation. But, almost immediately, God realized that loneliness is too painful to sustain indefinitely. Only two times in the Torah we read the words: *lo tov*, “not good.” The first time is after God created Adam. God said: “לֹא-טוֹב הָיְוֹתָ לְאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ, ” *it is not good for a person to be alone.* After God saw that being alone can lead to a feeling of loneliness, companionship was intentionally built into the design of God's universe, beginning with the creation of Eve.

² John Leland, “How Loneliness is Damaging Our Health,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/20/nyregion/loneliness-epidemic.html>, April 20, 2022.

Ever since the partnership of our tradition's "first couple," Adam and Eve have shaped our understanding of relationships and have made their way into each new couple's union. Our clergy bless us under the *chuppah* with the words of the *sheva b'rachot*, praying that we may be lucky enough to rejoice as Adam and Eve did - not only to be happy, but also to enjoy meaning and comfort in our togetherness.

After Adam and Eve wed, their lives became challenging. They made the mistake of eating from the tree of knowledge and God banned them from the Garden of Eden.³ Even worse, they were cursed with suffering and death, the awareness of mortality and frailty, the hard truths at the heart of the human condition. Inside the Garden, they were literally made to be together. But outside the Garden, they were faced with a choice: to be alone or to remain together. They chose to be together. Despite the banishment, the suffering, and the prospect of dying, or losing the other to death, they *chose love*.

Judaism invites us to summon the courage to love. Our literature recognizes the difficulty of this task. Our *siddur* reminds us: *it is a fearful thing to love what death can touch*, but God asks us to invest in love...and not just with intimate partners. The Book of Genesis begins with a couple, but most of its stories teach us about the dangers of wounded relationships among siblings and family. The book culminates in a transformational moment of forgiveness between Joseph and his long-estranged brothers. And Torah continues in its next book, Exodus, with a unification story about the coming together of the Israelite community, an entire people in relationship as a single, great family: the Jewish people, our people.

³ Genesis 3:23.

Science supports Judaism's call to relationship with evidence-based reasoning. Author and Harvard professor Arthur Brooks writes in *The Atlantic* that the key to happiness is committing our time and energy to relationships. He quotes a study from 2008 that reported, "'very happy' people socialize with their relatives, on average, 11 more occasions a year, 7 more times with neighbors, and 5 more times with friends. [And not for nothing,] they also attend religious services 7 more times each year. Membership [in the happiness club] requires that you be in generous love and allow yourself to be loved."⁴ Brooks urges us to dedicate the kind of seriousness to our relationships we usually reserve for our careers and not leave the quality and intensity of our bonds to chance, but instead, take hold of the reins.

Three weeks before my husband Roie and I stood under the *chuppah* with our extended family and friends, Cantor Kleinman and Cantor Rodnizki officiated at an intimate exchange of rings and marriage vows in my grandmother's hospice room with some of our closest family standing by as loving witnesses. Suddenly, joy and sorrow, dancing and mourning, a wedding and a funeral, merged. In a single moment, like bride and groom, emotions were united, neither stopping for each other, but intertwined.

Here I was, at my wedding, talking to my grandmother for perhaps the last time, granted the lucky opportunity to share intentional departing words. My vow to her was that Roie and I would spend our lives emulating the love she had shared with my grandfather - her partner in life for almost 66 years. That was the only time I ever saw my grandmother cry. She was not so scared to die. Her greatest fear

⁴ Arthur C. Brooks, "The Path to Happiness is Narrow but Easy," *The Atlantic*, June 15, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/06/tolstoy-path-happiness-sociability/674406/>.

had been that leaving this world, my grandfather would be alone. But seeing us standing there by his side, she knew he had us and we would take care of him. Now she knew her legacy had found its way to the generations of her family, the next generation to stand with the courage to choose love and enter into relationship, despite the loneliness of existence, like Adam and Eve before us.

On Rosh Hashanah we say: *Y'hi ratzon milfanecha, Adonai Eloheinu v'Elohei avoteinu v'imoteinu, shet-chadesh aleinu shanah tovah u'm'tukah,* **may it be Your will, Eternal our God, that this be a sweet year for us.**

As we look around tonight at our friends and family, our WRT community, let us give thanks for each other and remember that it is *us* - our relationships, which themselves are the sweetness.