

RH 5777: Nexus of Spirituality and Emotions

By Rabbi Michael Schwab (written for speaking purposes only)

It was like swimming in a sea of emotions. Picture a man wheeled into a hospital, anxiety and apprehension written all over his features. Like closed captioning for feelings, words appear beside his concerned and anxiety-ridden face which say: “He has been dreading this appointment. Fears he waited too long.” At the same time a younger man with an exhausted but happy look is leaving the hospital and beside *him* are the words “He just found out his wife’s surgery was successful and she will be OK”. Then as the camera pans out and zooms back into scene after scene – the emotions and thoughts of patients and family members, doctors and nurses, administrators and maintenance staff, are all revealed to the viewer in this way. One man coming up an escalator has just found out his tumor is benign, and you can almost see the weight lifting off his shoulders; the man just behind him has found out that his tumor is malignant, and his fingers drum the handrail with fear and anguish. At one point a doctor walks by an elevator and we learn that today is her 25th wedding anniversary, just as she speaks to a young

girl who is preparing to say goodbye to her father who will be taken off life support in mere moments. *Inside* the elevator, an older man is there to visit his wife who has had a stroke, and he is worrying about how he will care for her; beside him is a young resident wearing a goofy smile on his face, who has just found out he is going to be a dad.

This whirlwind snapshot tour of emotions is actually a four-minute video, put out by the Cleveland Clinic, that brought tears to my eyes and which reflects the emotional life of a hospital. But *I* know that much of that experience, and more, passes through *our* doors as well, *here, today, right* now, as we gather for Rosh Hashanah. Each of us brings to this very occasion, the challenges and joys – the emotions - of this *past* year at precisely the same time that we get ready to greet a new one. We sit beside each other – our vivid tumultuous emotional worlds in close proximity – our external expression revealing so little of the deep internal emotional life we are experiencing in our consciousness and feeling in our hearts. Yet, today, here, I would like to invite these emotions into the open. They do not have to *remain* as closed captions.

In fact, in so doing we actually create a potent cocktail of sorts as we bring this powerful assemblage of our collective feelings *to* this peak *religious* moment when we seek to connect with each other, with God and with ultimate meaning. And for me this powerful convergence of our rich emotional lives in this sacred environment speaks to the unique and compelling *spirit* - the very crux - of this moving holiday – the joining together of “us” as individuals to the “us” that is a community inside of a sacred and nurturing environment, as we bring our *deeply* personal emotional selves to this transcendent experience of spirituality, in our attempt to raise up the meaning of our lives to a higher plane.

For I believe that our emotions are at the core of who we are. In fact, we human beings primarily experience the world through our emotions, or as the interactions between our emotions and our thoughts. It is our emotions that primarily define our happiness and our level of satisfaction with life; the oft-used measuring sticks of how we evaluate our personal fulfillment. And I further believe that Judaism understands this truth and that Judaism honors our emotions and gives them an

elevated place in our tradition: in regard to both *using* Jewish spirituality to help *channel* our emotions and *also* as a means *themselves* to reach out to nothing less than God, God's self. Our tradition recognizes, that if harnessed properly, our emotions are not only to be given *space* in our religious practice but should be seen as the very best *source* for spiritual engagement and for encountering religious experience. Therefore, this space, the synagogue, this time, on one of our most sacred holidays, is *exactly* the right place, and *now* is *exactly* the right moment, to bring our emotions forward. We go through so much as human beings and our feelings guide us, accompany us and influence us wherever we go. And therefore, our emotions must play a crucial dynamic role in our spiritual lives as well – influencing our relationship: with God, with Judaism and with our thoughts about ultimate meaning, which in turn can guide and inform the way we as individuals then experience the raw emotions within us. Thus the relationship between emotions and spirituality is of essential importance in helping us live happy, healthy, ethical and meaningful lives, which is the very substance of what we have come here to grapple with today.

To surface some of our own emotions and to help bring them to our consciousness, I would like to ask you to participate. I would like you to think - think now about family members or close friends that you love. Picture them -- notice the feelings that arise as you do. You may be sitting next to some of those people right now – feel free to give them a smile or to squeeze their hands. Alternatively you may be missing someone's presence very much; someone you wholeheartedly *wish* were here. Notice these feelings as well as difficult, but meaningful, as they might be. Now think about how the emotions you are feeling right now, as you go through this exercise, affect the experience you are having in this moment: the thoughts they generate, the sense of meaning they relate.

Now, think about actual decisions you have made in your life *because* of the love or loyalty you feel towards a fellow human being, for example. Think about how sometimes that love and loyalty may influence you to make decisions that would be hard for you to imagine making if not for that feeling of love. As an extreme example, think

perhaps about a British father who saved his son, who has significant disabilities, by pushing him out of the way of a speeding car only to take the full impact himself, which tragically ended his life. His split second decision was surely motivated by love. Think about Dwayne Wade, new star of the Bulls who returned to Chicago and in only his first few months here, his cousin was killed – an accidental victim of street violence. This wave of violence has been going on for quite some time now, yet it is because of his love and connection to his cousin, and the anger he feels about her death, that he is *now* on a campaign to end gun violence, spending enormous amounts of his own time and money to create a safe haven for kids and to make the streets of Chicago safer. In these cases, the beautiful emotion of love, sometimes mixed with other emotions, was what motivated the behavior of an individual in significant and in inspirational ways, which in turn affected the lives of others.

Sadly, we know that emotions can have a negative effect on us as well. Think about how fear and anxiety often govern our choices. Fear

of failure, for example, constantly prevents us from doing things that our brains might otherwise tell us are important opportunities to advance our goals as human beings. We get stuck because: we are afraid of being the bad guy. Afraid of getting criticized or fired. Afraid of being ridiculed or ostracized. Or, ironically, we are sometimes even afraid of succeeding. So instead of taking a chance, we passively limit our lives. We avoid new experiences. We may even give up on our dreams. Or perhaps worst of all: we may even stop standing up for what we believe in. While fear can be a healthy feeling meant to warn us of a potential threat, when experienced without the ability to harness it properly, fear is often a counter-productive force that leads us to poor decision-making.

Bottom line: Emotions are powerful. They can serve as incredible motivators and at the same time our feelings can be so overwhelming that they threaten to hold us in their grasp, putting us at their mercy. Thus it is extremely important to engage thoughtfully in how to handle, harness and utilize this dominating life-force within us. Psychologists

and neurologists, amongst others, do this from the perspective of science. However, this is one of the many places where Judaism, as a spiritual practice, can really play a huge role in impacting our everyday lives. In fact, scholar of Hasidism Samuel Horodezky wrote that in practice, because of the nature of our religion, “Jews are actually more the People of Emotion than the People of the Book”.

He can make that claim because Judaism, at its core, is a lens through which to view our human existence; it is not simply a static body of rituals, texts and beliefs. Judaism is a spiritual practice that attempts to address our lives as lived in the real world. And as a spiritual practice it gives us the tools, and a framework, to elevate our experiences and to connect our emotions to a transcendent spiritual meaning that allows these emotions to be a more positive influence on our lives. James Jacobson-Maisels, Rabbi and Mindfulness expert, speaks about the inherent need, and value, of a spiritual practice which addresses the emotional life of the human being. He says, focusing first on the more difficult emotions, “Every spiritual practice must confront

the demons of the soul. Every spiritual adept must be trained in some way to encounter the suffering of life. Terror, fear, anger, hatred, self-doubt, desire, jealousy, pride, and shame are unavoidable aspects, unavoidable demons, of any true path of transformation. Pain, and often the pain of our own failings, is an inevitable component of the human condition.” In other words, spirituality and emotionality are inextricably linked. To be a spiritual adept you *must* integrate the powerful emotions that we as humans inevitably confront, and in turn, our spiritual life can then be utilized to *harness* our emotions in the most meaningful way possible.

In theological terms the ancient Jewish scholar Philo actually defines emotions spiritually by describing them as Divine, a gift directly from God that is both an essential part of our being, and which is at the core of what it means to be created in the Divine image. *His* focus, which classic Hasidism picks up much later, is on joy and the positive emotions. Philo believed that when we experience true joy, not to be mistaken for pleasure, we experience none other than, God. Ultimate

connection therefore is *defined* as a meaningful, purposeful, mindful merging of emotionality and spirituality. Through meaningful experiences of joy, we encounter God and transcendent meaning.

Albert Einstein agreed, as he wrote that “the combination of knowledge, beauty and emotion” is what forms the basis of true religiosity or spirituality. Einstein also wrote that while science can ascertain what is, it cannot ascertain what *should* be. This is the job of religion, as he said, “Judaism needs to take the valuations of the universe and set them fast in the *emotional* life of the individual”. For Einstein, the emotions are what motivate our actions but it is the job of our spiritual practice, our religion, to help inform and direct our emotions. In this way a spiritual practice helps us to make meaning out of the powerful raw material of our core emotional life.

As Jews, we harness this powerful nexus of emotion and spirituality all of the time through holiday celebrations, life-cycle rituals and prayer. Despite the general reputation that rituals are boring or staid, study after study, scholar after scholar, tells us that ritual at its best

enlivens, and gives expression to, our emotions in meaningful ways and therefore elevates our lived experience. Take for example a traditional Jewish wedding, whose ritual, customs, and embedded spirituality combine with the powerful emotions of love, family connection and joy to create a moving experience. The Huppah, the blessings, the rings, the spoken Torah, the wine and of course the glass with its accompanying shout of mazel tov, all join together to generate a unique expression of both the sacred and emotional nature of this event. The symbols and blessings connect the couple to eternal concepts such as God and creation, while at the same time evoke the personal loved shared by the couple and the bonds created by their love that serve to join two families. This blend of emotion and spirituality through ritual provides a beauty that transcends any individual component – the emotion elevates the ritual and the ritual channels and heightens the feelings.

This is just as true in regard to sad events as well. A funeral service, and the other rituals of remembrance, like Yizkor, make space and time in an authentic venerable fashion, to pay tribute to, and to raise

up, the memory of someone we love in the context of the sacred. When we remember, our hearts fill up – and Judaism provides a framework for dipping into those emotions in a way that honors those we love and lends meaning to their impact on our own lives.

And on a daily basis we can create a meeting place for emotion and spirituality through prayer. Some days, we feel very little and our prayer becomes the practice of a spiritual discipline. And thus on the days when we come to our prayer *filled* with feeling, we find ourselves with the *tools* to give voice to our emotions, examine them in a safe space and make sense out of what we are experiencing. As the great Herman Wouk wrote, “For the ordinary worshiper, the rewards of a lifetime of faithful praying come at unpredictable times, scattered through the years, when all at once the liturgy glows as with fire. Such an hour may come after a death, or after a birth; it may strike after a miraculous deliverance or on the brink of evident doom; it may flood the soul at no marked time, for no marked reason. It comes, and he knows why he has prayed all his life.”

Prayer can also work in the opposite direction, by *evoking* emotion. Perhaps singing *Aveinu Malkeinu* together – the stirring music, a connected community and a sacred purpose combining together serves to elevate your emotions and make you feel something transcendent – something beyond yourself. Or maybe you sensed this only a short while ago as we heard the stirring blasts of the shofar – that special unique instrument that is a symbol of the high holidays. From my perch here on the bimah I can see your faces – for the most part expectant, engaged, excited. The sound of the shofar reaches and draws on our emotions, its notes, in our tradition, are even likened alternatively to cries of joy or sounds of weeping. This moving part of our sacred service reminds us that God calls to us and we are called to God with our full emotional selves, complex and varied, as we ride the emotional roller coaster of life. Our voice reaches to heaven, through tears and laughter, through the expression of our collective emotion during this powerful and sacred ritual. The call of the shofar stirs our hearts to simultaneously reach closer to God and to live a better life as a result.

The power of the ritual evokes emotion and channels it down a spiritual path to yield a more elevated way of living.

In each of these we experience the powerful nexus of emotion and spirituality – understanding the dynamic that it is through our emotional experiences which we connect to religious ideas most powerfully and at the same time that it is our spiritual framework and rituals that help elevate and add meaning to the experience of our emotions. It is, therefore, precisely when we have *religious* or *spiritual feelings*, we give ourselves the ability to engage in the process of *unifying* our soul, our values and our present experience of life.

Thus, as my friend Yael Bendat Appell said to me, one of the great treasures of Judaism is that our rich tradition “brilliantly offers a framework for living a more meaningful life. Judaism is relevant; its rituals are a vessel for holding our emotional experiences as human beings”. Our Jewish tradition possesses many tools for transforming our emotions into constructive energy that adds depth to our existence. As Rabbi Daniel Gordis wrote many years ago, “Though there are many

factors that motivate Jews to embark on spiritual journeys, Jewish tradition recognizes that, often, the most important factors are *not* cerebral. . . Therefore we must realize that “Jewish life is interested not in proving God’s existence, but in feeling God’s *presence*”. Judaism’s framework is geared towards setting the stage for what modern Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel called moments of “awe and wonder,” - moments when God suddenly seems close.

I will conclude with a personal anecdote. I can’t tell you exactly how old I was but I was probably my son Ari’s age, around 9. My family and I were in Middletown, New York, in the Catskills, where my uncle was the rabbi of a shul. It was Yom Kippur. We were the kind of family who got there pretty early and stayed until the end, only pausing during the official break. I have a vivid snapshot of a memory, that only now can I look back on and know that it must have influenced the rest of my life. What I remember was simple: sitting in shul between my parents and brothers, my head resting on my dad’s shoulder, my mother tickling my arm as I loved her to do, as the cantor chanted the service

and as the rabbi, my uncle, spoke. I remember having this feeling -- a strong feeling -- that I was in the exact right place, that God was surely present, that the love and connection between me and my family, between me and the community, between me and the universe, was flowing and palpable, that our tradition was somehow facilitating this through my participation in the ritual and prayer, by being in shul on that very day. I felt that I had experienced the power of Jewish spiritual life and it moved me – not just generally -- but in real ways, to cherish my love for my family, my love for my community, my love for Judaism and my love for life. This experience, infused with emotion and awe, inspired me, amongst many other moments I am sure, to want to facilitate that for others, to share the notion that experiencing such moments are possible. It is part of why I am standing before you right now.

It is in this spirit that I would like to offer you, us, a blessing: that in a world like ours that moves fast, that values being busy but somehow is also one in which people seem to get bored so easily. In a world that

often focuses more on pleasure than sustainable joy, a world which seems to ask us to cover-up our anguish and put on a happy face instead of embracing our pain and dealing with it appropriately so that we can channel its power in more constructive ways. In such a world, my blessing for us is that we each find the inspiration, to seek out our great treasure of Jewish ritual, the sacred space of the synagogue and the vast resources of our very special tradition, to help us re-discover the many ways in which Judaism invites us to bring our full emotional worlds to bear as we seek to find meaning in our lives. My prayer is that we truly understand that our emotions do not just happen *to* us but are vital building blocks of who we are as human beings that have the power to enhance our lived experience of life. May we grasp, that as gifts from God, our religious tradition offers us powerful tools to harness the power of our emotions in constructive ways, to help us live elevated, happier, more connected and more ethical lives. So that next year when we enter these doors once again we will know, like I did so long ago, that this is *exactly* the right place and *exactly* the right time to experience the

essence of life. *Ken yehi ratzon* – may it be so for all of us in this New Year. *Shanah Tovah.*

Don't treat Him like a stranger. He loves you. He believes in you. He wants your success. To find Him you don't have to climb to heaven or cross the sea. His is the voice you hear in the silence of the soul. His is the light you see when you open your eyes to wonder. His is the hand you touch in the pit of despair. His is the breath that gives you life. (Sacks)