

Ki Teitse - Sept 2025

Choose Joy – Bar Mitzvah of Oli

This sermon is about resisting the theft of joy in the wake of the attack on Israel on 7 October 2023

Oli, you are a wonderful son, and I think a pretty decent brother and nephew. A lovely grandson. Your Torah portion is Ki Teitze. The part set out in our reading cycle for us to read this week is the section about the wayward and rebellious son, the naughty son. What do you think the Torah says the parents should do to him? It's incredibly harsh. Your parashah the part **I chose not to give you** says, the parents should take out that son, if he curses or hurts his parents, to the elders in the city gates, and the people should stone him to death.

To the parents in the room, I can only imagine how many times that has seemed appealing! Your Torah portion is trying to make sure that there is a strict hierarchy of obedience, child to parent, people to God. Maybe at some level, it speaks to the very particular pain that can only exist between parents and children. Who has at any time not felt those feelings?

But Oli, I did not feel this section was right for **you**. I knew your ability to grasp a wide range of ideas means that your section, a diverse collection of different laws would be the right sort of challenge for you to learn.

Your parashah opens with a powerful and important message. It is all about when that young man grows up; he has left his parents, and he has fallen in love, and begun his marriage. These are his first steps outside their home. For the first time, he lives in his own home with his wife. Let's imagine that times are difficult. This is not peace time; this is a time of war. All around him, people are being called up to fight. According to Torah, in those days, it is every man over the age of 20. Does he go to war?

The answer he gives is correct. He stays with his wife, ***l'chol davar naki yihye***, he is free or innocent of any other thing, ***ve'simach et ishto***, he should make his wife rejoice. ***Ve simach***. This is the word for *simcha*. Celebration. Joy. Imagine this, in a time of war, your Torah portion imagines that there is only one thing more important than joining in the fight: it is creating happiness.

Simach - creating happiness, this is the same word we say as we meet people on sad occasions, when we say, **only on simchas**. It is the tiny spark, the flame of happiness that becomes a mitzvah. A commandment. Imagine this, not only does he stay at home; he must make her happy...

I want you to remember this. My generation were raised to see being Jewish as the angry protest against our own Jewish history. Our parents saw the worst of humanity. Our Jewishness was a struggle for survival. It is so easy to forget in the struggle to survive there is also the creation of holiness, and joy. That we create new homes and new families not just to survive, but to rejoice in them.

We are just a few weeks from Rosh Hashanah, and then Yom Kippur, deep deep times for reflection. Times when every one of us turns inwards and reflects on our lives and their meanings. What happens next? An emergence. Because the very first thing I will do at the end of Yom Kippur, after I come home and have my tea and my honey cake, will be to start to build my sukkah. I will take my dusty tinsel decorations out of the shed and find some fairy lights. And here it is: a hidden thread of connection with the couple who celebrate their first year of marriage.

“take you on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, and branches of palm-trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and **rejoice vesimachtem before the Eternal your God seven days**”. (Lev 23:40)”

There is that word again, **v’simachtem**, you shall rejoice. You shall create happiness

That is going to be our great challenge this year at Sukkot, the first day of which falls on October 7. The attack on Israel on October 7 two years ago, can actually be understood as a direct attack on our survival and our capacity for creating happiness. Because October 7 **2023**, was **Simchat Torah**. The day of rejoicing and happiness in Torah: Literally **Simcha –Simchat Torah**. We will not let it destroy our capacity for simcha, for making joy.

Being Jewish is not easy. But as you Oli, rightly said it is ultimately about making **choices**. The hidden message of your Torah portion, which I want you to remember, is this. Choose joy.

Remember this, your parashah teaches that even in times of war, a person is commanded to build a home, to rejoice. To nurture bonds of love. To have the confidence, if you are lucky and if you wish, to build, a family. To make happiness. That doesn’t mean waiting for life to happen to you. But to actively make it. Go home after Yom Kippur and start building your sukkah. No matter how difficult the way of the world. we will in this community celebrate Simchat Torah, the celebration, the joy of Torah.

Because we are here not only to remember the past but to make joy happen, to choose **simcha**. Just as you have chosen, Oli, just as James also chooses today, and just as your parents have chosen. And just as your grandparents did, to raise a family filled with happiness and with hope.