

Beckoning to joy can also require assistance. For those struggling with their mental health or with substance abuse, setting the stage for joy can include a call to a mental health professional.

In *Inside Out*, Joy has to learn to step back and make space for Sadness, Anger, Disgust, and Fear. As the latter emotions take hold of our national psyche, let us remember the words of Psalm 30: “One may lie down weeping at nightfall; but joy comes in the morning.” Let us collectively embrace the radical Jewish call to set a spot at the table for Joy, and to welcome her with open arms.

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Joy Is a Radical Act

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“Art is a radical act. Joy is a radical act.”

—Rebecca Makkai, *The World's on Fire. Can We Still Talk About Books?*

A few weeks ago, my fiancée and I re-watched the Disney/Pixar movie *Inside Out*, where anthropomorphized emotions work together and compete to control the feelings and actions of an 11-year-old named Riley. One of the primary lessons is that unchecked “Joy” cannot by itself bring true happiness or properly prepare us for handling life’s more difficult moments. Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust all play a role in making us who we are, and we ignore those emotions at our own risk. As someone who strongly identifies with Amy Poehler’s peppy and unrelentingly optimistic “Joy” character, this message is both sobering and powerful.

However, after re-watching the movie in 2020, I was forced to wonder if our collective pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction. The last six months of uncertainty and fear have been so devastating that even as a naturally jubilant person I am hesitant to speak out on behalf of joy. The challenges we face today are both so great and so evident that we can recite them by rote—every article, sermon, and conversation is framed by a litany of disasters. I have noticed that even when feelings of joy do come, they are often accompanied by guilt. But it is not in spite of everything happening around us that I speak of joy this week; it is because of it.

Twice in this week's parashah, Ki Tavo, we are commanded to be joyful: we are instructed to be joyful in our bringing of the first fruits along with the Levite and the Stranger (Deut. 26:11) and we are to also be joyful after offering up—and eating—sacrifices of well-being (Deut. 27:7).

These instances of joy are tied to specific actions, and the Sages of the Talmud use these verses to establish that joy is experienced when singing (BT Arakhin 11a) or when eating meat and drinking wine (BT Pesahim 109a).

Joy appears for a third time in our parashah in the midst of the *tokhehah*, a long collection of curses meant for those who do not obey God's command:

תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עֲבַדְתָּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְטוֹב
 לֵבָב מְרֹב כָּל: וְעֲבַדְתָּ אֶת־אֱיִבֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלַחֲנוּ ה' בְּךָ
 בְּרָעַב וּבְצָמָא וּבְעִירִים וּבְחֹסֶר כָּל וְנָתַן עַל בְּרִזְל
 עַל־צַוָּאָרְךָ עַד הַשְּׁמִידוֹ אֶתְךָ:

Because you would not serve your God in joy and gladness over the abundance of everything, you shall have to serve—in hunger and thirst, naked and lacking everything—the enemies whom God will let loose against you. God will put an iron yoke upon your neck until God has wiped you out. (Deut. 28:47)

Here the expectation of joy is not tied to a specific action or a specific time. We are warned that if we fail to be exuberant when serving God, calamity will befall us. Tucked into the middle of one of the most difficult passages in the Torah is a huge and timely blessing, the necessity of joy in our daily lives.

The lesson here, just like in *Inside Out*, is that one emotion cannot be compartmentalized and only experienced when we feel it is warranted. Even as we grieve for friends and loved ones lost to COVID-19, fight for justice for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) Americans, and work to save our environment from those who would destroy it, there must be room for joy in our lives as well.

Yehudah Amichai appreciated the impossibility of compartmentalizing and separating our joy from our pain. In his poem “A Man in His Life,” Amichai writes:

”קהלת לא צדק כשאמר כך.
 אדם צריך לשנוא ולאהוב בבת אחת,
 באותן עיניים לבכות ובאותן עיניים לצחוק.”

“Kohelet was wrong about this [that there is a time for every purpose].

A human must hate and love at the same moment,
 To cry and laugh with the same eyes.”

As a staggering 40 percent of US adults surveyed by the CDC in June reported struggling with mental health or substance abuse, it is critical that we tap into Judaism's directives for infusing our lives with joy. We must utilize the tools at our disposal to allow our crying eyes a chance to laugh.

Thankfully, we are entering a time of year when our tradition places an added emphasis on joy and happiness. In the next month we will celebrate Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot—respectively, the birthday of the world, a day of forgiveness and renewal, and the holiday when we are supposed to be *שמח*, *entirely happy*.

While it is true that these holidays ask us to tie our joy to the calendar, our tradition also recognizes that one cannot set a timer and say “this will be my joyful moment.” These holidays ask something of us that is more difficult: we must actively set the stage for joy and allow ourselves to revel in it if and when it arrives. We cannot force joy, but we can beckon it.

Our Sages prescribe certain things to help bring joy: eating meat, drinking wine, singing songs, and Torah study were all ways various rabbis brought joy into their lives. During the coming holidays we traditionally dress in white, eat meals with guests, engage in small construction projects, and experience long periods of prayer and quiet contemplation. Hopefully one of those practices sounds compelling to you and has the potential to spark your joy.