

The Laughter of Play

Kol Nidre 5782

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Five years ago, a vigorous discussion broke out in my family. Shayah and Amitai wanted a trampoline. I was not initially on board—and I had reasons. Most homeowner's insurance doesn't cover trampolines. Too risky. My mother shared horror stories with me. Mom and Dad were never risk takers. Besides, a proper, well-constructed trampoline with appropriate safety netting and a sturdy frame was expensive—somewhere north of \$1500.

Moreover, every parent has experienced how childhood enthusiasms peter out, usually right after you've plunked down some serious cash. Would this be another short-lived passion? We called some congregational doctors and asked what sorts of injuries commonly occur to kids on trampolines. Parental worry being what it is, I had visions of spinal cord injury, but the doctors assured me that the vast majority of injuries were sprained ankles and other minor nuisances. Laura and I spoke frankly with the boys. If a trampoline was in the works, they needed to understand that it would be their birthday and Chanukah presents for the year and not just from us, but from their grandparents, aunts, and uncles as well. In the end, the kids won out. To this day, if it's not raining, one of the boys is on that thing—and when the rain lets up, a bunch of beach towels come out to dry it off and they are back to flipping. If the acquisitions of childhood were amortized by fun and hours spent that trampoline is probably the cheapest purchase we ever made for the kids. The boys were right to argue for it. I was wrong.

In fact, it would have been rather simple to predict that I would be wrong. Did you know that children smile about 400 times a day. Adults? Maybe 15 times. Again, children laugh around 150 times a day, while adults manage to do so about 6 times a day. Given these statistics, presented by the English psychologist, Robert Holden, none of us should be surprised that children play 4-5 hours a day, while

an adult, if lucky, will manage 20 minutes. The job of being a child sounds a lot more pleasant than the job of being an adult!

Why do so many people stop playing? Is it a normal part of human maturation or do other forces conspire against us? What do kids know that adults forget?

On the holiest night of the Jewish year, I want to share some thoughts on playfulness and play. Just as wellness can improve many areas of our lives, it is very difficult to effect meaningful change without play. We will return to this idea a bit later.

Let's first make an explicit connection between Kol Nidrei and playfulness. It's worth remembering that the rabbis of old opposed Kol Nidrei, which is not a prayer, but a legal act that nullifies future vows. Our Sages didn't want people to make vows at all, let alone attempt to nullify them. On the simplest level, they felt this way because the Torah imposes strong consequences on those who take but don't fulfill their vows. But there's another factor involved. Our vows bind and constrict us. They represent the very opposite energy as play. In a religion with 613 commandments, the Sages of old most likely worried about people making their lives unnecessarily onerous. So many of us create more work for ourselves than necessary. This saps our freedom, turns us bitter, and prevents us from investing in our playful sides.

That's a costly mistake we make. Perhaps if we examine the central role play has in being human, it will encourage us all to reintroduce more playtime into our lives. Play is an essential aspect of wellness, gratitude, and most importantly, renewal. Indeed, the English word recreation tells us out loud that play re-creates us.

So, what is play? Dr. Stuart Brown is the founder of the National Institute for Play. As a physician and scholar on the medical benefits of play, he states that play is as

important to humans as vitamins or sleep. This is important and worth repeating. Play is as important as sleep or vitamins. Let that sink in.

“Play,” he states, “is an ancient, voluntary, inherently pleasurable, apparently purposeless activity or process that is undertaken for its own sake and that strengthens our muscles and our social skills, fertilizes brain activity, tempers and deepens our emotions, takes us out of time, and enables a state of balance and poise.” Sounds like a trampoline.

If play is so important, why has it earned a bad reputation in the Western world? Why do we consider play as childish and beneath us as adults?

Some of the stigma of play is so ancient that we can see the cultural mores reflected in the Bible. There’s a famous scene in the Second Book of Samuel that occurs after a military victory against the Philistines. People are happy. Exultant, actually, as they transported the ark. While the ark was in motion, the Israelites were also having a jam session, rocking out on lyres, harps, timbrels, sistrums, and cymbals.

And as we all know, when someone is laying down a good beat, people dance. Everyone, the entire house of Israel, was jamming. But then tragedy struck. The ark almost tumbled from a cart and an unauthorized person touched it. There was tremendous fear that God would be angry, as happened when Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Abihu, drew too close so many generations earlier. As we all know, trauma can get passed down through the generations, so much so that in the Book of Samuel, everyone stopped dancing. It wasn’t until the Ark was safely at rest that David exhaled. In celebration, he began to dance again. That’s when his wife, Michal, saw him.

“As the Ark of the LORD entered the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and whirling before the LORD; and she despised him for it.”

And Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, “Didn’t the king of Israel do himself honor today—exposing himself (as a fool) today in the sight of the slavegirls of his subjects, as one of the riffraff might!”

OUCH! As the Gottmans, famous marriage counselors, once noted, contempt is one of the surest signs that a marriage will fail, and that indeed is what the Bible tells us happened to Michal and David. Imagine what would have happened if she went out to dance with him! Oy!

While this Biblical episode tells us something about the place of ecstatic dance in the ancient world, it also is a reminder that many of us stop playing because we are afraid of being judged by others. It begins in our middle school years when we have a strong need to fit in and find our place in the social milieu. Most of us make an expensive sacrifice to achieve this acceptance and do so by relinquishing key elements of who we are. We spend a great deal of time making sure we behave in socially acceptable ways. We break our spirits.

It would be hard to understate how central play is to who we are, and how much we lose when we don’t carve out time to play.

You all know by now that I often turn to Chassidic literature and practice to deepen my own understanding of how to live well. One such figure who can teach us about play was Reb Feibush of Ochnow. He must have known my boys in the spirit realm, because he is known as the somersaulting rabbi. It was his custom to leap and somersault before performing many ritual activities, like kiddush, or lighting the Chanukkah menorah. Most interesting, he would somersault before dealing with a difficult request or situation.

So why did Reb Feibush perform somersaults? Was he just outlandish? It was apparently a way to nullify the past and open himself to the future. Somersaulting was the way he got his ego out of the way. It opened new vistas and ways of thinking, precisely because, well, it turned his world upside down.

Play is a profound spiritual technology by which we invite joy into our lives. Joy, not fun. Activities that are merely fun tend to be a diversion or sometimes even a distraction. Joy is different. The Piazetsner rabbi says that during play, joy extends a piece of divinity because joy is divine. It sticks out like a limb of the soul. It is holy and essential.

This is not a new idea. In the Talmud,¹ Rav Judah said in the name of Rav:

'The day consists of twelve hours; during the first three hours, the Holy Blessed One studies Torah; during the second three hours, God sits in judgment on the whole world and when God sees that the world is so guilty as to deserve destruction, God moves from the seat of Justice to the seat of Mercy; during the third quarter, God is feeding the whole world, from the horned buffalo to the brood of vermin; during the fourth quarter God is playing with the Leviathan, as it is said, "There is Leviathan whom You have formed to play with'? (Psalm 104:26)

This is a remarkable image of God playing with the whale-like Leviathan. If children manage 4-5 hours a day and God invests 3 hours a day in play, what is our excuse?

Well, there's the money, of course. During the pandemic, people who worked from home blurred the lines between work and recreation even more than before. Burnout has become a very real concern.

¹ **Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 3b**

But it's more than that. Most employed adults gain too much self-worth from our jobs. "Do what you love, and you will never work a day in your life" is one heck of a whopper! It's an act of self-deception.

There used to be these things called cocktail parties, where unmasked people would gather and ask one another, "what do you do?" In America, that question always means 'what do you do for work'. Are we merely what we do? How can we play when it means we must stop doing that which defines us? The sad reality is that most of us don't and even when we weren't working, the first answer about what we do is to talk about our employment. We bemoan how busy we are, when sometimes beneath the moan there is pride. Pride that we are important enough to be so busy. Descartes famously said, *cogito ergo sum*, I think, therefore I am. In America, our philosophy has become, "I am busy, therefore I am."

On Rosh Hashanah, I outlined why I thought wellness is so important. In a world beset with so many hardships over which we have limited control, wellness allows us to thrive--and physically, spiritually, and emotionally healthy people actually can impact the world more effectively than those who are caught in a morass of dis-ease.

To achieve wellness—to make a *tikkun*, a repair, so that we can do *teshuvah*, something must change. Sometimes a wedding video is enough to slap us awake. Other times, play and the joy it occasions can achieve that without the stinging slap. As Rabbi Jacob Maisels stated, "when joy is present, we can see clearly, the mind is not frightened." Joy purifies our mind and heart. Fear is small. It makes us retreat into our ego. It causes us to clench tight to who we think we are and to how we imagine things must be. Joy takes us out of that smallness, if only for a moment. In doing so, it restores us.

Despite the importance of joy, we have built a culture of fear in which people are afraid to play, afraid to recreate. Unlike France, Spain, Germany, or Canada, the United States has zero days of required time off. Zero. On top of that, most Americans don't use the vacation days that our jobs provide to us. This past summer, I took most of June off. Last year, in other words, was the first time being a rabbi where I attempted to actually use most of my vacation time.

Why? I was afraid to take it off. Too much to do. What if there's a crisis? And while I intellectually have never allowed my job to define me and separate my role of rabbi from my essence as David, emotionally I wasn't making that distinction clearly enough.

Nonetheless, I at least have been good at nurturing hobbies. Pottery for 7 years. Singing and voice lessons. A good hobby is its own form of play. Getting my hands deep in clay was "an inherently pleasurable, apparently purposeless activity that I undertook for its own sake." Would I feel frustrated at times when a pot didn't quite match what was in my head? Yes. At the same time, just like the High Holiday prayer, *Ki Hinei KaChomer*, in which God is able to reshape us, clay is so forgiving. If a pot collapsed, the clay invited me to begin again. Clay is a medium in which mistakes are less costly. It gives us second and third chances to learn. That's play. The ability to try again taught me a great deal about being a rabbi and a person. My hobbies have been an avenue in which I allowed myself to play.

Even so, I could have done better. After all, at the heart of Judaism, we find Shabbat. This spiritual practice introduced the world to the concept of the weekend in which we declared that God put us here to enjoy life. We also state about God, *shavat vayinafash*. On the 7th day, God stopped and—*vayinafash*—God re-souled. God self-restored.

The world is upside down. It is sick. It is unhappy. It is constricted and stuck in old and destructive patterns. During this pandemic, the world asked us to stop as well. For a time, we did. But too few of us committed to "*l'nafesh*," to restore our souls. In fact, so many people did the very opposite, digging ourselves into an even deeper malaise of discontent and unhappiness.

Too many of us didn't renew. We didn't recreate, and we certainly didn't re-create. But that's what we need. Remember how the air over Los Angeles cleared when we stopped 'doing'?

Play is a spiritual act. It is an act of rebellion. It is an extension of the divine. In today's realm, it is the *teshuvah* we all are hungering for. This year, I invite you to get healthy, to seek renewal, and to enhance your wellness. This year, I am requesting that you flip out of your old ways of thinking and being. I am encouraging you to somersault your way to freedom, joy, and expansiveness.

This year, I challenge you to play.

Dance like no one is watching, love like it's never going to hurt, sing like no one is listening, and live like it's heaven on earth.