

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5784  
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## **Rosh Hashanah and the Bittersweetness of Time**

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The great and wise artist Joni Mitchell wrote:

*And the seasons, they go round and round  
And the painted ponies go up and down  
We're captive on the carousel of time  
We can't return, we can only look  
Behind, from where we came  
And go round and round and round, in the circle game*

I sing this song to my son each night as I put him to sleep. The more I listen to it, the more I realize that the circle game is bittersweet. When my son was born, my whole perception of time changed, and Joni Mitchell beautifully articulates some of what I have been feeling. As much as we might want to, there is no going back; we are stuck going round and round on the carousel of time. Always moving forward even as we look back. And as we move through life this way, we understand that our past is with us wherever we go. The past informs each moment of our life, and that's the blessing of time. We are changed every moment of the day simply because time passes by. Our past changes our future, and as much as we might want to continue holding on and stopping time, we continually go forward on the carousel of time.

Every day when my son wakes up, he gives me the biggest, possible, toothless grin on his tiny face. In that moment, I am instantly taken back to the memory of only a few months ago when the only thing that put a smile on his face was the subtle lights and shadows that danced on the ceiling. Or maybe it was the ceiling itself? We could never tell but it always made me

and my husband laugh alongside those big grins. I miss those times when he was so small, and through his eyes everything in the world became brand new. Yet in those moments, as I bask in the glow of his still toothless grin, I flash forward, thinking about what will be in his future. I wonder when he will hit another milestone. When will that smile be filled with new teeth? What will his first words be? How will he change once he can start talking to us? Every milestone sits just past the horizon in a mix of sorrow and anticipation. The sadness of what will never be again paired with the excitement of what will come. Hundreds of times a day, I look at my son and have this experience. I take too many pictures on my phone, hoping to capture each and every sweet moment before they are gone, left behind as we continue moving forward through time. And as these moments pass, whether captured in a memory or on my phone, I can't help but think of the wise words of Ms. Mitchell. *We can't return, we can only look behind from where we came.* And in those moments, I truly feel how bittersweet time can be.

Joni Mitchell isn't the only writer to focus on this idea of time being bittersweet. In fact in her book, *Bittersweet*, Susan Cain beautifully puts into words the sensation of living in a state of bittersweetness. She writes:

“bittersweet”: a tendency to states of longing, poignancy, and sorrow; an acute awareness of passing time; and a curiously piercing joy at the beauty of the world. The bittersweet is also about the recognition that light and dark, birth and death—bitter and sweet—are forever paired.

“Days of honey, days of onion,” as an Arabic proverb puts it.”

I have always loved this quote ever since I first read it because this quote is so steeped in Jewish values. Her use of light and dark evokes imagery of the creation story. God painting the night sky with the stars. Adding light where there is darkness, the joy of light amidst the fear of the night. The Arabic proverb, “days of honey, days of onion” reminds me of Passover. Enjoying the sweet wine alongside suffering through the bitter horseradish. And the “states of longing” bring to mind the end of each Passover seder when we announce, “Next year in Jerusalem” where we long to be all together in the year to come. Judaism teaches that joy and sorrow are forever paired, and what greater example is under the chuppah, on the cusp of marriage, when

a wedding couple smashes a glass. A symbol that even in life's most joyous occasions, we should never forget that there is brokenness in the world and in ourselves. Moments of bittersweetness and the bittersweetness in time passing are all around us.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians and philosophers of the 20th century, teaches another important lesson about time. He explains, "There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious...Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time and to sacred events." He goes on in his teachings to explain that Judaism is a religion of time and not space - a religion focused on making important moments distinct and sanctified. Every week, our tradition reminds us about the holiness in time as we prepare for Shabbat. As the sun sets on Friday night we set aside our everyday activities to make a holy time for Shabbat. In fact, Heschel teaches that the most distinguished word in the Torah is *kaddosh*, holy, and the first time this word is used is within the story of creation. God made the world in six days, and when God finished, God blessed the seventh day and made it holy; made it *kaddosh*. The holiness of Shabbat is not from praying in the synagogue or lighting Shabbat candles but is holy because of its place in time and the way that we mark this time.

It is fitting that the ritual of *havdalah*, separating the holy from the mundane, is a bittersweet ceremony. As we move from the holy to the ordinary, we do everything we can to let the sweetness of the holy day linger in our senses. We take a sip of wine, smell spices, and admire the candlelight. Yet, at the end, the sweet wine extinguishes the light as Shabbat officially ends and the rest of the week begins again.

This cycle of time weaving in and out of holy and mundane occurs continuously throughout the year. The cycle of Jewish holidays is an ebb and flow of bittersweetness. On Passover we joyfully celebrate the redemption from Egypt. Still, at the same time, we dip parsley in salt water and eat maror, literally meaning "bitter," to remember the sadness of being slaves.

The Jewish tradition has so many examples of balancing the bittersweetness. Yet, on Rosh Hashanah it is a bit different. On Rosh Hashanah we choose joy. We choose joy by eating apples, honey, and sweet challah and looking to the future with a fresh start. We choose joy by embracing the hope that begins to creep into view as the new year arrives. We choose joy by committing to ourselves and our communities that we will have a better year in the year to come. Tami Weiser from The Kitchn blog writes, “Once a year come these days filled with hope that next year will be healthier and happier. The food is sweet because hope itself is sweet.” And I love that idea. I love that we celebrate with joy and sweetness because hope is sweet and hope is one of the greatest joys we can have. Funnily enough, this tradition of enjoying sweetness on Rosh Hashanah does not come from the Torah or the Talmud as a requirement for how to celebrate the new year. The first written record of this practice comes from the 14th-century legal work, *Arba’ah Turim*, which states that Jews in Germany had a custom of eating sweet apples with honey at the beginning of the meal to say, “let this new year be sweet for us.” This joyous tradition has continued and spread to many Jewish communities since then to the point where every community I have had the joy of being a part of knows that on Rosh Hashanah we eat sweet foods for the new year. Knowing this, I find it so fitting that the prayer recited after tasting the first sweet bite of apple dipped in honey on Rosh Hashanah is:

יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ שֶׁתְּחַדֵּשׁ עָלֵינוּ שָׁנָה טוֹבָה וּמְתוּקָה

May it be Your will, O Lord, our God and God of our ancestors, to renew for us a good and sweet year.

As time progresses ever forward, Rosh Hashanah provides us a moment to pause. Not all moments are sweet, but this one is. Tonight, we taste the sweetness of the apple and honey and have an opportunity to reflect on the sweetness we hope for in this upcoming year.

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*We can't return, we can only look  
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Time holds it all, the bitter and the sweet, the joy and the sorrow, the past and the future. Each moment, however fleeting, is an opportunity to be present, and to not let the joys of life pass us by. As we start anew in 5784, may we open our hearts to the sweetness of the beginning of the year. And as time moves forward, may we embrace what time brings. Let each day be an opportunity to experience the fullness that the world has to offer as we go round and round and round in the circle game.

*Shanah tovah umtukah*  
May you have a good and sweet new year