

BETWEEN JOY AND JUDGMENT

R. April Villarreal | Pedagogy of Partnership

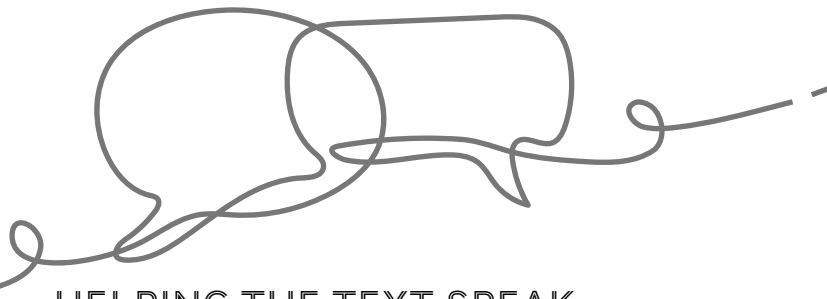


Many Rosh Hashanah experiences have a festive feeling. People gather for sumptuous new year meals, enjoying the newness of the year together. We add honey to the table to represent a sweet year ahead, and we bless each other for a year of goodness with smiles and joy.

Our liturgy is a little more complicated, though. It includes joy, but it also includes some more somber material, with themes of repentance and judgment, life and death.

Our movement across this wide emotional spectrum invokes one of the earliest examples of a Tishrei holiday observance in the Tanakh, in the book of Nehemiah. This text describes a segment of the Jewish community that had been living in exile since the destruction of the First Temple, experiencing the rupture of Jewish practice and life forced by their expulsion, but is finally able to return to the Land of Israel. This return is not only geographic—it involves a shift in their identity and choices about how to be in the world as Jews.

Below is a text learning routine to take you and a learning partner on a journey through this text, investigating how it can help us understand the Rosh Hashanah we experience today.



HELPING THE TEXT SPEAK

1. Greet your partner.
2. Take turns reading sections of the text out loud and sharing observations with each other using the prompt, "I notice...."
3. Together, discuss any thoughts or questions that arise from those details.
4. Using the questions below the text, consider the relationship between sadness and joy on Rosh Hashanah.
5. As you discuss, make sure each of you has an opportunity to share your ideas. Some prompts you can use are: "So are you saying...?" or "Tell me more about...."
6. At the end, share with your partner one thing that they helped you understand about this text.



נחמיה ח

Nehemiah 8

וַיֵּאסְפוּ כָּל הָעָם בְּאִישׁ אָחִיד אֶל הָרְחוֹב אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי שַׁעַר הַמַּיִם וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְעֹזְרָא הַסֵּפֶר לְהָבִיא אֶת סֵפֶר תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל: ²וַיָּבִיֵא עֹזְרָא הַכֹּהֵן אֶת הַתּוֹרָה לִפְנֵי הָקָהָל מֵאִישׁ וְעַד אִשָּׁה וְכָל מִבְּיֹן לִשְׁמָע בְּיוֹם אֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי: ³וַיִּקְרָא בּוֹ לִפְנֵי הָרְחוֹב אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי שַׁעַר הַמַּיִם מִן הָאוֹר עַד מַחְצִית הַיּוֹם נֹגֵד הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׁים וְהַמְּבִינִים וְאֶזְרָא כָּל הָעָם אֶל סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה: ...

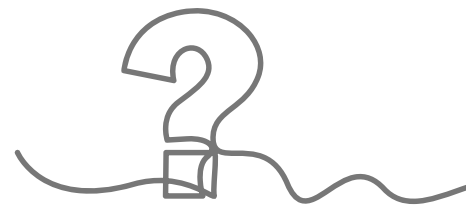
⁵וַיִּפְתַּח עֹזְרָא הַסֵּפֶר לְעֵינֵי כָל הָעָם כִּי מַעַל כָּל הָעָם הָיָה וַכִּפְתָּחוּ עֲמָדוֹ כָּל הָעָם: ⁶וַיְבָרֶךְ עֹזְרָא אֶת ה' הָאֱלֹהִים הַגָּדוֹל וַיַּעֲנוּ כָל הָעָם אָמֵן אָמֵן בְּמַעַל יְדֵיהֶם וַיִּקְדּוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לַה' אַפַּיִם אֲרָצָה: ... ⁸וַיִּקְרְאוּ בַסֵּפֶר בְּתוֹרַת הָאֱלֹהִים מִכְרֵשׁ וְשׁוֹם שְׁכָל וַיְבִינּוּ בַמִּקְרָא:

⁹וַיֹּאמֶר נְחֶמְיָה הוּא הַתַּרְשָׁתָא וְעֹזְרָא הַכֹּהֵן הַסֵּפֶר וְהַלּוּיִם הַמְּבִינִים אֶת הָעָם לְכָל הָעָם הַיּוֹם קֹדֶשׁ הוּא לַה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אַל תִּתְאָבְלוּ וְאַל תִּבְכּוּ כִּי בֹכִים כָּל הָעָם בְּשִׁמְעָם אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה: ¹⁰וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם לִכְנֹס אֲכָלוּ מִשְׁמָנִים וּשְׁתוּ מִמֵּתֻקִּים וּשְׁלַחוּ מִנּוֹת לְאִין נָכוֹן לוֹ כִּי קֹדֶשׁ הַיּוֹם לְאֶדְנֵינוּ וְאַל תַּעֲצִבוּ כִּי חֲדָתָה ה' הִיא מַעֲזָבְכֶם:

¹The entire people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses with which the Eternal One had charged Israel. ²On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Teaching before the congregation, men and women and all who could listen with understanding. ³He read from it, facing the square before the Water Gate, from the first light until midday, to the men and the women and those who could understand; the ears of all the people were given to the scroll of the Teaching. ...

⁵Ezra opened the scroll in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people; as he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶Ezra blessed the Eternal One the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," with hands upraised. Then they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves before the Eternal One with their faces to the ground. ... ⁸[Ezra's entourage and the Levites] read from the scroll of the Teaching of God, translating it and giving the sense so that [the people] understood the reading.

⁹Nehemiah the Tirshatha, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were explaining to the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Eternal One your God: you must not mourn or weep," for all the people were weeping as they listened to the words of the Teaching. ¹⁰He further said to them, "Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the Eternal One is the source of your strength."



QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR CONVERSATION

1. Why might the people in this story be crying? How might this crying relate to Rosh Hashanah?
2. In our text from Nehemiah, Ezra ultimately instructs the people not to be sad, but rather joyful. Imagine you are Ezra looking around at the scene. What might you have seen that would be a basis for you to give that instruction?

This passage in Nehemiah is not the first time in Tanakh that we hear about a reaction of distress upon hearing the Torah read after a period of disruption. Hundreds of years earlier, something similar happened to King Josiah, whose scribes discovered a scroll of the Torah that had been hidden during a span of reigns by wicked kings.

Read the passage below from 2 Kings with your partner, repeating steps 2–5 above.

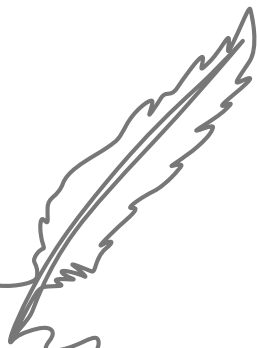
מלכים ב כב 2 Kings 22

⁸וַיֹּאמֶר חִלְקִיָּהוּ הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל עַל שָׁפָן
הַסֹּפֵר סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה מֵצָאֲתִי בְּבֵית
ה' וַיֵּתֶן חִלְקִיָּהוּ אֶת הַסֵּפֶר אֶל שָׁפָן
וַיִּקְרָאֵהוּ: ...

⁸Then the high priest Hilkiah said to the scribe Shaphan, "I have found a scroll of the Teaching in the House of the Eternal One." And Hilkiah gave the scroll to Shaphan, who read it. ...

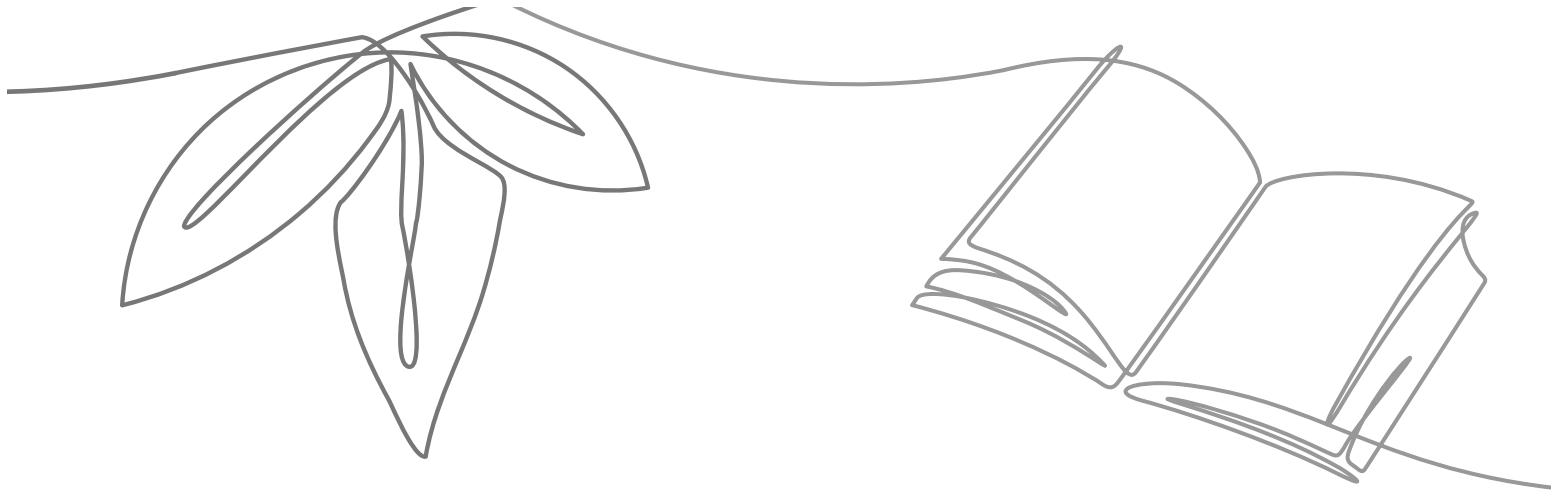
¹⁰וַיֹּגֵד שָׁפָן הַסֹּפֵר לַמֶּלֶךְ לֵאמֹר סֵפֶר
נָתַן לִי חִלְקִיָּהוּ הַכֹּהֵן וַיִּקְרָאֵהוּ שָׁפָן
לְפָנַי הַמֶּלֶךְ: ¹¹וַיְהִי כִשְׁמַע הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת
דְּבָרֵי סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה וַיִּקְרַע אֶת בְּגָדָיו:
¹²וַיֵּצֵא הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת חִלְקִיָּהוּ הַכֹּהֵן וְאֶת
אַחִיקָם בֶּן שָׁפָן וְאֶת עֶכְבֹּר בֶּן מִיכָיָה
וְאֶת שָׁפָן הַסֹּפֵר וְאֶת עֲשָׂיָה עֶבֶד
הַמֶּלֶךְ לֵאמֹר: ¹³לֵכוּ דֹרְשׁוּ אֶת ה' בְּעַדִּי
וּבְעַד הָעָם וּבְעַד כָּל יְהוּדָה עַל דְּבָרֵי
הַסֵּפֶר הַנִּמְצָא הַזֶּה כִּי גְדוֹלָה חֲמַת
ה' אֲשֶׁר הִיא נֹצֶתָה בָּנוּ עַל אֲשֶׁר לֹא
שָׁמְעוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ עַל דְּבָרֵי הַסֵּפֶר הַזֶּה
לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכָל הַכְּתוּב עָלֵינוּ:

¹⁰The scribe Shaphan told the king, "The high priest Hilkiah has given me a scroll"; and Shaphan read it to the king. ¹¹When the king heard the words of the scroll of the Teaching, he rent his clothes. ¹²And the king gave orders to the priest Hilkiah, and to Ahikam son of Shaphan, Achbor son of Michaiah, the scribe Shaphan, and Asaiah the king's minister: ¹³"Go, inquire of the Eternal One on my behalf, and on behalf of the people, and on behalf of all Judah, concerning the words of this scroll that has been found. For great indeed must be the Eternal One's wrath that has been kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this scroll to do all that has been prescribed for us."



QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR CONVERSATION

1. What might this passage from 2 Kings teach us about why the people are crying in the Nehemiah passage?
2. What can we learn about Rosh Hashanah from Ezra's instruction to be joyful?
3. Does the passage from 2 Kings shed any light on the relationship between joy and judgment?



CLOSING

In the Nehemiah text, Ezra gives the people three instructions:

1. To eat and drink pleasant things;
2. To send portions to those who need it;
3. Not to be sad, but to remember that rejoicing in God is the source of strength.

Ask people at your Rosh Hashanah table to choose one of these instructions, and to consider what it might mean for them and how they might follow it in a new way this year.

In many communities, a portion of this passage from Nehemiah forms a main part of the prayer that accompanies the eating of apples and honey. We invite you to consider incorporating this into your Rosh Hashanah celebration as well.

Share the prayer with people at your table and invite them to recite the prayer, holding the intention regarding Ezra's instructions that they just discussed as they enjoy their apple and honey.



יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאַלֹּקֵי
אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, שֶׁתַּחַדֵּשׁ עָלֵינוּ שָׁנָה טוֹבָה
וּמְתוֹקָה. מִרְאשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד אַחֲרִית
שָׁנָה:

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם לֵכוּ אֲכָלוּ מִשְׁמָנִים וּשְׁתוּ
מִמֵּתֻקִּים וְשַׁלְּחוּ מְנוֹת לְאִין נִבְּוֹן לוֹ בִּי
קֹדֶשׁ הַיּוֹם לְאַדְנֵינוּ וְאַל תַּעֲצֹבוּ בִּי
תְּהִי ה' הִיא מְעוֹזְכֶם:

May it be Your will, the Eternal our God and God of our ancestors, to grant us a year goodly [as the apple] and sweet [as honey]—from year's beginning to year's end.

He further said to them, "Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the Eternal One is the source of your strength."