

NETIVOT SHALOM: SUKKOT: SEPT 25, 2026

--Rabbi Carol Caine

Shabbat Shalom friends and Chag Sameach. *V'samachta b'ha'geycha, v'hayita ach sameach*, you should rejoice on your holidays, your chaggim, and be nothing but joyous, absolutely joyous. Many of us are familiar with these words. They appear in the Torah about the holiday we're celebrating now, Sukkot. The rabbis call Sukkot Z'man Simchatainu, the time of our rejoicing. So our mitzvah for this time of year is to rejoice—I'm down with that!

This is hardly the only place in the tradition when we're told to be joyful. To mention just a few examples: In the book of Nechemia, when some have returned after exile, there's a service on the first of Tishrey, so an early Rosh Hashanah. The scribes instruct the people not to weep but to rejoice, because their rejoicing in God strengthens them. The people seemed to have followed this instruction, because we read *la'asot smicha g'dola*, they made big joy, or great merriment, in one translation. During the month of Adar, when we celebrate Purim, we're told, *marbim l'simcha*, joy increases. The traditional rabbis teach that a very important mitzvah is to rejoice with wedding couple. And there are many more examples.

I love that our religion is so focused on joy. It's so life-affirming. Joy is so joyful! We really live this mitzvah here at Netivot when we sing together, chant Hallel, etc. I was here on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. During Musaf, when we sing that joyful song and dance around, even though many of us had been here for hours, I thought my heart would burst.

If joy feels so good, why do we have to be instructed about it so often? Why is it a commandment? Doesn't everyone want to be happy? Yes, but that doesn't mean it's always so easy. Many of us, certainly including myself, tend to muse on regrets about the past or worries for the future. Perhaps that is why we're told to cultivate joy as an instruction, a commandment.

Following this instruction doesn't mean I pretend to be joyful when I'm not. If I'd been depressed during that lively dance on Rosh Hashanah, I might have chosen to get up and sing and clap to get myself in the mood.

Or, I might have chosen to sit quietly, and let it affect me-- or not--in time. Real joy isn't dishonest.

Does this mitzvah mean a joy that's bubbly and giddy? Sometimes, maybe, but not necessarily all the time, if that's not the way we experience joy in any particular moment. Celebratory type of joy is only one type, and it's not appropriate for every occasion. My sense is that this joy is something deeper. If I were to choose a word or phrase for it, I would define joy as wholehearted living. It's a feeling of aliveness to the present moment, that doesn't exclude negative feelings, but rather takes them in as part of life without being overwhelmed by them. It includes appropriate sadness when there's good reason to be sad. Sometimes when I've been in situations involving my own or other people's honest grief, it has been joyful, in that deeper sense—my heart was full and I felt deeply alive.

The great Hasidic master, Reb Nachman of Bratzlav, famously said *mitzvah g'dola lihiot b'simcha tamid*, "it's a great mitzvah to be joyous always" and, similarly, "*lo liheetya'ash*" "don't despair". And yet, this is not at all a "feel-good" kind of teaching. From all reports, Nachman suffered from deep depressions himself. He also lived in very difficult times. He knew the darkness. He explained his teaching this way: "It is a natural human tendency to become discouraged and depressed....everyone has their full share of suffering. That is why you must...use every possible way to bring yourself to joy."

Nachman was very much a teacher who encouraged facing the darkness. Some have said that Reb Nachman was a kind of Jewish existentialist, dealing with nothingness, the void, what we might call, the dark night of the soul. Nachman's teaching about joy comes from confronting existential angst, a felt lack of meaning. We acknowledge that darkness so we can move out of it.

I realize I've made a quite a leap here. You may be thinking: I thought she was talking about joy? What's all this stuff about existential angst? Maybe the connection to Sukkot is that Sukkot is a holy day about impermanence, the idea that everything is transient, nothing lasts. It's our most Buddhist holiday, I think. We live in fragile Sukkot. We read from the book of Kohelet, *havayl havalim*. All is *haveyl*. Possible definitions of *havel*: vapor, breath, emptiness, nothingness, insubstantial, so we could translate it as "emptiness of emptiness, all is emptiness".

And yet we rejoice anyway. After telling us nothing we usually rely on lasts, Kohelet tells us to live whole heartedly anyway—“eat your bread in gladness and drink your wine with joy” and “whatever it is in your power to do, do it with all your might.” We’re being told to live wholeheartedly in this impermanent world.

Living with joy in this impermanent world isn’t easy. Perhaps that’s why so many of us were moved by that amazing poem by James McCrae that Josh sent out, about our souls being sent to earth for a temporary visit. I loved the verse “this 3D simulation is designed to break up the monotony of eternity by giving you a fully immersive experience as a distinct ego identity”. I’m simply having an immersive experience as a distinct ego identity, a kind of cosmic experiment. This idea helps me not take myself so seriously and live more joyfully despite impermanence.

Living with joy while embracing impermanence brings to my mind one of my favorite old movies, called “It’s a Wonderful Life.” Probably many of us have seen it. The main character goes through a very difficult period—he owes a great deal of money, he’s going to lose his business and probably go to jail, he’s had conflicts with his family. He never got to travel the world the way he dreamed of. He feels his life has been worthless and considers killing himself. Through some circumstances that I won’t give away for those who haven’t seen it, he comes to appreciate his life again. He runs into his house excitedly. He can’t wait to see his wife and children. His house is old and broken down, and the top piece of the staircase breaks off in his hand, which usually annoys him, but this time he kisses it. He’s still poor. He knows he’ll never travel the world. His outside circumstances haven’t changed. But he’s grateful to be alive, and he kisses the symbol of his life, the fragile staircase—like the fragile Sukkot we dwell in. He’s found a way to be ach samaech.

One final thought: This joy which we’re commanded to cultivate is a generous joy. Our Torah passage about tells this joy is not only for ourselves but also your sons and your daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites, the stranger who came from somewhere else to live with us, and the widow and the orphan. This is the Torah’s way of saying everybody—it’s all an inclusive-joy. I want to thank everyone in this community who has blessed me with their generous joy. I bless us all we find ways to honestly and deeply follow this mitzvah of being ach Sameach, totally joyful, while living in this impermanent world. Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach.