

Over many years, I mean since I was quite young, I've been told I'm a little serious.

Not too serious, but, still, apparently enough so for people to remark.

I'm what we call in the rabbinic world a Yom Kippur Rabbi. I tend to lean towards the more serious themes of the tradition. I like a good communal fast.

Others are Purim Rabbis. They lean towards the more lighthearted nature of the tradition: the 3 c's: costumes, carnivals and cognac.

I can dabble in that world, but I'm more comfortable putting on maybe a slightly different kipah for my costume, a pair of fun sunglasses if I'm feeling it, and focusing on the darkest parts of the Purim story.

But as I shared yesterday, I think we could use more lightness these days. I've come to see this as a spiritual matter, especially this time of year. Rosh Hashanah offers us an intentional process for personal renewal. Part of that process is reconnecting with

our sense of optimism and wonder, feeling a little less troubled or burdened in what I know we feel is a very broken world.

So I want to offer you a lighter story. It takes place, as so many memorable stories do, on a road trip.

Most of you know my family, but in case you don't yet, my wife is Sarah, our daughter Elie and our son Mica. I mention this because their names are important to the story. Sarah. Elie. Mica.

Several years ago, on a Sunday morning we were driving to visit a friend who lived about an hour or so away, so we buckled in, negotiated the terms of the drive - this may sound familiar - who was sitting where, what music we'd play, and what temperature the air would be set at.

SiriusXM radio came as a promotion with the car, so we decided to switch between different radio stations, one that is a favorite for each of us.

We started with the Broadway musicals station. We turn it on, and the first song is one of our favorites. Mama Mia, here I go again. My, my how can I resist ya? You know this song, right, by the group, Abba.

Now, you know, the kids call me Aba, Hebrew for father, and they think it's hilarious that there's also a musical group called Abba and so they get a big kick out of this. "Hey Abba, this is your song" ... etc.

A few minutes later, the time came to change radio stations. Next: 1980s hits. Classic. All the best hits of our childhood.

We turn the station and the first song that comes in is by Starship. One of their number one singles. Sara, Sara, no time is a good time for goodbyes.

We love this song, and we had to admit it was a little coincidence. Our first song is Aba, the second song, Sarah. We're all laughing about it. The kids think we're somehow up to something, planting songs about ourselves, but we're not. And we all just sing along.

Now we're about half way to our destination and it's time for the next station. This time, it's modern pop. 2010s, 2020s.

First song that comes on. One we all know and begin to sing together. Love me like you do, love love, love me like you do.

We're not thinking much about it - certainly not who sings it, until the DJ comes on and says "that was Love me like you Do," by Ellie Goulding.

We all look at each other. What? Elie and Mica stare at each other and then start laughing. What are the chances of this?

Abba, Sarah, Elie. It's as if the musical angels are following us, calling out our names. There was one name left. Unfortunately it may be the least likely name in the world to hear in a song. One of the kids looked up on their phone - are there any songs or singers with the name Mica? And if so, what musical genre? - maybe we can find the right SiriusXM station quickly.

It turns out, there's nothing. There was one ironic song where someone just says your name 40-50 times consecutively to a banjo in the background, but that seemed highly unlikely to be on the radio.

Oh well, we were so close. It was a pretty great coincidence that Aba, Sarah and Elie all got called out, but we turned the radio off for a little quiet. We were just about to arrive anyway.

The day didn't turn out the way we hoped. Nothing dramatic, just typical family stuff; sometimes longer car trips and hunger and weather and early onset of Sunday night

blues happens, and you just kind of slog through it. That evening, we got back in the car to head home.

It's at the top of the hour, so I turn on NPR news for the first ten minutes before it resumes its programming, which was a repeat of that morning's Sunday mass. I tend to be curious about what other clergy are preaching, especially in the Christian Gospel tradition. Many reverends' sermon styles are so interesting, dynamic and dramatic.

Sarah puts up with me, Elie and Mica less so, so they complain, "Aba," do we have to listen to this?"

"Give me just a few minutes. Listen, you'll like it. It's really interesting."

"Ok", they agree. Within 30 seconds, they're distracted or sleeping.

It was an interesting talk by the reverend. I always learn something, despite having a pretty different take on similar questions. We would be home soon, though, and we could use a little quiet, so I go to turn off the radio when the reverend says, "let me conclude." Might as well listen for one more moment. He closes his sermon by inviting his community into a sense of religious and spiritual purpose and action. He says:

“What does God demand of you? To do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

“Guys, guys, did you hear that?”

“Yeah, so?”

That verse is from the prophet Micah.

In fact it's the verse that influenced our decision to name our Mica, Mica. I have the verse written on a piece of paper on my desk.

*Mahdoresh Adonai mim'cha? Ki im asot mishpat, v'ahavat chesed, v'hatzne'ah lechet im Elohecha.*

Their eyes widen and they break out laughing, incredulous. The entire thing was so unlikely, we're pulling up to our house and we break out in celebration.

Somehow that *wildly* improbable sequence of coincidences felt meaningful - gave us something to celebrate.

Now - I don't want you to come away with a message that God works in mysterious ways. God looks after us, but not through Mama Mia, Starship, Ellie Goulding and Sunday mass. God is not programming my SiriusXM personally for me.

But I've been wondering over the years if there was something to explore here. I hadn't really found an angle that felt interesting or meaningful until the very heavy weight of this past year just caught up with us all. Suddenly, even just noticing the improbable feels like a spiritual nudge towards feeling more spacious and creative. Staying open to surprise - to coincidence, wonder, delight - can itself be a spiritual practice.

On Rosh Hashanah, there's purpose in stirring up our wonder, curiosity, playfulness, and amazement, sometimes at just very simple things. They are part of the process of teshuva. Teshuva means return or renew. It's like taking a yad that we use to read Torah and directing it towards oneself. The text we read is internal. The story we need to tell is about us and we try to tell it with precision and care, slowly and clearly.

I don't remember a time when it felt like we so desperately needed to get back in close touch with that part of ourselves that is just imaginative, playful even maybe a little mischievous. The part that finds joy and meaning even in ridiculous sequences of random events for the sake of ... just feeling lighter.

It turns out, this idea of the power of lightness comes straight out of the ancient rabbinic tradition. There are so many passages of Talmud that take a sudden light-hearted twist in the middle of a discussion of the most serious matters. And others that simply share stories or parables to show the importance of humor and playful energy in animating and sustaining a person and a community

In the Talmudic tractate called *Taanit*, which deals mostly with communal fasts, there is a passage addressing an issue no less significant than who on earth is deserving of a place in the world to come.

It takes place, of course, at the shuk, the outdoor market. Present in none other than Eliyahu Hanavi, Elijah the prophet. He's having a conversation with Rabbi Berokha Hoza'ah, who plays a fairly minor role in the ancient rabbinic world. They are talking about who will pass into the afterlife. Rabbi Berokha is pointing out different people - how about him? How about her? And Elijah offers his impressions.

Rabbi Beroka said to Elijah: Of all the people who come here, is there anyone in this market worthy of the World-to-Come? Elijah said to him: No.

Rabbi Beroka then sees two brothers come to the marketplace.

Elijah said to Rabbi Beroka: *These two have a share in the World-to-Come.*

Rabbi Beroka went over to the men and said to them: What do you do for a living?

They responded: “*Anu badachim.* We are jesters. We cheer up people who are sad, or depressed. And when we see two people who are fighting in conflict, we strive to make peace.”

It’s an amazing text. For bringing lightheartedness into the world, a person enjoys the reward of his actions in this world, and receives a place in the World-to-Come. The text suggests the greatest possible spiritual status for those who bring humor, lightness and play to a world full of conflict.

There are countless texts like this one throughout the ancient rabbinic tradition, in the Talmud, in midrash, and even in the halachic, more legalistic genre of rabbinic thought.

In the Talmudic Tractate of Ketubot, our rabbis teach that anyone who takes it upon themselves to make another person’s heart lighter - it’s as if he rebuilt one of the ruins of ancient Jerusalem.

I just want to pause on this for a moment to emphasize that when the rabbis say “rebuild Jerusalem,” it is not a simple matter. It is not a stand-in for “it’s wonderful.” They have words for “it’s wonderful” that they use many times in other passages and contexts. The language of rebuilding Jerusalem is an existential matter.

The ancient biblical prophets use this image to say there will be a time of spiritual return and healing after exile. Rebuilding ruins of ancient Jerusalem is prayer language - it’s a prayer for restoration of the people’s relationship with God, for resilience of faith, cultural revival and even political sovereignty. This is a matter of great religious significance!

What it means, in plain language, is the renewal of hope. Personally and communally. It means that we remain resilient in our hope. We continue to believe that the city that was destroyed - the city that holds our historic collective consciousness can be repaired. The fate of the Jewish people to live in a healed world relies on our ability to lighten the heart.

I want us to expand the notion. It depends not only on our ability to lighten and gladden the heart, but also to be amazed and willing to wonder. To stay curious,

open, spacious and imaginative. To lead with humor. To put on a costume, go to a carnival and drink cognac. To find meaning in and celebrate the improbable, even random sequences of events. To let go of so, so, so much weight, anger, resentment. All of this is really for one purpose: to stay resilient in our hope ... that what has been destroyed can be rebuilt, one ruin at a time.

We can follow the lead of the *badachim*, the light-hearted jesters who cheer up sad people and jump into conflicts to mediate peace. Remember they are among the very few who have a place in the world to come.

All these years I haven't really known what to make of that drive in the car with my family other than a fun story about an unlikely sequence of events that has us laughing and celebrating as a family on an otherwise discouraging day.

Now I can't stop thinking that, in a world on fire, staying open to wonder and delight is the heart of it all.

I wish you and your families a Shanah tovah. After *chag*, you turn on the radio - someone may be singing your name.