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Yom Kippur Morning 5782: It's Okay to Not Be Okay

One of my least favorite Talmudic characters is the one they call Nachum, ish gam zu¹ (he lived in the 1st century, after the destruction of the 2nd temple). He is a pretty miserable figure. One of those people to whom terrible things just happen. And when they do, whatever happens to him, he says the phrase, "Gam zu l'tovah" – This, too, is for the good. Or as we say in Portland: it's all good.

He is ceaselessly positive, the Talmudic version of the Black Knight in Monty Python's Holy Grail, who upon losing an arm says: "Tis but a scratch..."

Even in the story where Nachum ends up going before Caesar with a chest full of dirt as an offering (having been robbed the night before), and is at risk of being killed, he says, "Gam zu l'tovah," This, too, is for the good.

And, in the end, of course it is. Because Nachum represents a world in which everything, however terrible, is understood to be God's will, to be purposeful. And so, things often do work out OK for him. Gam zu l'tovah, it's all good, indeed.

I find this is a challenge, because it is certainly not our reality. It's never been our reality. Things don't always work out for the best. This Talmudic character particularly bothers me because, as a Reform Jew, I don't believe everything is God's will, I believe in free will. To be completely positive like him in the world today, sometimes at least, is to have totally misunderstood the situation. The truth is: It is okay to not be okay.

There is a meme going around my clergy networks that reads: After the year we've had, our rabbis should be able to stand up during the High Holidays and just exclaim: "I'm so overwhelmed, I don't know what to say!" And we'd all kinda nod and say: "L'chaim!, I'll drink to that!"²

Everything is not okay in our world and it is okay to not be okay.

I was speaking with someone who was laid off during the pandemic whose life was turned upside down. They told me how many well-meaning friends and family rushed to say she needed

¹ Nachum was a Tanna (a rabbinic sage whose views were recorded in the Mishna) of the second generation (first century).

² <https://media.discordapp.net/attachments/818551183689908277/879871555331555328/image0.png>

to “stay positive.” She’d be back on her feet if she just stayed focused. “It could be worse; at least your husband was still employed. At least you still had good health.”

The undertone was clear: she should be grateful for what she did have. Don’t dwell on what was just lost.

No one meant to hurt with these comments. They were trying to make someone feel better. And while she was grateful and knew she was still in a pretty privileged position, it didn’t mean the situation still didn’t hurt. It did, it does hurt. The same could be said with all of our new reality, be it things that are big, or seemingly small, but have a huge impact on our lives. We have lost people, we’ve missed funerals, we have postponed our weddings or our b’nai mitzvah, we could not graduate in person, we have lost a sense of connection, we have risked our personal health to keep others safe, fed, healthy and clean; we have been alone in our loneliness.

We know that people are hurting, that they don’t feel like themselves, that, as Rabbi Cahana summed up on Erev Rosh Hashana -- we all have road rage now.³ But we don’t have the words and the space to feel that. The forced positivity is counterproductive, and one term for this phenomenon is called: toxic positivity.

Toxic positivity is a phrase rooted specially in American culture, which values positivity above other emotions. Dr. Jaime Zuckerman, describes it as, “the assumption, either by one’s self or others, that despite a person’s emotional pain or difficult situation, they should only have a positive mindset or — my pet peeve term — ‘positive vibes.’”⁴

Toxic positivity not only invalidates your actual emotional state, but also increases secondary emotions. When we tell someone that feeling sad, angry, or any emotion that we consider ‘negative’ is bad — we end up eliciting secondary emotions inside of them like shame, guilt, and embarrassment.⁵

According to Dr Zuckerman, “The inherent problem with this concept is that we assume that if a person is not in a positive mood (or whatever we think a positive person should look or act like), then they are somehow wrong, bad, or inadequate.”⁶ In so many words, we are saying to them that they *should* feel ashamed of being sad or that they *should* feel embarrassed for being afraid.

It really is OKAY to not be okay.

³ Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana, “Choose Kindness,” Erev Rosh Hashana 5782

⁴ Dr. Jaime Zuckerman: <https://www.drjaimezuckerman.com/read>

⁵ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-adaptive-mind/202107/the-antidote-toxic-positivity>

⁶ <https://www.drjaimezuckerman.com/read>

Not only is it okay to not feel ‘okay,’ it is essential.⁷ An abnormal emotional response to an abnormal situation IS normal. We cannot simply pick the emotions we want to have. It just does not work that way. So feeling sad and scared about losing a job is normal. Crying after you get into a fight with your partner is also normal, as is feeling anxious and scared about an uncertain future. When we think we might lose something we care about, that’s sad. When we don’t know what to expect next, that’s scary. We should let ourselves, and other people in our lives, feel these things as they come up — which may be more than usual right now. By hiding our discomfort, we’re only adding fuel to fire.

When we are listening to someone in distress, we’re often afraid of making them feel worse and then we don’t know what to say. We need to affirm the other person's feelings and let them know we are here to support them without expectation:

It is okay to not feel okay.

You should feel whatever emotions you feel.

Take your time. I am with you and I’m listening.

You’re allowed to feel this way. Your feelings are valid.

And, let me be clear: it’s okay to not be okay, AND, if you, after sitting with your feelings, are really not okay, there are ways and resources to get help.⁸

I’m so impressed with Simone Biles⁹, and other athletes, who are no longer afraid to address mental health. By not jeopardizing her own health and wellbeing, she said, on the world stage: it’s okay to not be okay. It’s okay to leave toxic positivity behind, to embrace the full spectrum of the human experience. The good and the bad. She taught us about “tragic optimism.”

Tragic optimism¹⁰ says there is hope and meaning to be found in life while also acknowledging the existence of loss, pain and suffering. First defined by Austrian psychologist and himself a Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, in 1984, tragic optimism maintains there is space to experience both the good and the bad, and that we can grow from each.

⁷https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/toxic-positivity-mental-health-covid/2020/08/19/5dff8d16-e0c8-11ea-8181-606e603bb1c4_story.html

⁸ National Institute for Mental Health <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/find-help>

⁹<https://www.pennlive.com/nation-world/2021/07/its-ok-not-to-be-ok-thanks-to-simone-biles-mental-health-takes-center-ring-at-olympics.html>

¹⁰ Viktor Frankl, “Man’s Search for Meaning,” 1984 postscript titled: Tragic Optimism.

I know these terms sound very similar: Toxic positivity says that everything is okay and life is full of silver linings; it's based in American culture of putting on a happy face and pushing through. And tragic optimism is different, in fact it feels very Jewish because it says that we are able to hold both the good and the bad together. Like Tevia, in *Fiddler on the Roof*: "On the one hand I believe, and on the other hand I believe, and on the other hand...No. There is no other hand." It's the kind of philosophy we need to cope right now, as we're still trudging through the pandemic – and may help us once we're on the other side, too.

I think Frankl was drawing upon Jewish tradition and, specifically, our liturgy when thinking about tragic optimism. At Shabbat on the Plaza, earlier this summer, as we were singing the hashkiveynu prayer, our youngest turned to my wife and said: I used to think mommy wrote this song? She sang it to me every night before I went to bed.

Yes, I did sing this prayer every night before bed. But I don't really deserve credit for a prayer that was written thousands of years ago. But as a Mom, every night, I asked God to shield us from hatred, sorrow, and pain, from the reality of the world. Why? Because in our aloneness at night, as we say hashkiveynu before sleep, we are daily acknowledging what gets in our way and at the same time praying for comfort and protection from these frightening thoughts. Our liturgy puts into our everyday what is enormously scary and uncomfortable. And trusts that we will come around every night to feeling HaMakom's -- God's -- safety and shelter.¹¹

Instead of letting these negative feelings overwhelm us – or ignoring them completely, as is par for the course in toxic positivity – embracing tragic optimism means making a daily effort to, as much as is possible, feel comfortable with loneliness or anxiety. It's an opportunity to help us distill our values. In these moments, we may learn that we actually enjoy solitude, that we highly value community or discover who we want to be on the other side of the pandemic.

Now, I wouldn't be a Rabbi if I didn't believe in the power of community, the power of ritual, the importance of gratitude, and action. I spoke about these important planks on Rosh Hashana¹² and I try to live these values every day in my personal and professional life. AND, I'm standing here saying, they might not make you happy. You might not feel better after doing all of these things and that is okay.

As Glennon Doyle recently said in her podcast: You're not a mess at all. You're just a feeling person in a messy world. You are exactly right to feel a lot right now. It does not mean you're weak -- it means you're strong enough to be paying attention. Be gentle with yourself (sic), please.¹³

¹¹ Inspired by teaching of Cantor Ida Rae Cahana

¹² Rabbi Rachel L. Joseph, "Hold On," Rosh Hashana Day 5782

¹³ We Can Do Hard Things podcast, with Glennon Doyle, September 9, 2021

So, although it may feel tempting just to grin and bear it, taking the slightly more uncomfortable route of a tragic optimist may actually help us see that there's a light at the end of the tunnel – and help us take a breath as we wait to reach it. Last night Rabbi Cahana spoke about this year of shmita, this year when the land rests, as an opportunity for rest, connection and renewal for us as well. An opportunity to heal.¹⁴

Feel your feelings. Sit with them. Let them pass. And let others meet each wave of whatever emotions they're feeling too.

Not everything is Gam zu l'tova, "this too is for the good." Everything is not okay, and THAT IS OKAY. L'chaim, I'll drink to that!

¹⁴ Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana, "Release from Isolation," Erev Yom Kippur 5782