

**Rosh Hashana Day 1 Sermon 5778 (2017)  
Delivered by Cantor Scott Buckner**

Singing:

Smile though your heart is aching  
Smile even though it's breaking  
When there are clouds in the sky  
You'll get by

If you smile  
Through your fear and sorrow  
Smile and maybe tomorrow  
You'll see the sun come shining through for you

Light up your face with gladness  
Hide every trace of sadness  
Although a tear, may be ever so near

That's the time  
You must keep on trying  
Smile, what's the use of crying  
You'll find that life, is still worth-while,  
If you just smile.

What a beautiful song by Chaplin, Turner and Parsons, made popular by Nat King Cole in 1954.

What inspired me to sing this for you on Rosh Hashana? It carries a message that I think we all need to hear in these troubling times. Let me explain...

I had been thinking about all of the terrible news we are confronted with every day in the newspaper, on the radio and in 30 second sound bites on cable news stations. I could stand up here and give a fiery sermon about the evils of our time, the multitude of problems that we face in our country and the world. I could talk about how we are obligated as Jews, to work for justice. The phrase *Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof* – Justice, Justice Shall you pursue, is directly from the *Torah*.

The word justice is repeated in this phrase for a reason. Perhaps to emphasize that justice is of the highest moral value. Some say the first instance means we must work for justice, and the second instance tells us that just means must be employed in that work. It's clear there is much work to be done. As Jews, we are obligated to be involved in the mission to make the world a better place. We must hold our elected officials accountable for their part in caring for the most vulnerable among us, for fighting bigotry and hatred. But, I'm not going to give **that** sermon. I know, that the people of this congregation care about those in need and are concerned about the environment, health care, climate change, antisemitism, racism and other important issues of our day. I know, you will speak out and work for Tikkun Olam – to repair the world.

In case you need ideas of how you can help, send me an email after the holidays and I will share with you links to many

wonderful organizations working to make a difference. But today, I have another message that is foundational to our ability to cope with everything that is coming at us. The message of the song, simply titled "Smile" is a message that was well known to the Chassidic masters.

Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement, gave many teachings about joy. Rebbe Nachman stated: "It's a great Mitzvah to be happy all the time. You need to make the effort to push away sadness and melancholy with all your strength. Every ailment that afflicts a person comes about because of some disturbance to that person's quotient of joy." He says that "joy repairs illness".

Nachman states emphatically, "Every person is filled with suffering! That's why we have to force ourselves, with great strength, to be happy always. Give yourself joy however you can, even by being foolish."

But how do we reconcile these seemingly opposing elements? The weight of our problems and all the problems of the world with Rebbe Nachman's directive to be happy all the time? Isn't that unrealistic? Doesn't that fly in the face of all we see and hear in the news media?

Our tradition asks us to serve God in joy. *Simcha*, joy, is an essential element of Judaism. From our sacred texts – “I will rejoice in the Lord” Psalm 104. “Serve the Lord with joy; come before God's presence with singing”. Psalm 100.

The Rabbis of the Talmud spoke of “*simcha shel mitzvah*”, The joy of performing a mitzvah. Joy was encouraged at all times, especially during holy days. Here we are, in the midst of the Rosh Hashana liturgy which is filled with heavy language of God as king and judge of our deeds. But what is the greeting we say to each other on Rosh Hashana? We wish each other a *Shana Tova*, a good year. But we may also add the word, *Um'tuka* to the end of that greeting. Which changes the greeting to a wish for a good, and sweet new year. What is the symbolic food that we eat on Rosh Hashana? - an apple dipped in honey symbolizing the hope for sweetness in the new year. So aside from this being a time of *cheshbon hanefesh* - accounting of the soul, when our deeds are brought before the judge of judges, it is also a time of sweetness and joy.

The chassidic masters, like Rebbe Nachman emphasized joy and love because they saw the presence of God in all things. Joy, for these rabbis, represented a spiritual path, which gives one the perspective and the strength to face the troubles of life.

I know our very own rabbinic comedian, Rabbi Bob Alper agrees. He is well aware of these teachings by Rebbe Nachman. In fact, I was speaking with Rabbi Bob just a few days ago. I learned that in Philadelphia, this very day, he is delivering a sermon on the spirituality of laughter! With his permission, here is a quote from Rabbi Bob:

“Now my rabbinate, and my passion, is creating laughter. Creating laughter! Not just from the time I became a professional comedian, but throughout my life and my career.” He goes on to explain:

“There’s an intensely spiritual aspect to laughter. Humor, it turns out, is much more than pleasant diversion. It's much more than entertainment. Laughter is life giving, life affirming, and increasing its incorporation into our lives is a splendid way to enhance our physical, and spiritual health.”

Rabbi Bob is correct. Science bears this out. Just search the internet and you will learn of the growing popularity of laughter therapy, laughter yoga and laughter wellness. It has been shown that laughter decreases stress hormones. Laughter increases immune cells and infection-fighting antibodies. It improves your resistance to disease. Laughter triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals. Endorphins

promote an overall sense of well-being and can even help relieve pain.

Isn't it amazing that a Chassidic Rebbe understood this, and was teaching it 250 years ago?

I would like to relate a story about a young woman who came to my office in my previous synagogue. She wanted to discuss the importance of Mitzvot.

She offered a very creative definition of a mitzvah as an action that makes someone smile. She spoke about the need for both the giver and the recipient to smile, and to take that smile with them when they leave.

She then thoughtfully asked about people who might not be in the mood to smile: One who is ill in the hospital. Someone who has been touched by the death of a loved one. One who has received bad news. I believe, that in the darkest times, we need a smile the most. That smile can be brought to us by a small act of kindness. People who have been in the hospital—or members of their family—have told me years later about those who touched their lives during a very difficult episode. Even if a heartfelt smile does not come at the time, a smile is planted deep within the soul, as one remembers even the smallest acts of kindness: a telephone call, a visit, a get well note, a meal delivered.

We are responsible for repairing the world, but there's also an obligation to live life fully and joyously, even in the midst of difficulty.

There is plenty to get disheartened about, but what's the point of being down all the time? We aren't really much help to ourselves, or to anyone else when we are down. If we learn to live with joy, we won't focus so much on all of life's annoyances. There is plenty we could complain about, get depressed about or get angry about. Of course, there is a necessary time for grieving when you sustain a loss. That's why Judaism has prescribed traditions of mourning. We all need to give ourselves time, patiently, to grieve the loss of a loved one. However, the rabbis also understood the danger of prolonged grief. When we stay in a place of excessive grief, it limits our ability to do good in the world. That is the ultimate connection between living with joy and facing the difficulties of our times. It's the knowledge that from a place of happiness, we are in the best position to act, and give of ourselves to others.

Let us all resolve this year to practice "*simcha shel mitzvah*", the joy of performing a mitzvah, and bring a smile to someone in need of our caring.

As Mother Teresa said:

"Spread love everywhere you go,

First of all, in your own house,

Give love to your children, to your wife or husband,  
to your next-door neighbor...

Let no one come to you, without leaving better or happier.

Be the living expression of God's kindness.

Kindness in your face. Kindness in your eyes

Kindness in your smile, And kindness in your warm greeting."

- *Shana Tova Um'tuka.*

May this day, be the beginning of a good, sweet New Year,  
with many smiles and acts of kindness, to heal us and our world.