

*Shana tova*. A good year—that's what we all fervently wish for. But maintaining hope in these times can be terribly challenging. ISIS appears to be on the rise. The Iranian bomb threat hasn't receded, though alarmingly it seems to be receding from public consciousness. The summer that just ended drained one's energies with its relentless toll of bad news. Three Jewish boys were kidnapped and murdered, and the world yawned. The rocket attacks from Gaza revved back up, and the nations shrugged. Israel mounted Operation Protective Edge in response, and in some ways that provoked the greatest pain of all. I'm not just referring to the death and destruction. Reaction to the operation throughout the "civilized world" wrenched our eyes open to widespread, vicious, and sometimes violent anti-Semitism. Jew hatred is back. Or perhaps it never went away, but merely hid for a while after the Holocaust. Now it's coming back into style.

More than once this summer I found myself on the verge of tears as I sang to Matan and contemplated the world into which he's been born. The wistful tune of choice was often *Chorshat HeEkalypus*, "The Eucalyptus Grove," an Israeli classic that recounts the fleeting nature of the human experience within the context of Eretz Israel's beauty. I sang it to Matan again on Monday, taking a walk amid trees adorned with beautiful

decaying leaves, just hours after Rabbi Woolf's passing. In some ways *Chorshat HeEkalyptus* has meant more to me in recent months than any prayer, any ritual observance in or out of shul. The ugliness and evil of the summer frankly made it harder to feel connected with traditional Judaism, and I turned more in the direction of music.

And yet, *hineni*. Here I am. Here we are—the collective Jewish nation, millions of us around the globe, from the fervent *chassid* to the resolute atheist. We are come together, as at this time every year, to participate in what Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks has called “vivid enactments of Judaism's greatest leap of faith: the belief that the world is ruled by justice.”

It would be fruitless to delve into a debate of whether justice prevails. But the debate exists, since time immemorial. People of faith have been questioning divine justice at least as far back as Abraham's challenge of the intended destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The religious person, as much as the agnostic, questions G-d's providence in light of the Holocaust that is still fresh in human memory, and in light of the depressing goings-on of recent months.

At this time of year, when we gather to be judged—and also to question and challenge our Judge—might the Torah offer a hint of justice’s existence? Might it give us a glimmer of optimism that things will be made right, that the day will come when life makes sense?

In studying today’s portion, I asked the question, why do we read of Isaac’s birth on Rosh Hashana? What’s its significance, what does it have to do with the holiday? Rabbenu Artscroll tells us that we read of Sarah’s pregnancy and the birth of Isaac because Sarah became pregnant on Rosh Hashana. Well, perhaps, but that explanation frankly seems a little too pat.

Why not read the account of creation from the very beginning of Genesis, for instance—doesn’t that seem more tied into newness and renewal? Or we could read the account of the covenant between the parts, since the High Holydays are a sort of exclamation point concerning man’s covenant with the Divine. Instead, we read of Sarah, Isaac, and Sarah’s laughter on his birth, a laughter that informs his very name, Yitzchak, “he will laugh.” Laughter during the Days of Awe, when we are being judged and perhaps pondering our verdict on the almighty Judge . . . how does that compute?

Previous to Yitzchak's birth, both Sarah and Abraham laughed at the very notion that Sarah, an old, post-menopausal woman, would have a child. Indeed, they laughed even though the promise of a son came from the Almighty. While that laughter strikes us as disrespectful, it also strikes us as natural. We often associate laughter with incredulousness, sarcasm, perhaps amusement, perhaps cynicism. It's a coping mechanism of sorts. So laughing at the Almighty seems understandable, even if in questionable taste.

This summer—this same summer that brought so much grief—I became aware, or perhaps re-aware, of a different kind of laughter, one that is too rare in our world. It is the laughter of pure joy. Matan brought it into our house. Our baby's laughter expresses happiness at the wondrous nature of life. If he's like most people he'll probably lose that kind of laughter to some extent after eating from the proverbial fruit of knowledge. But G-d willing he'll reclaim that laughter when he has children of his own—just as Allyson and I have sometimes found ourselves reclaiming it, laughing with Matan in a way that probably neither of us had experienced in years.

When Sarah laughed out of pure joy—as I’m certain she did when she finally had her child—her and Abraham’s previous sarcastic laughter was redeemed. They had been promised a miracle. They’d laughed at the promise, even though they knew their Maker in a way we can’t imagine. Yet they were forgiven.

In our days, we’re much farther removed from the Divine than Sarah and Abraham were. And yet we come together, at least during the Days of Awe, to seek redemption, to seek a closer relationship with our maker. Our stiff-necked nature gets us in trouble so often in the Bible. But it also redeems us when we say to G-d, to each other, to the world, WE ARE STILL JEWS. We will try to connect with our religious heritage. We will remember who we are. And we will defend our right to live as Jews. And perhaps that’s enough reason for the Almighty to continue to consort with us every year at this time, and cause enough for us to consort with Him.

In Sarah’s laughter—in the elevation of her laughter, after such a painfully long wait, from disbelieving to joyous—we can take hope that one day our prayers, too, will be answered. The childless shall become parents; the poor shall have bread. Anti-Semitism will disappear, we’ll see that justice reigns on the Earth, and we’ll have a well-developed relationship

with the Divine. Then, just as happened with Sarah, and as is foretold in the *Shir HaMa'alot* that we'll sing after our holiday meals over the next few days, *az yemaleh schok pinu*. A joyful laughter will fill our mouths—not just in the presence of newborns, but continually. We'll make full use of our fleeting lives. Let us take inspiration from that notion every time we recount Sarah's joyful laughter. *LeShanah Tovah tikatevu ve-tichatemu*. May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year.