

We are a wordy people. The *Machzor*, our new Holy Day prayer book, is a great example. It's beautiful – I love it! – but I knew we were in trouble when I saw that it came in two volumes! We Jews defy the editing process, especially when it comes to prayer!

Yet, there is one very short prayer that says it all – “*L'chayim!*” To life! This is an especially important declaration now, on the edge of the New Year when we pray to be inscribed in the Book of Life.

Traditionally we say “*L'chayim*” after *Kiddush* – the prayer we say over wine... And we say *Kiddush* a lot, every *Sabbath*, Baby Naming, *Brit Milah*, *B'nai Mitzvah*, Wedding and most holy days including *Rosh Hashanah*.

We say “*L'chayim!*” at the end of *Kiddush*, because *Kiddush* itself is symbolic of life.

Wine – symbol of joy and celebration, as long as we don't drink too much!

The New Year is a good time to ask ourselves, “What brings us joy? What in my life can I celebrate?” For many, “joy” is a hard emotion to experience and even harder to express. “Oy” we are good at but “joy”? The Jewish educator and author of the *Red Tent*, Anita Diamant, expresses the challenges many face with joy when she writes:

“As the New Year approaches, I resolve to focus on joy. This has been my *kavanah* (my intention) every year since 9/11.

It isn't easy for me. I'm good at worrying. I'm good at crossing things off my to-do list. Hey, I am the daughter of Holocaust survivors. Don't talk to me about joy; it's not part of my culture. We Jews have filled libraries with the historical litany of our losses, our pain, our despair. ...”

“Nachman of Bratslav, who struggled with depression for much of his life, equated joy with holiness. He did not say that holiness, or doing *mitzvot*, or being a good Jew would give you joy. He said that joy itself is the throne of holiness...That joy is *kadosh*. What a concept.”

By the way *kadosh*/holy is derived from the same root as *Kiddush*...

Wine is also a symbol of the Divine, human partnership - God makes the grapes but we make the wine.

As we pour that full cup of a fine, Sonoma vintage wine, it's worth asking ourselves in what ways are we the hands and feet of God? Where in our lives are we in partnership with things greater than ourselves?

Our new *Machzor* has some really compelling commentary. This is a taste from page 177 that speaks directly to the idea that we hold divinity in our hands:

“Just as the shadow of a person does whatever that person does, so too, does the divine do what we do. Divinity is the shadow of human action. If we save a life, so too does God... the utterly transcendent is right at hand...If you want to save the innocent you need to get up off the couch and save the innocent. If you want to see God feed the hungry, you need to feed the hungry. If you want to see God stand by while the innocent suffer, all you need to do is stand by and do nothing yourself.”

Wine is a potent symbol for life in the New Year as is the kiddush cup we pour it in. According to tradition, we are to fill our cups to the brim as a symbol of the full life we hope to live in the year ahead – a life of prosperity, health, happiness, etc.

From our mouths to God's ear! This is why these Holy Days can be so poignant!

Everyone wants a full life in the year ahead yet... we know it won't be true for all of us. Stuff happens...The religious metaphors for this time of year can be tough – God as king on his throne, judging us all, deciding “who shall live and who shall

die.” Yet there is something frighteningly true in these images. Life is precious and oh so fragile. There are no guarantees.

Recently I officiated at an unveiling for one of our families. Visiting our cemetery is always a sobering and bittersweet experience for me... At the end of the unveiling, the surviving spouse said to the small crowd assembled something like, “Life is so fragile and so precious and all we really have is the present. The present is really a present we should cherish.”

That’s why, in addition to pouring a full cup we are also supposed to grasp that cup with a strong hand committing ourselves to living what life we have as fully as possible. In truth – and this is what is so scary – we don’t have much control over “who shall live and who shall die” but we do control how we live with what life we do have.

The great poet Mary Oliver expresses this well in her poem, “The Summer Day”:

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean--
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass,
how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed,
how to stroll through the fields, which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

So now we have a full cup of a robust, Sonoma County wine, and we're grasping it like our life depends on it. The next thing we are supposed to do is look into the cup, examine our lives, the year that was, what worked, what didn't work, who we were, who we are and who we want to be in the year ahead. In Hebrew this process is called a *Heshbone Hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul.

Not so easy to do. Looking into the mirror is a true act of vulnerability. We are more likely to stay real busy, and/or self-medicate in a myriad of ways rather than face ourselves. Yet, how can we know where we are going if we don't know which way we are facing?

Having trouble staying awake? Bored? Wondering how you will survive the rest of the Holy Day season? Wake up! The liturgy, all these prayers, all these words are about you! Your life! Now! The most meaningful conversation you can have during the Holy Day services is with yourself! Use this time to do a *Heshbone Hanefesh*. Find yourself in the *Machzor*. Bring your life to these services, find your story in the Jewish story, and let the *Machzor* be like a magic mirror which reflects the deepest part of who you are and who we want to be in the year ahead.

Having filled our cups to the brim, holding on for dear life and reflecting deeply as we gaze into our cups, we are now ready to recite the blessing but we don't just

read the words, we chant them together in community. We chant them out of reverence for the life we hold in our hands. It's awesome when you think about it. No wonder in Hebrew these times are called the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe.

And we stand together, not alone, because we know that a life fully lived is a life connected to other lives, a life in and for community, the Jewish community and the universal human community.

Now we are ready to recite *Kiddush*, but more importantly to say *L'chayim* and really mean it as we enter the New Year.