

D'var Torah

SINAI TEMPLE, SPRINGFIELD
SHABBAT EVENING, 18 AUGUST 2016

Cry when You Must, but Laugh Some Too

Does anyone here know the name, Vidal Sassoon? (At some hands going up, say;) I figured that. But don't worry, the next question isn't going to be, "How many of you use Vidal Sassoon hair products."

But now here's the next question. Who knows the name, David Sassoon? And who was he (I'm not speaking of David Sassoon, Vidal's adopted son whom Vidal Sassoon disinherited)? And where was he from? And what did he do for a living? And what was his legacy?

Well, in short, David Sassoon was a "businessman." He was born in Baghdad in 1792 and died in Pune, India, in 1864, and his trading empire spanned the globe, from Mumbai (It was Bombay then) to Shanghai and Hong Kong, all the way to London.

A religious Jew, he became fabulously wealthy, making much of his money in opium trading. And he was also extremely philanthropic. I've been in at least five of the synagogues he (or his progeny) gave money for building, one in Hong Kong, one in Shanghai, two in Mumbai, and one in Pune. And there is also a big library bearing his name standing in Mumbai.

But the question I really want to ask is, "What is the meaning of the name, Sassoon?"

The name Sassoon comes from the Hebrew, שִׂשׂוֹן, which mean, joy. If you know any of the last blessing of the *sheva b'rachot*, the seven wedding blessings that are part of the wedding ceremony, perhaps you've heard the line, קוֹל שִׂשׂוֹן וְקוֹל שְׂמֵחָה, the sound of joy and the sound of happiness...

And that's what I want to spend a few moments at least thinking about: joy, happiness, pleasure and any other words that have a similar connotation. Not as ends in and of themselves, but, rather, in what they have to do with Judaism.

As I said in the piece I wrote for E-vents earlier this week, yesterday (and by "yesterday" I mean today, Friday, before sunset)...yesterday was a minor holiday. The holiday is known as Tu B'av, *tu* being the letters *tet vav* which, when put together and used as Hebrew numerals, become the number 15. Tu B'av is the fifteenth day of the month of Av, and, as I said in my short piece, it is a day devoted to the celebration of love. That, of course, is one of the biggest, most "up," emotions that I know of, and Tu B'av, says the Talmud, is one of the two happiest days of the year.

True, maybe this comes from the fact that at the start of this week we observed Tisha B'av, undoubtedly the saddest day of the year. In other words, maybe this is a reaction

to that, but I'm not sure. Today (this Shabbat) is known as Shabbat Nachamu, the Shabbat of comfort, taken from the first word, repeated twice, in this week's *haftarah* from the 40th chapter of Isaiah, "נְחַמוּ נְחַמוּ עַמִּי, Be comforted, be comforted, My people..." And the seven *shabbatot* leading all the way up to Rosh Hashanah will be Sabbaths given over to offering comfort following *Tisha B'av*. So with that I don't think Tu B'av is there just to jar us out of the mournful experience of *Tisha B'av*. Rather, I think it's there to tell us that Judaism isn't all about sadness, about doom and gloom. Sometimes, and more than just in the midst of a wedding ceremony, it's about happiness. And more, I think, it's about our having to *work* at being happy.

You know, in a number of ways I was a weird kid, and not just because I took (and enjoyed) violin lessons. Far weirder, I really got off on Hebrew and Sunday school, all five and a half hours a week of it that, when I was growing up, was what *Reform* Jewish education was all about (Hard to believe, but that's what it was). Now maybe I was so happy because I got my parents to join a Reform congregation instead of one of the many Conservative and Orthodox congregations in the neighborhood where the schools and the Talmud Torahs required kids to be in class after school four days a week in addition to Sundays. But I don't think that's the reason. Rather it was because the atmosphere in our school, or this is how I remember it at least, made me feel good, made me feel...happy!. And that included the baseball games out in the street in front of the synagogue that we played before classes began.

It was all happy. And that too was what the choir rehearsals that I attended down at the Orthodox congregation were. They were because that's what Cantor Lind, whom we all fondly called, Chaz, short for Chazan, made them. They were happy.

And from that I learned that even though some of our observances do carry a measure of sadness ("They tried to kill us; we won; now let's eat!"), and Judaism does have mechanisms for dealing with things incredibly down, as grief, that's not all that it's about.

Here is an example: there is a minor Talmudic tractate that we have known as *Evel Rabbati*, meaning, "The Great Mourning," probably compiled sometime in the 8th century. It is a compendium of a wide array of customs relating to dying, death, mourning, and the like. *Evel Rabbati*, by the way, is one of the few books that a mourner is allowed to read while s/he is sitting *shiva*, a time when other works, which could bring joy, are forbidden. The idea is that a mourner, following the death of a loved one, is supposed to mourn.

But then? Well, there is something paradoxical about *Evel Rabbati*. It has another name. The name is *Semachot*, meaning, "Happineses"! Most think this second name is a euphemism. After all, one of the Hebrew names for a cemetery is *beit chayyim*,

meaning, House of Life. We do use euphemisms sometimes. But I don't think that's the case in calling *Evel Rabbati, Semachot*. Here, it's the case of saying that when we're down, we're down. But after that and after dealing with it, we move on to what Judaism suggests should be what we ultimately should always strive for, namely, happiness.

Oneg Shabbat...do you know what that means? Right, it means, pleasure of Shabbat. But what is [an] *oneg Shabbat*? Right, for us it's the collation that follows our Friday night service. But that's not what the term *oneg Shabbat* always referred to. There was the *oneg Shabbat* that Hayyim Nachman Bialik the poet laureate of Israel, envisioned.

"In an effort to counter the trend of the primarily secular atmosphere of Tel Aviv where many young people and adults had begun to spend their Saturdays at entertainment centers or on the beach, and to infuse the Sabbath with Jewish content, Bialik invited the public to a weekly Saturday afternoon get-together that combined lectures, Torah study (in the broadest sense of the word), communal singing, cantorial music and refreshments. The lectures were on Bible, Haggadah, Talmud, Jewish law, Jewish philosophy, the history of the Jewish people, and more. These programs drew hundreds of people from all social sectors. In keeping with Bialik's plan, *Oneg Shabbat* societies soon sprang up in other parts of the country and even in the Diaspora. There were active groups, for example, in Jerusalem, Haifa, the kibbutzim and several European cities. Interest in the project even reached the United States."¹

What Bialik had in mind was countering what many found to be the oppressive nature of Shabbat because many people were simply abandoning it. He knew Shabbat needed an alternative, an alternative that was *oneg*, that was a joyful experience.

And that's Jewish. Judaism, the synagogue, everything we are about, seeks to be as its endpoint, a positive, happy experience. That's what I hope that Sinai Temple will be for us, not just for our children but equally for all of us as well. This year we will experience many things, and this year we will share many moments. But my hope is that all of them will lead us to taste the happiness that is in our tradition, the happiness that will lead us to want to experience more and more and more happiness. That's the hope, and that's what the words of the Psalmist, **פְּקִידֵי יְהוָה יִשְׂרָיִם מִשְׁמַחֵי לֵב**, the precepts of God are upright, making the heart rejoice,² mean. May that be our life's lot, now and always.

-- Howard A. Kosovske

¹ Shmuel Avineri, "Spending Shabbat With Bialik," *Ha'aretz*, 7 July 2001. The quote, in slightly modified form is from <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/books/spending-shabbat-with-bialik-1.63996>.

² Psalm 19:9.