



JEWISH SMACHOT, REVISITED

For me, COVID-19 was represented by a neatly packed bag of hostess gifts that I had bought in February for my son's wedding in April. I was very aware that this occasion was a blessing and I did not take it for granted. Nevertheless, as it became obvious that the wedding could not proceed as planned on that date, the bag of hostess gifts became a constant reminder of the new reality of COVID-19 and the ways in which it impacted life. The questions and unknowns were relentless. Would there be a celebration? Would our family be able to attend the celebration? COVID's toll is, of course, first and foremost, felt in the loss of life and the grieving of those who lost loved ones. In the shadow of

this devastation, there also has been anxiety and sadness about the way COVID has upended and threatened to steal the precious moments that punctuate our lives. The path toward a simcha during a pandemic has often been compared to a roller coaster, with many ups and downs; yet the journey and the lessons learned through it have left an impact that I think will last for a long time to come.

Why Celebrations are Important

In their book *The Power of Moments*, Chip and Dan Heath explain that certain moments shape our lives. Brief but special experiences can “jolt us, elevate us and change us”

in ways that help create a life-long narrative. Experiences are worth more by far than any possessions in shaping our identities and creating happiness, specifically if they are shared with others. They especially create memories and feelings of pride and connection (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). While there are ways to make even mundane moments special, there are occasions that lend themselves to commemorations. Anniversaries, graduations, birthdays, the first day of a new job and retirement are all examples of auspicious milestones in life, and marking them with a celebration can be very beneficial for our psychological well-being.

Weddings, bar and bat mitzvot or “*semachot*,” as they are called in the

religious community, often refer to what society at large would call “rites of passage.” First formulated by Arnold Van Gennep, these moments are important because they are transitions in life when we undergo a change in status, where there is an “old me” and a “new me.”

From a psychological point of view, the rituals and celebrations of the rites of passage are what help the individual make this important transition. In his book *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage*, Ronald L Grimes states that a transition can happen without the “rite” or the celebration, but without the celebration there is greater risk of speeding through the “intersections of the human life course.” The festivity ensures that we don’t “slide” into the next step in life, but rather walk into it intentionally, held by the ones we love, grounded in the past and confident in the future. Unattended passages create a feeling of “unfinished business” that can impact the commitment and joy felt afterward. In all cultures, rites of passage, or *semachot*, have commonalities: they have both social and ritual aspects. These aspects create a sense of belonging to a community and a connection reaching far into the past, which help fuel a sense of belonging, continuity, and safety, and they create memories that bond families and friends.

Jewish tradition places great importance on these events. There are new halachic obligations for a bar mitzvah boy and a bat mitzva girl. In many instances, the boys and girls study certain material in preparation of these events so that the moment has greater significance. At a wedding, a time when two single people change status to become lifelong partners,

there are many traditions and halachic rituals. Two men must witness the ceremony and ideally a minyan must be present at the ceremony. Additionally, there is a special mitzvah for others to join in the wedding festivities to rejoice with the bride and groom.

Interestingly, these halachot seem to corroborate the findings in research as well as the value of particular details in wedding celebrations. There are studies that indicate that weddings are correlated to successful marriages when they are shared with family and friends. The hypothesis is that the social aspect has two prongs: one is that the public pronouncements of commitment create an added layer of obligation for the couple; and the second is the social support, the feeling that “all my friends are rooting for me” (Baker & Elizabeth). These halachot line up with these findings perfectly. The mitzva to have a minyan for the ceremony helps create the public declaration of commitment and the mitzva to rejoice with the bride and groom provides the social support for the couple.

Reframing Celebrations During COVID-19

The challenges imposed by COVID seem to strike right at the core of how we celebrate. We are limited by the number of people we can have at the celebration and by the activities we can perform during the event itself. How do we create meaningful rites of passage given these realities?

After considering our Jewish traditions and the available psychological research, and after speaking to people who had to make changes to their simchas, a picture

becomes evident. Not only can the celebration go on, but it can be deeply meaningful, and it can create profound happiness. In fact, the *semachot* that have transpired during COVID have truly been special. When asking young graduates, bar and bat mitzva boys and girls and brides and grooms about their special days, they repeatedly stated, “It was so special”; “It was better than anything I could have imagined”; “I will never forget it”; and “I am so grateful.” *Semachot* today are life affirming, and it is especially important amid the current sadness to amplify joy whenever possible, albeit with increased sensitivity.

Incredibly, finding ways to celebrate is something people began to do instinctively. In just weeks, new ways of celebrating were invented. Drive bys, floats for graduations, decorating the lawn, Zoom meetings and live streams became new methods of celebrations. The beauty of these methods is that they incorporate the two key aspects mentioned above: they create public pronouncements of celebration and they create social support for those celebrating.

An example of such a unique celebration was personal to me. On the day that my son’s wedding was initially planned, his friends and my soon-to-be daughter-in-law’s friends and family made a spontaneous drive by. Despite the rain, their friends and her community rabbis drove by the kallah’s house and danced to music blaring from their cars. As a bonus, making the event even more memorable, a local news station came by and featured this event on the evening newscast! A day that could have been stressful turned into a day to remember thanks to the efforts of caring friends and family.

A simcha during COVID is an opportunity to think about what is important for each of us. It is a chance to have conversations we might otherwise not have had, and to make deliberate decisions about aspects of the event that we might otherwise have taken for granted. And in fact, approaching the event with this heightened intentionality can make even the “normal” aspects of the event much more appreciated. When priorities must be reassessed, it is often touching to see what results. A poignant example comes to mind: During the season of bar mitzvahs, one boy in our community said, “All I want is to be able to lein in shul. This is the shul where I grew up and this is my grandparents’ shul and I just want to lein inside of it.” Miraculously that was worked out, and he was able to read his Parsha with a minyan and his parents and grandparents were there to hear it. The bar mitzva boy was jubilant, as was his family. How sweet it is, when things that used to be taken for granted are now seen for their true value.

Similarly, for many, having a smaller wedding created more intimacy and warmth and greater appreciation of everyone who could be there. One recent bride said, “What made my wedding special was that everyone who attended really wanted to be there. I was concerned that having less than half the number of guests I had planned would make my wedding less fun, but that could not have turned out to be any less true. Being with family and friends who could be there was one of the most special things that I could have asked for. My wedding was so different than planned, but I truly felt nothing was missing. I wouldn’t have changed a thing.”

Some Practical Tips for Making a Simcha During COVID-19 (and Beyond)

Don’t Forget the Flowers

With our priorities shifting in light of new realities, it is reasonable to ask ourselves: do the flowers (and music and giveaways) still matter? The answer is that they do but in a different way than we might have thought. Research repeatedly shows that spending more money on a wedding doesn’t make it more special. At the same time, a defining experience is deepened by making it beautiful and memorable (Heath & Heath, 2017). For some people, the flowers and decor make the experience feel special and festive. With so much out of our control, others may find themselves enjoying planning the clothing, or the logo for the bar mitzva boy, or they might find meaning in selecting the exact songs for the band. In each of these examples, what is important is not the items themselves, but the experience of selecting them and the symbol they become, designating this as a special and significant day. So yes, COVID has shifted our priorities and has rightly made us question what is truly important and what is excessive or unnecessary. But as we reframe our thinking and make new choices, we don’t have to cancel the beautiful details and sensory experiences that make our celebrations special.

Express Gratitude

For each simcha, there is a reason. All the planning and preparing is a manifestation of blessing. So amid all there is to do, we should continually remind ourselves about the blessing of it all. And we should find ways to verbalize and actualize this gratitude

often. In addition to being grateful to Hashem for the event itself, there are countless people around you who are holding you up as you are celebrating it. One big take away for me during this time has been the great importance of the friends, family, vendors at the event, or those watching from afar. As I watch clips throughout this pandemic of special moments, whether they be bar mitzvahs or drive bys for birthdays, I am struck by the generosity of those who are celebrating in whatever way they can. It is always a mitzva to attend a simcha and to be “*mesameyach*,” but it is highlighted and magnified when there is so much at stake and so much sacrifice involved in doing so safely. I will personally forever be grateful to the remarkable friends of my children, our friends and community, and our family for making the efforts they did to make our children’s wedding day special.

Allow and Expect the “Roller Coaster” Feelings

It is normal to have many mixed feelings leading up to a big event, and that is certainly the case under today’s more complicated circumstances. There are no wrong feelings. Whether happy or sad, excited, or worried, feelings come to us whether we want them to or not, and they need to find expression even if they are challenging. Allow yourself to express and to feel the sadness or worry about what you wish could have been. If you notice that difficult feelings are lingering, create a toolbox to deal with the difficult emotions. Techniques that some find helpful can include speaking to a friend, journaling, doing something enjoyable or soothing, exercising, or many other varieties of self-care. Acknowledging negative

feelings is key. Only after validating the challenging emotions can we intentionally shift our attention toward more positive pursuits.

Avoid Judging Yourself and Others

As you make decisions and others around you do as well, you may find yourself judging yourself harshly, or judging others for what they choose to do. You may talk to others in similar situations who make different decisions than you do. Remember the personal nature of the celebration, and that every person must choose what works best for them. Negative judgments and thoughts will simply create more animosity and division, when what we need most is unity.

Be Present

“Being present” at the simcha itself is easier said than done. Being present means really noticing the people who are with you, taking in the meaning of the moment, enjoying the details, and appreciating the music. Take a moment to really notice and make eye contact with everyone who is there, and to acknowledge those who joined in virtually. This mindfulness of the moment requires practice and preparation. In the months leading up to the event, try to add a mindfulness practice to your routine. Mindfulness is the ability to really participate in the moment and is a skill that is acquired by incorporating it into your daily life; by being mindful as you breathe, walk, eat or even stand in line. With stronger mindfulness skills under your belt, you will be more able to turn your mind into the present and truly enjoy the moment.

Remember, Challenge Builds Resilience

You may worry about the effects of all the unknowns and ups and downs on your family or on the chattan and kallah or the bar or bat mitzva child. But in fact, these hurdles can be strengthening. Resilience is built by overcoming and bouncing back after disappointments and challenges. The need to refocus what is important is only beneficial. Difficult discussions that push us to clarify what we prioritize empower us to make our next steps more meaningful.

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In Conclusion

One day, back in April 2020, I said to Suri, our friend and amazing party planner, “You know how to make these moments special. Just like Esther, maybe you have been preparing for this day all along.” I admit, this seems a bit melodramatic.

But actually, there is a lot at stake in planning these major life cycle events. Life’s occasions need to be marked so that the new generation of young boys and girls, couples, graduates, and others feel encouraged, enveloped, and loved, not forgotten or embittered. This applies to smaller moments as well, such as receiving a first internship, winning a middle school debate, writing your first article for the college newspaper, or retiring from a job. The opportunity is there to make these experiences as meaningful as ever. We look forward to a time when we can celebrate *semachot* safely without social distancing, masks, or capacity limits. Yet the tools and attitudes that shaped our *semachot* during this time, including evaluating priorities, personalizing celebrations, practicing gratitude, staying flexible, and focusing on the purpose of it all can be carried with us and can enhance the way we celebrate life’s moments together in a post-pandemic world.

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