

JOY BY PROXY
Rosh Hashanah First Day
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This year's summer Olympics mirrored the best and the worst of human nature. There was the refusal of an Egyptian judoka competitor, El Shehaby to accept the handshake of his Israeli counterpart, Or Sasson. Conversely there was the genuine empathy and humanity of the U.S. Track and Field star, Abbey D'Agostino. She tripped over New Zealand's Nikki Hamblin, who had just tumbled to the ground, then stopped to assist Nikki in getting up, forfeiting the possibility of her own success in the race.

During these games, there were Lebanese athletes who refused to share a bus with Israelis athletes, and Saudi and Syrian competitors that quit rather than face off against their Israeli counterparts. Israeli wrestler Dov Nagar received a gold medal without having to face a single opponent after each of his scheduled competitors from Syria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Iran, forfeited to avoid having to face "Zionist athletes." So, there were no silver and no bronze medals awarded when the Israeli national anthem was played with Nagar on the podium.

We witnessed disgraced American swimmers who feigned being held up by robbers rather than admit to their own drunkenness; but we rejoiced in seeing a racially and religiously diverse team of female American gymnasts claim gold many times. Aly Reisman, who won the silver in the overall competition, and the rest of her teammates, showed unrestrained joy at the success of their competitor, Simone Biles, who won the gold. The gold standard, it seems, is not set always by being first, but by how we relate to others who succeed.

In that regard, I recently learned a new Hebrew term from a friend and congregant who in the past has taught me about insurance, baseball and generosity. But, I don't remember his teaching me Hebrew. Some weeks ago he asked me about a Hebrew term used in the book, *Ally*, by former Israeli Ambassador and now Keneset member, Michael Oren. The term is FIRGUN. I responded that FIRGUN could not be a Hebrew term because no Hebrew word begins with the sound "F." Grammatically it would have to be a "P" at the beginning of the word.

But I was intrigued, and I looked up the reference and explored the origin and meaning of the word which I had not known before. And my friend was right! FIRGUN is a Hebrew neologism, a newly coined term that has become common Israeli street parlance over the past several decades. Google informed me that FIRGUN is a new "cultural concept that defies translation". It means to be supportive and encouraging of somebody regardless of personal benefit. It is the "antidote to envy," the emotional antithesis of begrudging someone else's success.

I wondered how many of us exhibit FIRGUN as a natural disposition. How many of us operate from a position of "generosity of spirit, an unselfish, empathetic joy that something good has happened or might happen to another person" (Irin Carmon, [Tablet](#), 6/18/2012).

I was vindicated, however, that FIRGUN is not, in origin, a Hebrew term. It comes from the German, "vergönnen" and the Yiddish "farginen." Interestingly, the German term means "to begrudge," but Yiddish "Farginen" and later, the Hebrew "FIRGUN" come to mean quite the

opposite – “to delight in someone else’s delight or good fortune.” Israelis, who are not especially known for their finesse in manners, have gone so far as to establish a yearly International FIRGUN Day. It is on July 17, a day dedicated to sharing compliments or expressing genuine pride in the accomplishments of others.

FIRGUN is not just about being nice, giving a pat on the back and offering a compliment. It is deeper – it is a sense of identification and affinity in another person’s joy. It is joy by proxy!

Imagine how refreshing American politics might be if we were to declare election campaigns a FIRGUN time – when we are only permitted to say positive, complimentary things about others. Imagine how our society might change, how our personal lives might improve, if we adopted a FIRGUN attitude!

- “You took my parking spot! I’m glad you found a good place.”
- “You got the raise and promotion I was hoping for. You deserve it. I’m so happy for you!”
- “Your daughter got the scholarship my son hoped for! I know she deserved it!”

We rather seem more conditioned to operate from the opposite vantage point. We are all into SCHADENFREUDE. SCHADENFREUDE is a high-brow term imported from German into English that means the very opposite of FIRGUN. It is the joy that comes from seeing or hearing about another person’s troubles or disgrace. It means to gloat with self-satisfaction at my success at the expense of someone else's failure. SCHADENFREUDE is predicated on an I win/you lose or, more accurately, “you should lose so I can win” approach to life. Joy at my success requires your defeat, your failure.

I wonder how many of us have had FIRGUN moments this past year. How many of us have had SCHADENFREUDE experiences? How did we feel during those moments? How many others might have these feeling towards us: FIRGUN – genuine joy in our joy; or SCHADENFREUDE – gloating satisfaction at our pain and distress.

The High Holy Days are an invitation to us, in the midst of the toxic and dissonant notes emanating from the political world and social media, to attune ourselves, to raise the antennas of FIRGUN in our lives, in our family relations, in our social encounters.

The social and political climate in which we live is shaped by a fundamental assumption of Western culture that human beings are basically selfish. In an excellent essay on Altruism, the columnist David Brooks reminds us (NY Times, 7-8-16) that from Macchiavelli to Hobbes, our political and economic traditions have been predicated and built on the spirit of selfishness and competition, of ego and power. Freudian psychology, Brooks reminds us, is also based on a presumption of selfishness, where children, from infancy, are described as "egotistic" creatures who "feel their needs intensely and strive... to satisfy them."

But new studies are beginning to show that this worldview is wrong. In real life, “the push of selfishness is matched by the pull of empathy and altruism.” Babies’ earliest experiences of love and care build neural connections for cooperation and empathy. The natural instinct is towards goodness. We are wired for caring, empathy and compassion.

This is the traditional Jewish understanding. One of the first prayers we recite upon awakening to a new day is "Elohai Neshama... – My God, the soul that you have implanted in me is pure." Contrary to the Christian, Western notion of "Original Sin," Judaism affirms a doctrine of "Original Virtue." Created in the divine image, our impulse is toward goodness, not evil; towards cooperation, not competition; towards mutual affirmation and blessing, not negation and curse. It is all about FIRGUN, joy at the success of others.

So, what happens when our negative impulses tend to get the best of us? Judaism helps us here too. Our tradition speaks of two inclinations within the human being: the *Yetser Hatov*, "the inclination to good," and the *Yetser Hara*, "the inclination to evil." The ancient rabbis teach us that the *Yetser* is "passion." Morally, it is neutral. We can channel it for good or it can chain us to evil. The same *Yetser* yields the drive to love and reproduce or the drive to hate and destroy; the drive to dominance or the urge to share, to be empathic or competitive. But, subsistence needs, scarcity, jealousy begin to thwart the natural good inclination, our good intentions, into the inclination to evil. As Jews, we discipline the *Yetser* through Torah and Mitzvot.

In economist Adam Smith's vision, capitalism and democracy attempt to turn private vice into public virtue. But for that to happen, Brooks reminds us, we need social institutions, synagogues, churches, schools, neighborhoods, civic and public associations, that help us to experience life through a moral lens. Today, such institutions have diminished in influence. Instead, organizations that incentivize selfish and suspicious instincts have proliferated. TV and the social media magnify that impact. The assumption that people are by nature selfish, egotistical, sinful has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We accept and promote such attitudes.

These High Holy Days come to remind us of our yearly duty to review and to strive to reverse such ways of thinking and acting. The High Holy Days invite us to look at the world with a sense of FIRGUN rather than with an attitude of SCHADENFREUD, with positivity rather than negativity, with trust rather than suspicion, with generosity rather than jealousy.

Upon learning about FIRGUN, I decided to mine the classical sources of our heritage for precedents to this unique Modern Israeli concept. In the Biblical Book of Proverbs we read: "If your enemy falls, do not exult; if he trips, let your heart not rejoice" (24:17). The Torah instructs us not only to "Love your neighbor," "but to love the stranger," the Other who is not like us, or perhaps, might be against us. It even tells to come to the aid of our enemy in distress. How do our values and practices measure up to Torah standards?

In Pirkei Avot, the sage, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, asks his disciples what is the most meaningful, genuine quality a person may exhibit? The responses include: an *AYIN TOVAH* and a *LEV TOV* – a "good eye" and a "good heart." These are the classical rabbinic expressions for an eye that looks favorably and a heart that deals kindly with others, attitudes free of envy and ill-will. This is the ancient Jewish concept that modern Israelis have rendered as FIRGUN.

I found it strange and unlikely that no other language would have a similar word or concept as FIRGUN. But, indeed, neither English nor any other western language offer a synonym. We all understand SCHADENFREUD – joy at the downfall or misery of others; but FIRGUN, joy at the joy or success of others – go find it!

Well, Sandy Googled it for me – in Sanskrit – in the ancient Vedic Hindu Scriptures. The term is MUDITA. MUDITA is “the pleasure that comes from delighting in other people’s well-being” (Wikipedia). It is paradigmatically the “attitude of a parent observing a growing child’s accomplishments and successes.” It is not to be confused with pride: “You give me such *nachas!*” – which is a bit self-serving.

Ancient Hindu and Buddhist traditions have developed “MUDITA Meditation” – spiritual exercises to cultivate appreciative joy at the success and good fortune of others. Back to Judaism, the Talmud teaches that the purest expressions of unselfish love are the tender, unconditional love of a parent for a child and the selfless commitment of a teacher for a student. It is the hope of good parents that their children will grow to attain happiness and success beyond theirs, and it is the hope of good teachers that their disciples will surpass them in learning and accomplishment.

Ultimately, it is God whom the tradition sees as the ideal of FIRGUN. The God of the Bible loves as a “mother who comforts her children” (Isa. 66:13), with *Ahavat Olam*, “Forever love.” God’s *Hesed* or covenantal love, is unconditional, always accessible. Our calling as human beings created in the divine image is to emulate God, to become God-like, to love abundantly and unconditionally.

Let us make the New Year 5777 the year of FIRGUN.

Let us see the world and others with a good eye.

Let us, with a good heart, do what we can to upend the animosity, the competitiveness and jealousy, the xenophobia and hatefulness that dominate our discourse and tear at the social fabric of our nation and the world.

And let us make of Beth-El Zedeck a sanctuary of FIRGUN where we may look upon one another with caring, compassion and trust as we usher a New Year of goodness, kindness, abundance and peace.