



Rosh Hashanah, Day One
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Holy Kleenex
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This is no ordinary Kleenex. This Kleenex is like no other Kleenex. This Kleenex has a backstory.

On the Sunday of Labor Day weekend, 9/1/19, I was in Denver for the wedding of my nephew Noah and his bride Ester. Noah and Ester are both professional comedians. They live to do stand-up, and they have both been doing it their whole adult lives. Most nights, they are on stage, with a mike, before a live audience, telling jokes. As comedians, they have different styles. Noah is dry, wry, subtle, understated. He is also a writer for the show *Mrs. Maisel*. Ester is more in the style of Sarah Silverman. Her comedy is very funny in a raw and out there kind of way. They live both in Los Angeles and New York City, the comedy capitals of our country. Their wedding was so much fun because there were so many professional comedians there to celebrate.

They had told me that they each wanted to offer vows under their chuppah. I did not ask to see what they were going to say. There would be an element of surprise to this moment.

Ester takes the mike--again she is very comfortable with a mike--and what she says, and how she says it, are totally unexpected. She does not share words of comedy. There is no irreverent tone. She says, *Noah, I never got a chance to meet your mom, Marsha, who died before we ever met. But I feel like I know her because she brought you into this world and raised you so lovingly until she died 11 years ago. Marsha, I never met you, but here under our chuppah I want to thank you for bringing Noah into this world. Marsha, I promise you that I*

will always love your son. Marsha, I promise you that I will do my best every day to make Noah's life as full of love and joy as I possibly can.

As she was speaking, this comedian was weeping away. Tears were streaming down her face. Which brings me to the Kleenex.

At every wedding, there is always a table that holds the two kiddush cups for the different blessings, and the glass that the groom shatters at the end of the wedding. But on this particular day, in addition to the usual set up of two kiddush cups and a glass to be shattered, somehow—Hashem, the wedding planner, I don't know how—there was also this package of Kleenex on the table. I have been doing weddings for 22 years. I had never before had a pack of Kleenex on the table.

But I was glad it was there that Sunday. As Ester was pouring out her heart, and crying real tears, I opened the pack of Kleenex and gave a piece to Noah. He kept wiping away her tears as she spoke about the promises she was making to his beloved departed mother. This moment was so real. Unscripted. Unrehearsed. Full of emotion. Vulnerability. Loss. Yearning. Missing a parent who was not there at a defining moment. Resilience. Affirmation. Covenantal commitment that life and love and joy would continue and deepen. Ester wept. Noah wiped away her tears with this Kleenex. There was hardly a dry eye in the house. The shul was full of crying comedians.

When the wedding was over, I took this package of Kleenex home.

I've had a lot of Kleenex in my life. In any rabbi's study, there will always be boxes and boxes of Kleenex, and we go through it.

But this Kleenex is like no other. This Kleenex embodies an idea that is totally central to Judaism and totally inaccessible to modern Jews. That idea is holiness. *Kedushah*.

Kedushah is everywhere in Judaism. *Kedoshim tiyu ki kadosh ani Adonai eloheichem*. Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy. Be a *goy kadosh*, a holy nation. *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh Adonai tzevaot*. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts. It is in the rituals we observe most widely. We lose our loved one? We say Kaddish. We have a Shabbat dinner? We say Kiddush. The Cantor sings a beautiful song every Shabbat Musaf? In the *Kedushah*. Your loved one gets married? It's called Kiddushin. This concept, *kedushah*, holiness, you cannot avoid it.

But this is a problem because for modern people holiness is very hard to wrap our minds around. It is airy. It is wispy. It is in the clouds. What is it? What does it look like? How do we achieve it?

Let me share with you a single idea that can bring holiness from the clouds down to earth. To be holy is to be invested with, to be touched by, something beautiful that makes it special, that makes it unlike other things of its class. There is Kleenex in general. And then there is this Kleenex which became holy to me because it was invested with memories of Ester's tears and Noah's love in wiping them away, and of Marsha's presence at their chuppah eleven years after she had passed away. This Kleenex is holy because it embodies the idea that people die. But love never does.

What holy Kleenex do you have in your life, and how can you get more of it?

Our tradition tells us that there are three kinds of holiness in the world. Holy space. Holy time. Holy relationships.

There are places, in general, and then there are places that are holy to you because that place got touched by something, was invested with something, that makes it special, that makes it yours. The place where you fell in love, or confessed your love, or proposed. The places you took your kids where you really bonded, and where they really thrived. The places where family

bonds got strengthened. Your vacation home, your favorite get-away, your Shabbat dinner table, your Rosh Hashanah lunch table, where the generations come together. That is precious. That is priceless. In Jewish language, that is holy.

There is time in general, and then there is time that is touched, invested, special. There is time in general, with your cell phones ringing and ping-pong and beeping and buzzing. There is time in general, with you running around from appointment to appointment, stuck at a traffic light, late for a meeting. There is time in general with noise and obligations and emails and bills and errands. And then there is holy time, Jewish time, Shabbat and holidays, where you can deepen your relationships with the people you love, where you have the bandwidth to ask bigger questions like how you can become a better version of yourself.

There are relationships in general. You are civil. You are honest. You are decent. But it's arms' length. Then there are relationships that are touched, invested, special. There are people for whom you would do anything. There are people who, if they called you and said I need you now, and I am 1,000 miles from you, you would drop everything and get on the next flight. No questions asked. Those are relationships that are just different from your other relationships. Those are relationships that are holy.

Places like no other are holy places. Time like no other is holy time. Relationships like no other are holy relationships.

Now here is the thing. Only God is totally holy. The rest of us can just try to *grow in holiness*. The rest of us can just try to become *more holy than we were yesterday*. More holy *than we were last year*. More holy places. More holy time. More holy relationships than we used to have.

This increase in holiness can happen either inside or outside this building. Both will

change your life.

One night last month, a man finished saying Kaddish for his father for a full 11 months. Prior to his father's passing, this gentleman never went to minyan. After his father's passing, he never missed minyan. He was deeply emotional that this period was coming to an end. After the service he came up to me and said, "My father in dying gave me the most precious gift. He gave me community." Holy place. The Gann Chapel. Holy time. 7:30 to 7:45 every evening. Holy relationships. The love of a son for a father that will never die.

But when I was in Denver for Noah and Ester's wedding, I had a powerful moment of remembering what holiness looks like outside the building. When I was eight years old, my mother used to take me every week to get an allergy shot. My allergist's office was an hour drive from our home, which meant being in the car for two hours, with a shot in between. And yet, I loved those afternoons. Getting those allergy shots was the highlight of my childhood. After I got the shot, my Mom would take me to a Baskin Robbins near my doctor's office. She would order a double scoop of chocolate ice cream on a cone. I would order a double scoop of Rocky Road ice cream on a cone. Those were in the good old days, before I was dairy free, sugar free and gluten free. But back in the day, my Mom and I would sit at Baskin Robbins and enjoy a double scoop of ice cream together. This past Labor Day weekend, 50 years later, I went back to that Baskin Robbins. It was 50 years ago. It was yesterday. My Mom has been gone for 3 years. Those ice cream cones are a half century old. But that is the special power of holiness. It is always in you. It is always with you. It never dies.

In this coming year what will *you* do to become more holy than last year, to increase the places, spaces, times and relationships that are like no other? We hit our stride as human beings when we can find our own version of holy Kleenex. *Shana tova.*