

Have you ever known people who wanted to “get high?”

There is a Bloggie winning website called “BoingBoing - a directory of wonderful things” and it posted an article on August 8th by Xeni Jardin:

“Getting high with Richard Branson: ... Virgin America's virgin flight”

Mr. Jardin wrote: “I flew on a V[irgin]A[merica] inaugural flight from Los Angeles to San Francisco just now to check out the new service, ... I really hope the Virgin America experience two weeks, two months, or ten months from now is as great for all customers as it felt for invited guests on this launch day.”

Listen to some of what got Mr. Jardin so high.

“These planes are wired. There are two 110-volt power outlets for every three seats,... USB ports, two WiFi access points on board (front and rear, broadcasting SSIDs today, but not delivering connectivity yet pending regulatory approval), ethernet at every seat (which connects you to a planewide network -- ...). EVDO is planned for transmitting data back to the ground (email, txtng -- not active today, should be by early '08). I'm told AirCell will be providing the wireless connectivity.”

I do not even understand what I just read, except that it is techie lingo and excited someone. Unfortunately, in my generation, “getting high” had a whole different meaning and it is still in use.

[This past April, \(24th-25th\) the Associated Press reported a story from Salem, Oregon: “Teenager dies while attempting "dusting" high”](#)

“A 14-year-old Salem boy inhaled spray from a can of cleaner used on computer keyboards and died, police said. The cleaner used to blow dust out of keyboards and electronics contains difluoroethane, ... ‘The high from the gas can paralyze the user for several seconds or minutes, giving them a feeling of euphoria,...’”

How far will we go for a moment of euphoria?

In an article this past June entitled; "The Downside of Getting High on Cough Syrup," Aaron Rowe "tells the story of a 20-year-old kid from Portland, Oregon that extracted the active ingredient, dextromethorphan, from some cough syrup and tried to get high with it.

[To do so,] the drug is extracted from the cough syrup with ammonia and then from the pungent household cleaner with cigarette lighter fluid.... Imagine how much lighter fluid could have been left over in the cocktail that this young pillar of society prepared for himself."

I guess, today, people are prepared to go pretty far for a "high." Thirty, forty years ago, most people seemed to limit themselves to pot.

Describing the effects of cannabis, the chemical in marijuana, Mikki Norris with Chris Conrad wrote [in] an article called: "**THE EXPERIENCE OF GETTING HIGH**"

"Cannabis use can increase focus and concentration, making a person's moods, sensations, and experience seem more intense. Your heart may feel like it's pounding, the music is fantastic, this is the best dessert you've ever eaten and, wow, get a load of how beautiful nature is. ... Most people consider cannabis to be an experience enhancer rather than an escape device. If you feel good, it may make everything seem even better. ... People often get a new perspective on a familiar scene or problem, a seemingly profound thought or burst of creativity. There is a sense of awe, revelation and realization.... It can result in... a burst of complex insights, such as when Carl Sagan solved a physics equation while "under the influence."

Consumers may feel a slight euphoria, happiness, or sense of "well-being."
...Problems seem less severe and pressing. ...

Why should I worry about “getting high”? Well, obviously, these are the **High** Holidays and for many Jews, coming to services is all about a spiritual high, isn't it? Or is it? Rabbi James Diamond made me think about this issue in a short essay: “How ‘High’ Are the High Holidays?” He writes:

“Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur have, for a long time now, been called the High Holidays or the High Holy Days. This is **not** a term known in traditional sources, which speak of the entire ten day period we... [begin today] as the ‘*Yamim Nora'im*,’ the ‘Days of Awe.’

Why do we call them, ‘High’ holidays? Why *are* they ‘high’? What do they have to do with height? Are there ‘low’ Holidays?

Shouldn't these days be able to excite us as much as the newest tech options do tekkies? Shouldn't our liturgy be able to bring us to the euphoria of the ingredients in a keyboard cleaner or cough medicine? Shouldn't the sound of the shofar awake in us “a seemingly profound thought or burst of creativity.... a sense of awe, revelation and realization...” the way marijuana apparently does? But I suspect we all know that “getting high” on the High Holiday experience is just not that easy. Praying is a lot more complex than huffing or puffing.

Rabbi Elliot Dorff from the University of Judaism notes. “It would not be realistic or fair to expect a home run each time one is at bat in prayer any more than it would be in baseball. Those who pray very little often make that mistake. A home run in prayer, like one in baseball, requires much practice, many trials and errors, and, ultimately, consummate skill. Even that is not enough. One needs some luck, too. The conditions have to be just right, and one's body, mind, and emotions have to be perfectly attuned to one another and to the task at hand. This does not happen very often.

Moreover, one should not pray only in hopes of having such an experience any more than one plays baseball only for the times one hits a home run. In fact, some of us will play baseball all our lives and never hit a home run.

Indeed, if our praying or baseball playing were to succeed on every level each time we tried, we would be very different individuals and societies from what we know, and prayer – and baseball – would have to be restructured to speak to our needs. The fact that prayer cannot remake us into ideal human beings does not negate its value, however, for prayer can remind us what to strive for and motivate us to try. Although it cannot move us in all its dimensions every time, it can affect us on some level on many occasions. It thus can be a valuable practice even if it is not always or totally successful.”

So if you have been sitting here today and thinking about your golf game, or what work you will need to make up next week, or what groceries you need to buy, all those activities are easier, a lot easier, than praying - and more accessible than the Hebrew of the mazor, let alone the outdated English translation from the 1940s in our edition. Momentary euphoria may emerge from cough syrup. But even to tap into that requires careful study and a flawless process. While I would very much welcome us having a newer edition of the mazor, I don't fool myself into thinking that it would lead to many of you getting high on a better translation and a series of more meaningful readings. If we use our time while at services to engage in some serious introspection, and contemplate what we need and want to change in our lives, and what relationship, if any, we have with God, then the essence of all the words have impacted us, even if we don't spiritually float out of the sanctuary. If you're expecting to get a “high” on the High Holidays, I am afraid you are very likely in for a disappointment.

Rabbi Diamond, however, has some other insights into the High of the High Holidays. “A joker” he writes, “would pun and say the spelling is wrong: they are the ‘HI’ [“H”-“I”] Holidays. On two or three days, Jews who haven't seen each other all year gather in synagogues and temples to say ‘Hi!’”

“I have learned,” Rabbi Diamond continues, not to be dismissive of ... [this explanation.] For those to whom prayer does not come easily and for whom the

ideas, language, and symbols of these days are, at best, problematical, what could be wrong with investing them with a social, if not a religious, focus? Something good, I believe, accrues when we get out of the confines of our selves and come together with other Jews, sitting with them in community ...”

I agree with Rabbi Diamond. I hope – dare I say, pray, that people get more out of all davening than just a social experience. But, I recognized a long time ago that our breakfasts together after weekday services, and our kiddushes after Shabbat morning services, are very important. Food plays a role, but a very minor one. In a world where the technology of communication constantly increases the amount and speed of communication, ironically, it also leads to greater isolation. Opportunities to share our ideas and lives with other human beings in person, whether with friends or relatives, are valuable. So consider coming to services not only for what happens during them, but also for what happens after them.

But even saying HI involves a decision. To whom do we say HI, and to whom do we turn a cold shoulder? This is not only an issue that applies to community members, but also to family. I recognize that the HI Holidays is an important time for extended family. Many families use the HI Holidays to travel long distances to be together and say “HI” to each other. But in some cases, the distance that needs to be traveled is much longer than just air miles or super highways. It is not always easy, or sometimes even possible, to forgive and reconcile with family, friends and acquaintances. But that is the ideal of this season and countless rabbis have preached on this topic, as have I. But I want to share an excerpt from a sermon by Rabbi David Wolpe, because I think it brings an important perspective to the discussion.

“At times we feel as if, to use the imagery of the Talmud, clay rises in our hearts, and we feel stony instead of soft. We tell ourselves that forgiveness is not deserved. Our anger is just.... Forgiveness is the lightening of our own hearts. The darkness of hatred, of rage and contempt that we harbor inside

rarely injure the unforgiven as much as they do the one who will not forgive. We imagine that our continued anger is so powerful that it will bring sorrow and ruin on those against whom we hold a grudge. But its influence is far more dangerous for our own hearts....

As a Rabbi," Wolpe continues, "I see families torn apart, siblings who do not speak, parents who cannot sit in the same room with their children, ex-spouses who speak of each other in tones of deep contempt. All of them know that forgiveness is an ideal, but even for those who are closest – perhaps especially for those who have been closest, it seems an impossible ideal. ...

How do we forgive?"

Rabbi Wolpe offers this further insight. "Forgiveness is about more than finding reasons, or understanding. Often our anger melts away when we truly understand the circumstances of the other, but that is not identical with forgiveness. Although it is important to try to understand the motivations of other people, true forgiveness occurs when conduct has been inexcusable, not when it has been understandable. A misunderstanding that is cleared up is not an occasion for forgiveness, but for further clarity. Forgiveness is a generosity of the heart, not an example of clear thinking.

To forgive someone is to believe them to have been wrong, and to let go of the moral leverage that grants us over another. ... Forgiveness does not always mean a renewal of the relationship as it was before.... Forgiveness is not building something new, but letting the old wash away – the old anger."

Please think it over. Is there anger you need to let go? If you are able, let it go for your own benefit. At the least, be able to say HI to members of the community and your family.

One final comment from Rabbi James Diamond on the High in the High Holidays: "Fastening onto the 'high' in these holidays can help us look upward

even as we look inward. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur can allow us to articulate, or re-articulate, to our selves our loftiest aspirations and capacities. As we sit through the services, perhaps we will be able to tap into the reservoir of spirit and sensitivity and concern for others, be they fellow Jews or all members of the human family, that I believe is inherent in every human heart.”

Part of what we affirm on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is our individual worth. We celebrate the creation of the world and that every human being is created in God’s image. We each have unlimited potential and we reach **upward** to fulfill that potential by looking **inward** at ways we need to improve. But Rabbi Diamond is most certainly correct, when he says that we reach **high** when we show “sensitivity and concern for others.” One of the ways we reach new heights, and often, or at least occasionally, achieve spiritual euphoria, is by volunteering our time on behalf of others. I will soon be sending a letter to the congregation which offers you the opportunity to volunteer your time. The commitment will be for a specific number of hours during the year, but for unspecified tasks. I am asked with regularity for volunteers both by agencies and individuals; sometimes for continuing projects and sometimes for one shot efforts. I will do the matchmaking, if you are able to reach high and offer your time.

So are these High Holidays? In the final analysis, each of you has to decide for yourself. My analysis is that they will be “high” only if you make them so. I hope that you do.

AMEN