

Half and Half

Thought for the Day

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I've been thinking a bit recently about optimism and pessimism, consolation prizes, and what we mean when we talk about a glass half empty or half full. As a card-carrying pedant, I've had a long-running argument about this with a couple of friends who tell me it's obvious that the optimist sees the glass half full and the pessimist says it's half empty. But is that really so? Can't both be interpreted positively? If a glass is only half empty, is that so bad? And if it's half full, at least it's a long way from being empty!

I should explain that this is nothing to do with the result of a football match that I've been told took place last night in Spain. It was in my mind because of two minor festivals in the Jewish calendar that fall this week. Last Sunday was *Pesach Sheni*, the second Passover, which the Torah prescribes as a opportunity for people who couldn't travel to ancient Jerusalem on Pesach itself to compensate by making their pilgrimage a month later. Then today is *LaG b'Omer*, which recalls the tens of thousands of students who died in a plague two thousand years ago – yet their memorial is a minor festival on the day the epidemic stopped. So one was a consolation prize, and the other is a consolation, a comfort.

This difference is reflected in language too. Modern Hebrew talks about *chatzi nechamah* – literally a half consolation, half a cheer as it were; but the Yiddish idiom is *a halbe tzorreh* – half a misfortune. Both are ways of saying things could have been worse, but is the glass half empty or half full?

Perhaps the difference *is* psychological – it's not about language, or for that matter glasses of beer, but about whether we embrace the consolation or fixate on the misfortune that made it necessary; whether we focus on the black mark on the paper or the white space around it.