

The Pursuit of Holiness

Rosh Hashanah – Day 1 – 2013

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Let me start with a joke: A Jewish couple is sitting down for lunch at Zaftig's Deli – right here in Coolidge Corner. The man is having a matzo ball soup and his wife has decided to go for the potato knish. Their waitress, a woman who has been working at Zaftigs since it first opened, gives the couple a few moments to taste their food before approaching them with the question she reserves just for this clientele: “Is *anything* alright?”

Yes, I guess as Jews, we have a reputation for *kvetching*, for complaining.

The Judaism of conflict, guilt, suffering and complaint – in restaurants and elsewhere, might indeed be the way in which famous Jews like Freud, Philip Roth and Woody Allen portray our tradition. Yet, how do we as Jews relate to the flip side of negativity?

What about the pursuit of happiness - so central to our American values and the culture that we live in? What do we, as Jews, have to say about happiness as a guiding principle in our lives?

I was thinking about this question, and then came across a Time Magazine issue on the subject of happiness. In recognition of Independence Day, the magazine's July 4th issue included a series of articles on just this subject. What I found particularly interesting is the way in which the definition of happiness in American culture has evolved over the years. For the founding fathers happiness was much bigger than “bliss” or private gratification; it was intimately tied to the public good. Today, however, happiness has become closely associated with the pursuit of pleasure. I was also intrigued by a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt on this subject. She seemed to anticipate our modern-day emphasis on pleasure as the path to happiness when she said: “Happiness isn't a goal, it's a by-product. Paradoxically, the one sure way not to be happy is deliberately to map out a way of life in which one would please oneself completely and exclusively.”

Now, you might be surprised to learn what the rabbis had to say about pleasure.....

In a *midrash*, they warn us that on the day when we come before God in heaven, we will have to account for every permissible pleasure we deprived ourselves of in this life! While the *midrash* refers specifically to the enjoyment of food (that alone is exciting to know, right?) the broader idea is that taking pleasure in the world around us is not only a legitimate response. It is also a way of expressing gratitude for the blessings bestowed upon us.

Yet, when we speak of happiness or *osher* in Hebrew, we express something much bigger than pleasure; we express a yearning for a life of meaning and of inner peace, much richer and deeper than a temporary pleasure.

In fact, every Shabbat when we return the Torah to the ark we express this idea when we sing the verse that says: “It is a tree of life to those who cling to it, and all who cling to it find happiness. *Eitz chaim hi lamachazikim ba, v'tomchegah m'ushar*.”

Meushar, which is derived from *osher*, is the word we use for happiness when we speak of Torah as our guide. In contrast to other synonyms for happiness that might be more familiar to us like *simcha*, *osher* points to a deeper, more lasting joy.

It's a happiness of balance and inner peace.
It's about creating a meaningful life amidst all of its struggles;
It's about living in community and contributing to the lives of others,

But besides *osher* we have many other synonyms in Hebrew for “happiness.” This of course, goes to show how central the concept is in our tradition.

I was reminded of this when a few years back I had the unique opportunity to give my mother a Hebrew name – a chance, I would venture to say, few people ever have! My mother was born in Germany and, like many German-Jews her parents were quite assimilated and never gave her a Hebrew name. Since the quality that defines my mother is her positive and lively disposition, what came to mind when thinking about what name to give her, was the seventh wedding blessing said under the *chupa*.

Six different words are used to express happiness in this blessing. Among them are *sasson*, *simcha*, *gila* and *rina*. These words are all different aspects of joy. (I chose Rina because it sounds like her given name, Renata, and despite the fact that I would forever mispronounce the “r” sound, which is strong in Hebrew and Spanish but not in quite the same way!)

Words like *simcha*, *sasson* or *rina* speak to the joy that comes from peak moments – like the birth of a child, a bar/bat mitzvah or a wedding. These are the events in our life that I like to call, the *havah nagilah* moments. You just want to sing and dance!

By the way, the words *havah nagilah* literally mean: “let us rejoice!” And if you haven't seen *Havah Nagilah* the movie – which came out a few months ago, I recommend you rent this wonderful gem. It's both funny and informative as it traces the origins of the song and how it traveled the world to become this quintessential expression of communal joy.

In addition to these “hava nagilah moments,” these peak moments in our lives, our tradition sensitizes us to the everyday miracles that surround us and teaches us to respond by saying a blessing. Familiar blessings like *hamotzi* - which we say over bread, and less familiar ones - like the blessing upon seeing a rainbow or, my favorite one - the blessing upon greeting a friend who we haven't seen for over thirty days. We preface these blessings by saying: *baruch ata adonai eloheinu melech ha'olam* - blessed are you, adonai, ruler of the universe - words that help us recognize the source of our blessings; that help us connect to something much larger than ourselves.

And that is exactly what our pursuit is about. It's about opening ourselves up - connecting with others and with something larger than ourselves. While Judaism encourages us to enjoy life, even to seek pleasure, the highest spiritual aspiration of Jewish life is expressed by the words - *kdoshim t'hiyu* - you shall be holy.

These words are familiar to many of us here because they are prominently displayed above the ark in our chapel. They are a concrete reminder that our pursuit is the pursuit of holiness. And it is through holiness that we hope to find happiness.

You might ask: what does pursuing happiness through holiness look like? Well, I'd like to share a passage with you from the book *Relational Judaism* in which Rabbi Edward Feinstein offers us a beautiful image. He gives the example of saying *Kiddush*, the blessing over the wine when we gather to celebrate Shabbat:

“A family, a circle of friends, gathers about the Shabbat table to share a celebration. A cup of wine is raised. The wine is not sacred. It's only Manischewitz. What is sacred, holy, are the bonds that gather us together to celebrate life. So together we recite a prayer called Kiddush. Kiddush – which derives from kaddosh or holy, means opening the self to embrace another, bonding with another, holding the other close, making the 'other' part of the self.

Rabbi Feinstein goes on to ask the following rhetorical question: *What is the opposite of holiness?* To which he responds: *In Hebrew the opposite of kadosh is hol. Translated as profane or ordinary, hol literally means sand. Sand has no cohesion, no connection, and no bonds.*

In Judaism, pursuing happiness through holiness keeps us connected; it keeps us grounded in relationships, in community. It insists that happiness is a community endeavor and prevents its pursuit from devolving into a quest for individual gratification and pleasure.

Pursuing happiness through holiness sensitizes us to the many blessings that we might otherwise take for granted and cultivates a response of thanksgiving.

Pursuing happiness through holiness makes us appreciate that the sources of happiness are neither remote nor aspirational – that, to a large extent, happiness comes from how we choose to approach life.

Interestingly, what I've shared with you about the Jewish understanding of happiness is very much supported by the current research findings on this subject.

The research of UCLA Psychologist Sonya Lyubomirsky shows that our level of happiness is influenced only 10% by life-circumstance factors such as money, gender, marriage, education or age. Although most of us think that we'd be happier "if only" our health were better, if only we could afford to fix up our house - research suggests that we will adapt quickly to any positive life change and return back to our previous happiness level.

Apparently, just like we have a set point for weight, it seems that we also have a set point for happiness. As we know, some people are blessed with a "skinny disposition" - they easily maintain their weight even if they are not really trying. Well, some people are blessed with a "sunny disposition" which allows them to see the bright side of any given situation. I was surprised to learn that about 50% of the difference among peoples' happiness levels are explained by these immutable, genetically determined set points.

But, whatever set point in happiness we have, the key is this: our set point is not our destiny! According to these research studies, the remaining 40% is determined by what we DO - by the intentional activities we choose to engage in from day to day.

Researchers call these activities we do to enhance happiness, "happiness boosters." Not surprisingly, in the list of "boosters," is being mindful of our blessings and expressing gratitude. Not surprisingly as well, the list includes a booster that is not an activity but rather, a deliberate refraining from "doing," from squeezing in more and more things into less and less time. We can easily get caught up in the word "pursuit" – chasing after happiness rather than letting our blessings catch up with us.

There is a story told about Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, a famous Hasidic master. He is watching people rushing to and fro in the town square and he wonders why they are all running so frenetically. He stops one and says, "Why are you running?" and the man answers, "I'm running to make a living." The rabbi contemplates and says "hmm - how come you're so sure that the living is in front of you and you have to run to catch up with it? Maybe it's behind you and you've got to stop and let it catch up with you!"

For many of us this rings true. We know we could be happier if only we could stop for a moment to catch our breath. But for others, looking back and letting our blessings catch up with us feels disconnected from the hardships that we have encountered in the year that has passed. Looking back

is painful. Our hearts are broken by the loss of loved ones, by our own battles with a chronic or life threatening illness or perhaps, by deep disappointments in our personal or professional lives.

How do we talk about happiness when we are hurting?

The Hasidim, for whom joy is a key ingredient to their spiritual quest, wrote movingly about the struggle to find happiness in the midst of pain and sadness. The Kotzker Rebbe, a well-known Hasidic master, taught that the only truly happy heart is a broken heart; that our real happiness comes from the lessons we learn as a result of brokenness. We become strong because of the places where we have been broken, and we achieve true happiness when we come to see that life is not lived in our dreams but in the day-to-day celebrations and encounters.

A friend whose son died a tragic death while in college, shared the following story:

After Jake died, actually, it was the week after shiva, I brought breads from my hometown bakery to an elderly man - an acquaintance, who grew up in a nearby town, and who wistfully remembered the sissel bread. He called me that evening to thank me, and, while my intention was to make him a little happier by giving him a small taste of joy of his youth, I was jarred by the sound of my own laughter...

I hear such stories all the time. While it might seem counter-intuitive, healing and happiness comes from extending ourselves to others. When we reach out to help someone else, we feel alive once again and in that aliveness we come to experience a measure of joy.

As we set goals for ourselves in the coming year may they be grounded in a pursuit that binds us to community, that opens us up to the blessings that surround us and that encourages us to slow down – to let our blessings catch up with us. May this pursuit bring us both the *havah nagilah* moments as well as the life of *osher* – of meaning and inner peace, that our hearts so deeply desire.