

A congregant took a vacation in Maine this summer and spent some time at a small coastal village. He saw a local fisherman coming in with a great number of fish, so he asked him how long it took him to catch them. "A couple of hours," the fisherman answered. "That's it? And you caught all those fish." "Yup ... it's always about the same. About this many fish ... about the same amount of time." "Every day you catch this much, and in just a couple of hours? What do you do with the rest of the day?" The fisherman replied, "I sleep late and play with my children. After fishing I go exercise or go into town with my wife. In the evenings I read or have a meal with my friends, have a few drinks, play the guitar and sing a few songs."

"With all that time," the tourist asked, "Why don't you stay out longer and catch more?" The man said that his catch was enough for him. "Look," the tourist asked, I have an MBA from Wharton and I can help you. Start by fishing longer every day and selling the extra fish you catch. Then you can buy a bigger boat. The larger boat will bring in more money and you can buy a second one and a third one and so on until you have an entire fleet. Instead of selling to a middleman, you can sell directly to the processing plants. Then, you can leave this little town and move to the city where you can oversee your business."

"How long would that take?" asked the fisherman. "20-25 years," replied the tourist. "And after that?" asked the fisherman.

"After that you'll be able to retire, live in a tiny coastal village, sleep late, play with your grandchildren, catch a few fish, take some time to be with your wife and spend your evenings drinking and playing the guitar with your friends!"

On Rosh Hashanah I spoke to you about the importance of hope. The message was that faith is not some easy salve to despair, but that it does offer a possibility of being optimistic that our lives have meaning. Today I wish to explore what Judaism teaches us about how we can, indeed, be happy. What is happiness? How can we achieve it?

George Burns once said that "Happiness is having a large, caring, close-knit family ... in another city." Not all of us, of course, are so lucky! Seriously, however, most of us yearn for happiness - and whether because of or despite our family, it alludes us.

This past year, Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychology professor at the University of California, Riverside, published the results of two decades studying what makes people

happy.¹ Much of our inner contentment, she found, is a result of our natural, genetic disposition. Some people, in other words, have an innate sunny disposition. Others are ... well, just *kvetches*. It's like those demanding patrons at a restaurant whose waiter, frustrated by their ongoing complaints, came over to the table after the food was served and asked, "So, is anything alright?"

While all of us have an inclination towards being generally satisfied or not, Lyubomirsky argues, surprisingly, that only a tiny percentage of our inner contentment depends on life circumstances such as income, education, health and marital status. Most of us - even after getting what we want - find that having it really does not bring us any long term or significant happiness. We simply get used to what we have. "It's not that money doesn't make us happy," she writes, "It (just) doesn't make us as happy as we expect, or for as long as we think."

There is, of course, no simple prescription for happiness, but Judaism does offer suggestions that can lead us towards a life of greater satisfaction. First, it is recognizing that the pursuit of happiness is illusory. Second, happiness comes not by acquiring, but through giving. And third, happiness is a habit.

Hint One: Be happy? Don't worry

I suppose, if you wanted to be flip, you could summarize my Rosh Hashanah message about hope as being, "Don't worry ... Be happy." The logical converse of this is just as true - "if you want to be happy, don't worry so much about it."

Over the past few weeks I've overheard a lot of Jews wishing one another "Happy New Year." The intent is wonderful, but the words are not a reflection of Jewish sensibility about life. Consider the Hebrew phrases we use to greet another at this season - for Rosh Hashanah, *shanah tovah* and Yom Kippur, *hatimah tovah*. They are not prayerful wishes for happiness, but a fervent wish that the other be written and sealed for "good" in the coming year. There is a world of difference. To wish someone "Happy New Year" is beautiful, but it is a "set up." Since no one can always be content, the wish is doomed for failure. In contrast, Jewish tradition has settled on greetings that speak of goodness - a life of ethical rectitude whether we are happy or depressed, whether fortune has

¹ *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*, quoted at <http://finance.yahoo.com/print/expert/article/moneyhappy/63192>.

smiled on us or not. Happiness, in other words, is not the goal. Rather, it is a by-product of living life in a particular way. And the more we try to *be* happy, the more we realize the pieces of our life where we are not.

This fundamental truth is reflected in a parable about an older dog that saw a puppy chasing her tail. The older dog asked, “What are you doing chasing your tail?” The little dog replied, “I was told that the best thing for a dog is happiness and that happiness is in my tail. I’m chasing it so that when I catch it I’ll be happy.”

“Listen,” said the older dog, “I too want happiness and I have also been told that happiness is in my tail. But I noticed that when I chase after it, it keeps running away from me, but when I go about my business it comes after me.”

The twentieth philosopher Albert Camus said, “You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life.” He reminds us that one of the most important things about life is living it in the moment. So often we think we will be happy only if we achieve some goal or at some future time. The most contented people, however, are those who live in the moment - making the most of where they are, what they are doing and who they are with at the time.

Our sages asked the question, “Who is truly rich?” Their answer? “The person who is happy with what they have.”² The rabbis of antiquity were not arguing against seeking to acquire more or to do what we can to achieve. They did believe, however, that worrying about what we do not own or have not achieved or fretting too much about the things not done, would only push happiness aside. Contemporary psychological research only seems to underscore the point. The people most engaged in whatever they are doing at the moment - be it exercising, listening to music, gardening - are the happiest.

It may be a paradox, but the truth of the matter is the less you worry about *be* happy, the happier you will be. What is important is to be involved in the relationships and experiences you have.

Hint Two: It’s not about happiness, but goodness

There are two seas in the Land of Israel. One, the *Kinneret* (or Sea of Galilee) is fresh. It is alive with fish. Green rushes and trees adorn its banks. The sacred city of Tiberias is

² Pirke Avot 4:1

on its banks and it has always been home to an abundance of life. The river that flows south from the *Kinneret* flows into the other sea - called *Yam HaMelach* ("The Salt Sea" in Hebrew). Almost nothing can live in its waters and most who come only stay for a brief visit. Its water is toxic, the landscape is barren and the air around it is thick with the smell of noxious minerals.

What is the difference in these seas? It's not the River Jordan. It empties the same good water into both. Not the soil in which they lie; not the country 'round about.

The only difference is this - the Sea of Galilee receives but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into it another drop flows out. The giving and receiving go on in equal measure. The other sea is shrewder, hoarding what it has jealously. It will not be tempted into any generous impulse. Every drop it gets, it keeps. The Sea of Galilee gives and lives. This other sea gives nothing - and that is really why it referred to as "The Dead Sea."

On Yom Kippur we are not supposed to eat, drink, bathe or engage in intimate relations. This denial of bodily pleasures would, we might think, teach that it is the spiritual side of our lives is what is most sacred. Yet the Torah portion for Yom Kippur is a reminder of the need to be concerned with the physical wellbeing of others. "I am God ... you shall be holy."³ How do we achieve this sanctity? Paying those who work a fair wage, ensuring that a portion is given to the needy, treating those who are not citizens no differently than others, showing respect for those who are old. On this most sacred of days we are reminded that faith is not about a state of mind. It is not some inner calmness. Faith is about you and I acting in ways that lead us to give to others. Out of this contentment grows.

Psychologist Martin Seligman, in his book *Authentic Happiness*, concludes that one of the key aspects to a happy life is to find a life of purpose and meaning. That, he said, comes through serving some larger end. Is this not what a synagogue is at its best - serving others? What does such giving look like? It is helping register voters, feeding lunch or dinner to the needy or visiting someone in a nursing home. Serving others means not giving up on government - but reminding our leaders that soup kitchens are no substitute for a society that ensures health care, decent meals and adequate housing for all. Serving others means volunteering at the hospital or with disabled children; it is

³ Leviticus 19:1

helping the synagogue raise funds so we can provide a connection to Jewish life for those whose financial means are inadequate.

A final piece of advice related to all this is that we cannot rely on others for our personal sense of happiness. Whatever your political proclivity, the one thing I am pretty sure about is that whoever is voted in as President next month you will find plenty to be upset about with by next summer. More importantly, to vote is not enough - for no individual, no Administration, indeed, no political party can “solve” all the issues. It takes each of us to make a righteous society - and if ever there was a time that needed people to take personal responsibility it is now.

What we have to do is alluded to in a story told about three men who are fishing. One of them sees a baby floating by, so he jumps into the stream and saves the baby. A few minutes later, another baby comes floating by, and the second man jumps into the river to save the baby. The third man gets up and walks away. His friends shout at him: “Hey, where are you going? We're going to need you to save the next baby that comes floating in the water!” To which the man replies: “You guys are free to stay here and fish. As for me, I'm going upstream to figure out who's throwing babies in the river.”

If you want to truly be happy, help solve the problem. The secret is in Israel's seas. Keep and die. Give ... and live.

Hint Three: Happiness is a Habit

The largest book in the Bible is the book of Psalms. The 150 different psalms speak to the full range of human emotion - despair, longing, courage, failure and gratitude. And what is theme of the very first one? Happiness. “Happy is one who does not walk in the ways advised by the wicked ... That person's delight is in the law of God.” What is it that the author of this psalm is trying to teach? The search for God is about finding something that gives purpose and direction to your life. It is about “walking the walk” ... just getting into the habit of doing good and feeling good about it can lead one to being happy.

A few years ago a group of congregants went to Israel. The first morning there we were tired after two long flights, a bit testy because of bags that did not make it and disoriented having to wake up at 7 am. On the bus our guide Itay and I spoke about our mutual philosophy that instead of seeing things as half empty, it would be best to focus

on the good. I told him about a song from Monty Python that I recently heard in the Broadway show, *Spamalot*, that reflects that point of view - "Always Look On the Bright Side of Life." He brightened and said, "I love that song! In fact, I have it right here on my iPod. And that is how that Monty Python song became the theme song of our trip, played every day as we toured Israel. Even the morning after a Katushya rocket hit a house in the town only two miles from where we were staying, we just went on (as Israelis always do) with the regular routine, and laughed as we sang "Always look on the bright side of life."

While the song is outrageous and silly, it asserts something deeply imbedded in Jewish thought - an attitude of happiness leads to a feeling of it. In her research on happiness, Dr. Lyubomirsky concludes that while much is not in our control, we can manipulate 40 percent of our happiness level by consciously adopting the behaviors of happy people. She's the first to admit that some of these strategies - such as "act like a happy person" - sound a little corny, but they work. This is not an argument denying the real pain in the world. The financial markets are worrying. The political climate is devolving into personal attack instead of focusing on the issues. To be "happy" is not to deny the setbacks, even difficulties, of life, but it is a forceful and conscious refusal to allow our selves to be defined by those challenges. How do we keep ourselves from being in a funk?

One technique is gratitude. There is, of course, plenty to be unhappy about - politically, financially and socially. But despite the current environment, let us not lose sight of the bigger picture. We who sit here today are among the most privileged men and women on the planet, and we are certainly the most privileged generation of Jews. So let's learn a little humility, put our life in proper perspective - and be a bit more grateful. In fact, the research shows, the more we actually tell someone "thank you" for what they have done to us - a parent, teacher or friend - the greater sense of joy we feel.

A second tactic to help make us happier is to focus less on "with what" and more on "with whom". The science confirms what Judaism has always taught - that it is not possessions that bring contentment, but relationships. The more we cultivate experiences - and build deep connections with others - the happier we are. And those abiding relationships - with friends, with family and with God - are what sustain us when times are difficult.

And finally, let us take to heart the central message of this holiest of days - that contentment is impossible without forgiveness. "Happy is the one whose transgressions are forgiven," we read in Scriptures.⁴ We are not bound by our misdeeds, Yom Kippur teaches, but can be released from the burden of our misjudgments and misdeeds. The act of confession - of acknowledging our wrong - actually lightens the burden that weighs down our soul. "Turn from your evil ways and live," says the Eternal. To be forgiven brings a sense of relief and joy - an inner contentment that is the true source of happiness.

Now, in conclusion, I am willing to concede that I might be wrong - that all I've tried to convince you that Judaism teaches about happiness is wrong. Indeed, a story is told about a meeting of rabbis where suddenly an angel appears. The angel tells the most prominent rabbi that in return for her unselfish and exemplary behavior, she will be given her choice of infinite wealth, wisdom or fame.

Without hesitating, the rabbi selects infinite wisdom. "Done!," the angel proclaims and disappears in smoke and fire.

Now, all heads turn towards the eminent rabbi, who sits surrounded by a faint halo of light. After a few moments, one of her colleagues whispers, "Say something wise."

The rabbi looks at them and says, "I should have taken the money."

Despite the humor, I think that rabbi would come to realize how wrong she was. We may be granted wealth or wisdom or fame ... or we may not. But we can follow the advice of the sages of our past and walk in the ways of righteousness. That will bring a contentment more enduring, more lasting, more treasured than gold.

What, then, is the way towards happiness? Instead of running after it, live fully each day. Embrace your loved ones. Bring passion to your pursuits. Remember that no matter how much you possess, you cannot carry it with you from this life. It is not through acquisition that happiness comes, but through giving. And finally, live in ways that will lead to happiness - "always look on the bright side" ... with gratitude, gratefulness and goodness.

Oh ... and keep your family close ... just not *too* close!

⁴ Psalms 32:1