

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

*Yom Kippur 5771 — Saturday, September 18, 2010
Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas
Sermon by Rabbi Alexandria Shuval-Weiner*

My grandma Armstrong of blessed memory was an amazing lady. She lived well into her 90s. I knew her as the loving woman, who marveled at living life. She adored family and wanted to hear about every little thing that we did. She loved us unconditionally and always had a smile on her face. When she visited, grandma was content to play cards with us kids, walk to the park or sit out on the porch and talk (or more to the point, listen to us babble on). As a child, Life around grandma was relaxing and stress free, there were no airs to put on and time seemed be suspended when grandma was with you. It was as if she never had a care in the world. Grandma would get up in the morning put on her glasses, rub a little baby oil into her skin, stand-up, take a deep cleansing breath and stretch- then if you happened to be standing near her she would say “breath with me- isn’t it a wonderful day?!” As a little girl, I remember giggling, but feeling good just to stand with her and suck in the air! You really felt the newness of the day.

My grandma believed in the simple joys: She gave thanks for her food, and helped others in need. She loved the Lawrence Welk show, listening to Walter Cronkite deliver the nightly news, and enjoyed reading about all the new technologies and inventions that were being developed. I recall how the first thing she would say when we picked her up at the airport, was some comment on the miracle of flight- how incredible it was

to travel so quickly and comfortably, by airplane. And her general excitement over what she would call “all the amazing gizmos and gadgets” that were coming out -each one created to make life just a little bit easier for us! We girls would always joke about her enthusiasm- but we loved how grandma was always happy- because it was contagious- when grandma was around, we were happy.

It wasn’t until we were adults that we came to learn more about the difficult and often challenging life she had experienced, (the loss of her first child, a daughter, when she herself was so very young, an abusive husband, and becoming a single mother during the Great Depression) but one would never have known that she experienced even a single day of hard ship because if you ever asked my grandma if she was happy with her life, her reply was always “how could I not be? God provided me with a beautiful world, a wonderful family and good health.”

Sameach b’cheko- happy is the one who finds contentment in their lot- this was my grandma’s view of living. She never took anything for granted. She looked for the beauty found in every human being. And she appreciated every breath.



Over the summer I posted a number of questions on my face book page pertaining to the idea of happiness:

What do you want out of life? What makes you happy? Where do you find happiness?

I received numerous posts to the question of what do you want in life? The overwhelming response was “I don’t need a lot, I just want to be happy” When asked what makes you happy, responses included things like: “I find happiness when I’m playing with my puppy”, “I am happiest when I’m watching my child discover something new”, “To me, happiness is holding my new born grandbaby”. “Seeing the expanse of the ocean” and “I feel happy when I’m doing something to help someone else”

When I asked if people if they were personally happy, the response was much less enthusiastic. And interestingly, all of these came privately: It seems that many of us don’t see ourselves as truly happy or content with our lives.

Gretchen Rubin, the author of one of this past year’s best selling books “the happiness project” left her career to pursue happiness. In her introduction to the book she writes: On a morning, just like every other morning I had a sudden realization that I thought I was in danger of wasting my life. I saw the years slipping by. And I asked myself What do I want from life? She responded I want to be happy...” then a few paragraphs later she remarked “I should be a happy woman: I have a loving husband, two great kids and a writing career in New York City. But Still, I felt discontent” So she spent a year doing things, working on her life to see if she could elevate her happiness level.

According to a survey conducted in 2006 only a third (34%) of adults in this country say they're very happy, another half say they are pretty happy and 15% consider themselves not too happy.

What has changed from my grandmother’s view on life to that of today? And more importantly why does this “happiness” factor seem to elude so many of us?

If you go to Amazon.com there are 36,709 book titles dealing with some aspect of the topic “finding happiness”. (I read 8 of these books on this subject in preparation for this sermon)...titles such as **Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill , The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want, and Hector and the Search for Happiness.**

There are blog spots on the subject, Institutes that study the levels of happiness in the world, Life coaches who work with individuals who will “support you on your exploration to find greater happiness and life success”. There are classes, workshops, chat groups and movies, who read or saw Eat-Pray-Love? All dealing with how one can find greater happiness in their lives. Did you know that there is even a happiness test that you can take on line; it’s called the Authentic Happiness Inventory to check your state of happiness. I took it and scored a 3.33 on a range of 1-5. That puts me in the “pretty happy” category.

So, what have I discovered? It’s a very simple message: Based upon everything that I have read, modern research, maintains, as does our Jewish tradition, that (assuming that one is not battling

mental illness) we can be in control of our happiness by cultivating feelings associated with gratitude, awe and wonder . This is one of the key lessons of Yom Kippur, that although we may not be in control of our mortality we are in fact in control of how we choose to live out our lives. One of those choices is that we can commit ourselves to seeking out the things that bring us happiness and celebrating them.

Our holy days help us reconnect with the things that are important in our lives- The reality is that it doesn't take a lot of work to find it, but it does often take a reminder to nurture and celebrate it. That's where our tradition can help us to live lives of fullness. The rabbis and sages of the past understood this. It is for this reason that we are encouraged to say 100 blessing each and every day. Blessing is about taking the time to appreciate what we have-, which in turn fosters happiness. Whether its that discovery your child has made, the new puppy or the great bottle of wine you have just opened with your spouse- Its that thing that we refer to all the time- it's the Henaini moments- that awareness of being fully present, that brings with it fulfillment, or happiness if you will.

In Hebrew the words for riches and happiness are pronounced the same: *Osher v'osher*. "Happiness" begins with an *alef*, "riches" with an *ayin*. Since happiness begins with an *alef*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and riches with an *ayin*, the seventeenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the sages teach that living life in a state of happiness/gratitude will lead to a life that is enriched.

Sadly too many people think happiness is based on what you achieve or acquire. According to all those books that I read, research has indicated this is a false assumption. Even marketing people know deep down what we really desire are the moments that touch our hearts, the son coming home for the holidays, the couple sitting together after a tough day and sharing a cup of cocoa, the intimate moments of life- these are the true sparks of happiness that are all around us if we just stop and cherish them. This idea that my whole life would improve if I just had a new car...just doesn't pan out. You get the car and what happens? At first you're elated, but then the new car smell fades and the excitement is gone. But the sound of an old friends voice on the other end of the phone, the wonderment that you still find in the arms of your partner of 40 years or experiencing those days when you are utterly exhausted but then you gaze at your sleeping child and all of the burdens and fatigue fade away, all that remains is joy... that is what gives us the L'Chaim feeling- that's what lingers in our souls. This is happiness- and these are the true riches of human existence. – As was my grandmother's understanding, Happiness is a state of mindfulness.

As the Talmud says, "Who is rich? The one who appreciates what is in his grasp" (Ethics of the Fathers, 4:1). That's why our morning prayers begin with a series of blessings thanking God for the simple and obvious: Thank you, God, for giving me life, Thank God I can see, that I can use my hands and feet, that by bowels function, that I can think... Happiness comes from mastering the art of appreciating and consciously enjoying what you already have.

Remember that old Shirley Temple movie- the one where the little girl goes out searching for the blue bird of happiness? She searched and searched the world over, even going up to heaven- in the end, the bird was waiting for her outside her front door...or more famously, The Wizard of Oz- with its key line "There's no place like home"? We may assume that happiness lies somewhere over the rainbow-where skies are blue, when in truth its as close to us as the air we breathe. I know that for me, its about celebrating the now and stop myself from worrying about the stupid things like getting my hair wet- I have to just jump into the pool with the kids, dance in the rain with my daughter. Its really not about the table manners that count, but rather the sounds of my family laughing as they are being silly sitting together over a family meal. Only I stop myself from experiencing the happiness and the joy of life- and thus it is only me who can change the behavior- it is only me who can stop to appreciate the magic of the moment. It is my choice.

Gretchen Rubin wrote: "If I've learned one thing from the "happiness project", it's that if I want my life to be a certain way, I must be that way myself." If I want my children to be thoughtful, I must be thoughtful. If I want my marriage to be romantic, I must be romantic. If I want my parents to be appreciative...I must be appreciative. If we want our lives to be a certain way...we must be that way ourselves. If I want a happy life, I must emerge myself in joy and gratitude because Happiness is something that breathes and lives in the relationships between one person and another.

Last week I discussed the need to do the work of teshuvah-repentance, we do this work so as to right the relationships that are important to us. This morning we metaphorically stand before God, awaiting our judgment. Yom Kippur helps us to strip away the noise of the world to get to the essence of what is truly important. We are asked to face our mortality to cause us to wake up and recommit ourselves to living a life of meaning, a living in a state of gratitude.

In truth, this has been another tough year for so many of us. Sadly, in times of struggles we forget to appreciate what we tend to take for granted. We may even push away the meaningful aspects of our lives- Home, family, relishing the simple pleasures of sitting with a friend and talking- but Yom Kippur helps us to refocus on what is important life-

So today we stand before God, our hands outstretched praying for the opportunity to start again, and we are urged, "to choose life", to re-energize ourselves

-when we exit these doors this evening, we will rush to seek nourishment with and from family and friends, we will raise our glasses in joy, savoring the flavors of good food as only one who has been renewed can understand, and we will cherish our loved ones as only one restored to life can appreciate.

The only question remaining is will we take the opportunity to use this as a fresh step toward life? Toward happiness?

In four days we will celebrate Sukkot, Zman Simchateynu, the festival of our joy. Some of us will leave services tonight and place the first post of our sukkah as a visible commitment to our renewed appreciation for all that is good

in our lives-for our bounty- for our happiness. In psalms we read “And to the upright of heart, there is happiness”. That is after we have made our hearts right by through our soul work between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we merit the joy and happiness that can be found in the simple joys of life.

As my grandma used to say “the days are long – our years are short, appreciate the time you have been given by living it in joy and in gratitude with the ones you love because this is where you find true happiness.

As we move through this day, may we each consider where our happiness lies, and take the time to search our souls for the things we must do now to nurture our own mindfulness and our gratefulness, today and every day.

Zochreinu l'chayim we pray...may we be remembered for life and may each one of us be strong enough to take steps to live our lives fully – in doing so we let the happiness in!

Kayn Yehei Ratzon!