

Happiness
Erev Rosh Hashanah 2018
Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers
Final

Woody Allen once said, “There's an old joke about two elderly women who are at a Catskill mountain resort, and one of 'em says, "Boy, the food at this place is really terrible." The other one says, "Yeah, I know; and such small portions." Allen adds, “Well, that's essentially how I feel about life - full of loneliness, and misery, and suffering, and unhappiness, and it's all over much too quickly.”¹

I don't know if you concur with Woody Allen or not. I hope that you don't feel that your life is full of loneliness, misery, and suffering because we all seek joy, peace, wellbeing, in essence, we want to be happy. The word happiness is bantered around often. We ask others if they are happy and we struggle with how we feel about ourselves and our place in life. Are you happy? Such a simple question. Are you happy? How many of you need to think about that or unsure?

We often recognize times when we think we are happy. For some of us, its cheering our favorite sports team to victory, watching a comedy, eating a piece of rich chocolate cake, playing in the sand, hiking a mountain, sipping some wine, or watching a favorite TV show. But are we truly happy in such moments? It's easy to confuse momentary pleasure with long term happiness or satisfaction. We may get an initial rush out of the purchase of an electronic devise or an outfit but it's temporary. We may savor the taste of salty caramel ice cream but the pleasure is gone almost as soon as the ice cream melts. We may enjoy an activity but once it's over, the joyful sensation can pass as well.

There's a saying from Hasidic Rebbe Hanukh of Aleksandrov where he explained the Talmudic teaching comparing the world to a wedding hall. Rebbe said that a man came to an inn in Warsaw. In the evening, he heard sounds of music and dancing coming from the next house. “They must be celebrating a wedding,” he thought to himself. But the next evening he heard the same sounds, and again the evening after that. “How can there be so many weddings in one family?” the man asked the innkeeper. “That house is a wedding hall,” answered the innkeeper. “Today one family holds a wedding there, tomorrow another.” “It's the same with this world,” said Rebbe Hanokh. “People are always enjoying themselves. But some days it's one person and the other days it's another. No single person is happy all the time.”²

Happiness is a fleeting emotion and even though I'll be using this term throughout my sermon, what I really mean is satisfaction, the deep kind. We are at the beginning of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. The Talmud describes how God opens up the books of life and death and inscribes our names for this upcoming year. And so we try to encourage God to put us in the good book of life by repenting, giving tzedakah, and doing good deeds. The writing of

our names in these celestial books, I believe, is more of a metaphor for how we inscribe ourselves. Will we have a year of upheaval and unhappiness or will it have the blessings of contentment and joy? To be sure, there are things beyond our capacity to control but we do get to choose our attitude, our perspective, and our subsequent actions.

As of late, I've been fascinated with a field of learning known as Positive Psychology. I was a rabbi's conference last spring when two rabbis presented on the "Science of Happiness meets Judaism." Rabbis Moffic and Levine stated that psychology in the past focused on mental illness, personality disorders, and looked for ways to treat people. There is no doubt a great deal of value to this. Many of us have been the beneficiaries of the psychological understandings of why we do what we do. And the remedy can give us a whole new lease on life. I've always had a great appreciation for psychological studies, counseling, and treatment. I did find my ears perk up though when the rabbis spoke about Positive Psychology and its focus on happiness. In essence, instead of looking at what could go wrong, they study how some people get it right. What qualities or traits does a person need in order to live a good life? What perspective does such person have and what choices does she/he make to gain satisfaction? The rabbis spoke about the importance of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, having a higher purpose, and accomplishments. I was intrigued.

Recently, I read Dr. Martin Seligman's book, "Authentic Happiness." Dr. Seligman is considered a pioneer in the field of Positive Psychology, a systematic theory about why happy people are happy.³ He posits a formula for happiness. H (enduring level of happiness) = S (your set range) + C (circumstances of your life) + V (factors under your control). Seligman suggests that each of us have a predetermined range for happiness. Some of us are predisposed to be higher on the range than others. These are those people who seem to be happy most of the time. Those bastards! While others lower on the range have greater amounts of discontent. Our set range, though, is only one factor.

Seligman describes the circumstances of our lives as potentially making a difference even though not to the degree that people assume. For example, he points out that living in a wealthy democracy, being married, and avoiding negative events can increase one's happiness however making more money, getting more education, and changing your race doesn't. Most surprising, health is not as significant as we think it is. He writes that, "objective good health is barely related to happiness; what matters is our subjective perception of how healthy we are..."⁴ He instructs that while severe illness does impact happiness, moderate ill health surprisingly does not.

Then Seligman focuses a lot of his work though on the 'Voluntary', i.e., those factors that are within our control and that can make an immense difference in our happiness and wellbeing.

This is the area of greatest to me. The things we have control over is how we view our past, live our present days, and our perspective on our future.

Let's go down memory lane. Some of us have had unfortunate things happen in our past. There are those of us who didn't have ideal childhoods. Our parents made serious mistakes, tragedy befell our family, and there was struggle and turmoil. Even for those of us who had a tough childhood, Dr. Seligman advocates that we can choose how we look back on these events. We can make a choice in how we remember people and incidents. Most importantly, he counsels that bad childhood events do not mandate adult troubles. Our past doesn't dictate our future. Knowing that we are not imprisoned in our past can be liberating. Just because our parents were alcoholics, abusive, short tempered, or immature doesn't mean that we will be.

As a Jewish people, we recount over and over again our suffering back in Egypt when we were enslaved. This is not to inculcate a slave mentality but rather to put our historical memories in perspective. We do it to learn from our past not to replicate it. This is also why we remember the destruction of our Temples, crusader period, and the Holocaust. But this is not to supersede the wonderful parts of our history as Jews. For example, the Golden age of Spain in the Middle Ages was a great time to be alive. There was a revival of ancient literature, medical breakthroughs, learning, and scholarship. We also had good prospects during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment period. These eras brought great hope to our people. Historically speaking, even though, we have had hard times as a Jewish people, we also have had opportunities because of our values and traditions.

On a personal level, Dr. Seligman advocates that we can choose to focus more on the good events of our past, strive for forgiveness, and emphasize those things that we can be grateful for. Let's take a moment right now. Regardless of your upbringing, can you think of anything that was good, joyful, or heartwarming in your past? We can traverse the younger years of our childhood to teenage transition and then to adulthood. Can you find anything redeeming about yourself and your family? What are the good qualities and traits that were present? What were the events that gave you a feeling of belonging and love? I'm in no way saying that this is easy but only that it is possible. Seligman advocates that is feasible to free ourselves from our past and to transform our previous ways of looking at ourselves and our place in the world. While our past cannot be changed, how we view it certainly can be. Once again, he asserts, one's past does not determine one's future.

Let's explore our present state. Seligman points out that bodily pleasures are fleeting. That isn't to say one should avoid them. Judaism embraces the joy of being alive. On Shabbat, we are supposed to have the best food, have marital relations with our spouse, and wear our best outfits. Ecclesiastes, from the Bible, teaches that a person should eat, drink, and enjoy oneself through all the days of life that God's grants him under the sun.⁵ While we will fast on Yom

Kippur, we are not supposed to add to our days of abstinence. We don't have nuns or monks in Judaism. Our bodies and lives are gifts from God.

However, such pleasures are momentary and Seligman points out the importance of gratifications. These involves a task that requires skill, a time when we concentrate with clear goals, are deeply involved, feel a sense of control, time stops, and our sense of self vanishes. Is there ever a time when you are deeply absorbed and come out feeling gratified? Is it after building something, finishing a book, writing, hiking a mountain, sewing, or drawing? When do you feel most gratified? All too often, we are racing around getting to work, school, doing our chores that we omit activities and projects that bring us true joy. These are activities that replenish ourselves. They can help us more fully live in the present.

Gratifications are not enough though to have enduring happiness. One needs to identify our signature strengths and to utilize them. Strengths are not talents or abilities but rather traits that are valued in all cultures. These are qualities such as a desire for wisdom and knowledge, courage to act in the face of adversity, love, kindness, generosity, teamwork, loyalty, leadership, self-control, discretion, humility, appreciation, forgiveness, and sense of purpose. What are your strengths? Are you able to use these qualities in work, school, friendship, and family? Our traits provide a means to transcend our individuality and help us connect with others, community, world and with God.

Judaism is replete with these values. We are a people who value learning and knowledge. Studying Torah has been a generational value for thousands of years that came to also encompass secular studies. This is not just in our modern period but it also occurred in times of growth and revival. Love for our fellow human being as a value is repeated in the Torah and we are taught to help others as one way to perform Tzedakah, the giving of charity. The High Holy days strive to imbue us with a sense of humility before God and an appreciation of our mortality. This is to inspire us to make better choices for ourselves. And even though we appreciate bodily pleasures, there are times when we abstain as a way of gaining mastery over ourselves in hopes of channeling those parts of ourselves that can be undesirable.

Furthermore, the beginning of true spirituality is having an appreciation of the world, other people, and of the significance of life itself. And the High Holy Days wouldn't be what they were if we didn't remind ourselves of the importance of forgiveness. We have to forgive others. There are times when we must dig deep to forgive our parents, our siblings, our children, and our friends. Because there comes a day when we must also forgive ourselves.

Rabbi Moffic links the teachings of Positive psychology in his book, *The Happiness Prayer*, with a meditation we say in the morning that states, *Elo Devarim she ein lahem shiur*, These are the obligations without measure: To honor father and mother, to perform acts of love and kindness, attend the house of study daily, welcome the stranger, visit the sick, rejoice with bride

and groom, console the bereaved, pray with sincerity, and to make peace when there is strife. These actions reinforce our core values, connect us with family and community, and enable us to support one another. In essence, by doing these mitzvahs, these sacred commandments, we tap into something greater than ourselves and we can gain a sense of fulfillment.

Perhaps this is the key to happiness or to a sense of satisfaction with ourselves. First looking back on our past with a sense of gratitude and even forgiveness. Embracing our present and tapping into those things that are gratifying. And then giving back with our signature strengths to our family, friends, and community. We all know how good it feels to do something worthwhile, to do something helpful. It is reinvigorating. It is with a better perspective and good acts, that our future can look better. Making good choices for ourselves can help us feel more optimistic about our future. Hopefully, we will believe that our lives are not miserable that we will not concur with Woody Allen's assessment. Instead, we will say that life is sweet and meaningful and to be embraced.

May we all be able to tap into a lasting joy and happiness and may this year not only be a good one, but may it be filled with lasting satisfaction for us, our families, and friends.

I wish for you a *Shanah tovah u'metukah*- a good and sweet new year for all of you.

Notes:

- 1 <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/4151-there-s-an-old-joke---um-two-elderly-women-are>
- 2 Jewish Wisdom by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin pg. 219-220
- 3 <http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/martin-seligman-psychology/>
- 4 Authentic Happiness by Martin Seligman pg 58
- 5 Ecclesiastes 8:15