

Rosh Hashana Day 1 Happiness is.....

When my son Jeremy was a little boy and things were not going his way, he would cry in frustration, “I want to be happy again!!”

I’ve thought about that plea a lot over the years. My sweet, innocent, three-year-old son clearly had a specific picture of what happiness felt like to him, and he was very much attuned to when he was experiencing it, and when he definitely was not. He also had a very explicit way of conveying this to us as well!

As a child, happiness to me meant looking forward to my birthday party; going on a long-anticipated vacation with my family; opening Hanukkah presents; the sound of the bell on the last day of school; the summer when I played Gretel in the Morton Grove Music Theatre production of “The Sound of Music.” I was able to wrap myself in those blissful days without a thought about what came next. Nothing could cloud the happiness I felt just living in those moments.

Looking back, I realize what a gift it was to be able to have the capacity to feel and express such unadulterated joy. As I’ve grown older, I realize that this gift is harder and harder to attain. Not that I don’t experience happiness; it’s just that it’s tempered, it’s cautious.

It's more of an, "I'm so grateful for this moment/I hope it lasts/I know it won't last forever/I hope there's many more moments like these/do I deserve this happiness?/why don't other people get to have this kind of happiness/why is life so unfair?" kind of happiness. In other words, the joy is no longer unadulterated, which is an ironically appropriate word to use; "unadulterated" means, "pure, untouched, untainted, unsullied." In other words, possessing the innocence of a child, before the adult world hones in and complicates things. Which poses the question, ***is it even possible for adults to recapture the unadulterated happiness of childhood?***

Before we attempt to answer this question, we need to take a step back and ask an even more fundamental one: ***how do we even define the word "happiness?"*** Several months ago, I asked you to do just that. Here are some of your responses:

For some of you, happiness is the feeling that comes from enjoying the physical comforts and simple pleasures in life:

- *A really, really cold chocolate milkshake with fried green beans.*
- *A thumb and a blanket, comforting things that are yours to use as you like.*
- *A cup of tea and a book.*

Some of you defined it as an emotional state of being:

- *The feeling I have within me when I step outside on a cold, dreary and overcast night ,look up at night sky, and think to myself, with complete sincerity, "what a wonderful evening".*
- *Feeling cared for by G-d*
- *Hearing a child laugh*
- *not worrying and having peace of mind*

For some, happiness is connected to reaching a goal:

- *Seeing your dreams come true and your plans come to fruition.*
- *feeling like I've accomplished something,*

And for others, happiness means engaging and being with others:

- *My definition for happiness is making others happy, in turn I feel happy.*
- *Family, friends, being with people who make me laugh*

Someone even offered a “negative definition: of happiness:

- *If I'm not unhappy, frustrated, upset, worried, anxious, et al., then I'm "happy".*

The standard dictionary definition of happiness is: “a mental or emotional state of well-being characterized by positive or pleasant emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy.”

Formally, this definition holds, however, one person’s joy can be another person’s pain. I really enjoy watching Grey’s Anatomy, but Richard would rather have root canal than join me in my guilty pleasure because he thinks all the characters are selfish. But he loves me so much that not only did he buy me season 5 for Mother’s Day, he even agreed to watch it with me as long as he could do the crossword puzzle at the same time. And I love him so much that I made him return it because I knew I wouldn’t get any enjoyment out of knowing that he was mentally cursing out Meredith Grey in his head.

So he exchanged it for Season 1 of the British Series “Call the Midwife,” which we both got hooked on in the middle of Season 2 because the characters are not selfish at all. Some of them are even nuns. But I digress. My point is it’s basically impossible to come up with a definitive description of happiness because it depends so much on how each individual views it. In other words, happiness is in the eye of the “perceiver.”

I do think however, that we can group the different ways in which we experience happiness into three categories, which I've named: ***"Me" happiness, "Free" happiness and "We" happiness.***

In the interest of full disclosure, my model was inspired by the guests I heard speak in an internet broadcast of Emory University's 2010 interfaith summit on happiness. This summit was a culmination of a study that began five years earlier at Emory's Center for the Study of Law and Religion aptly named, the "Pursuit of Happiness Project." The objective? to, "reconstruct the idea of happiness in light of the new findings of the human and social sciences and of the new liberties of constitutional democracies." This sounds complicated, serious. Not what you'd expect when you think about a happiness project.

Among the distinguished panel at the summit were the Dali Lama, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the UK, The Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, International Scholar and Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University. And I've got to tell you, the Dali Lama is hilarious! He's got an infectious laugh that had the audience and guests, as well as himself, in stitches. But back to my model.

“Me Happiness” can be described as an emotionally energized feeling or mood associated with immediate gratification or reward or experiencing something pleasurable. For example, winning the lottery; acing a test, purchasing a coveted item, having that cold chocolate milkshake with fried green beans. Another term for it is **Hedonic happiness** defined as “the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.” It’s the most fragile form of happiness, because it depends on external conditions, and if those disappear, so does the happiness. But there’s also an endpoint when the happiness is Hedonic: when one experiences too much of a good thing, it can quickly turn sour. Too many milkshakes and green beans can make you sick.

“Free happiness” also refers to happiness that each of us personally experiences, but it’s not contingent on outside circumstances. It’s the kind of happiness that leads to spiritual and emotional freedom; It’s “Me Happiness” turned up a few notches. Rabbi Sacks defines this as **“Osher:”** one of two biblical Hebrew words for happiness. Osher describes a state of being at peace with yourself and the world; In Buddhism, this can be achieved through mindfulness meditation. Scientist-turned-Buddhist Matthieu Ricard describes this as, “A deep sense of serenity and fulfillment, a state that actually pervades and underlies all emotional states and all the joys and

sorrows that can come one's way."

It involves attaining balance and rootedness in life; living a life of meaning, being able to have a sense of well-being despite the challenges one faces in life. I imagine it's the attainment of the emotional and spiritual freedom that leads to wholeness, **Shalom**. It comes from a place of honest self-reflection about who you are. Yet it remains a personal feeling that we can only experience on our own. Engaging in meaningful work, raising a child, studying for your Bar/Bat Mitzvah, or writing a HH sermon can be difficult, even painful, but, in the end, the ultimate reward is experiencing the "free" happiness that comes from knowing that you've met the challenge head on with the best of your abilities.

"We" Happiness is communal, attained from being shared. As opposed to *Osher, the happiness we feel*, Rabbi Sacks calls this *"Simcha, the happiness we create."* And, he adds, it comes from a place of covenant, or "a moral commitment of respecting individuals coming together to do what they cannot do alone." It is the spiritual satisfaction that we gain when we give of ourselves for the sake of uplifting others. Bishop Jefferts Schori echoes that sentiment, stating that for Christians, happiness is about being in "right relationship" – with God, ourselves, and others, and using the blessings of this world for the benefit of all."

Picture these three categories as overlapping circles that all intersect in the center. That intersection marks the pinnacle of happiness, and our goal is to remain there. If we stray too far from the center, we put that happiness at risk.

Regarding “**Me Happiness**,” desiring, attaining, and enjoying the physical and material things of this world can and should give us great pleasure. Denial is not a Jewish concept as Rabbi Sacks reminds us, “It says in the Talmud that in the world to come, each person will have to give an accounting for each legitimate pleasure that he deprived himself of in this life.” I really, really like that quote! Despite this, we certainly love to kvetch. Professor Deborah Lipstadt, another presenter at the Happiness Summit, recounts a joke about a man moaning on a train: “Oy, am I thirsty; oy, am I thirsty.” Someone brings him water, he’s quiet for a few minutes, and they begins to moan again, “Oy, was I thirsty!!”

The problem comes when the pursuit of “Me Happiness” becomes the ultimate goal. When we measure our happiness as if it were a mathematical equation (This+this+this= happiness), then the absence of any one of those “must haves” creates a problem with no solution.

Professor Nasr describes this as having a “Consumer’s Philosophy,” and comments, “A great Sufi Master once said: ‘I want not to want.’ That is the epitome of happiness.”

Always looking outward to satisfy our needs prevents us from discovering the place where happiness must ultimately reside: within us. So if we are perennially dissatisfied, when we are forever searching, seeking, actively trying to “Pursue Happiness,” we will never attain the inner serenity that “**Free Happiness**” offers us.

This happiness is also threatened if we suffer from low self-esteem, if we are constantly punishing and berating ourselves for our mistakes and shortcomings. The Torah instructs us, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” But what if you don’t love yourself? Perhaps our goal should be, “Love yourself as you would want your neighbor to love you.” Easier said than done. But even as we come together today to reflect about the changes we want to make in our lives, and to face up to our flaws, we should also remind ourselves that we are all made *B’Zelem Elokeim*: in the image of God, we are all worthy, and precious, and possess that divine spark of goodness.

If we don't love ourselves, we may feel more inclined to withdraw from the world, thus endangering the **"We Happiness"** that can immeasurably enrich our lives. One of the cornerstones of Judaism is Tikkun Olam, repairing the world, helping others. Rabbi Bill Gershon of Shearith Israel in Dallas claims, "Happiness in life ultimately is about allowing yourself to be used by a sacred idea, a noble cause, something larger than yourself. The purpose of life is not to find yourself. The purpose of life is to lose yourself." That may be true, but I contend that unless we "find ourselves," unless we know and accept who we truly are, we won't be able to take that next step and "lose ourselves" to be a part of a bigger picture.

These three types of happiness are inextricably linked. Enjoying and appreciating what we have been given and have earned, and feeling at peace with oneself and the world means that we can then take an active part in helping to create that peace. They are all dependent on each other. But how do we ensure that we stay grounded, centered, in the.....well.....center of this happiness model?

Here are some of my suggestions: not specific "self-help" suggestions such as "take a bubble bath each night" or "volunteer for your cause of choice" or even "learn how to crochet"(although

there's nothing wrong with doing any of these things).

These are more general observations. And as this is a brand New Year, I'm hoping that you can think about incorporating them into your own lives:

1. Know, accept and even embrace your limitations and imperfections.
2. Take care of yourself: physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. The specific ways to do this are something I'll leave to you. Actually, I lied. I'll give you one specific. After all, I am clergy. Pray. Not necessarily out of a siddur, or mahzor. Just take time to acknowledge miracles. Prayer makes us slow down or stop, at least for a short time, the never-stopping pace of life. Rabbi Sacks tells a story about a Rabbi who was watching people in a town square frantically running around. He stopped one to ask why he was in such a rush. The man replied, "I'm chasing after life." The Rabbi answered, "Why are you so certain it's ahead of you, that you must chase it? Maybe it's behind you." Rabbi Sacks concludes, "Sometimes we don't have to pursue it: we just need to pause and let it catch up with us." In Buddhism, this is done through meditation, just being, not doing. In Judaism we have a day built into our week to do just that. We call it

Shabbat.

3. Let go of the need to control: some things can't be fixed. (This is something that I need to focus on)
4. Learn to live with uncertainty.
5. Take risks.
6. Identify your support system. Keep connected with others, and not just through Facebook.
7. Find meaningful work.
8. And when you do feel unhappy, or depressed, make room for it; don't cover it up; acknowledge it and give yourself permission to "be in the valley."

When I was young and worried or sad about something, I was often told, "Just don't think about it." Not helpful. I wholeheartedly disagree with Jewish radio commentator Dennis Prager who says that, "inflicting bad moods on others is just as obnoxious as inflicting bad breath or body odor on others. Just as we try to brush away bad breath and wash away body odor, we should just try to brush and wash away bad moods." Um.....I don't think so!

Claiming that a mental state can be washed away as easily as a physical one seems to me at best, insensitive, and at worst, offensive and dangerous. In my experience, there's nothing that helps blow negative thoughts out of proportion more than trying to suppress

them.

Which brings me to one final question: is it possible to be so mired in sadness, or depression, that happiness, for some, is simply unattainable? Especially if one has suffered a devastating loss of a loved one, or multiple losses or traumas in life? How can one experience happiness when so much of his/her life has been about pain? That's a really, really hard question; one that doesn't have an easy answer.

For someone who is suffering from "complicated grief" – "being in an intense state of mourning.....with pain and loss so constant and severe that it keeps you from resuming your life," or from depression, the short answer may be "no." This kind of debilitating, darkness can be paralyzing, and if one cannot envision a way out, then happiness may be beyond their grasp.

However, the antidote, especially from a Jewish framework, is **Hope**. Rabbi Sacks tells us, "In Hebrew there is no word for tragedy, because Judaism is the principled refutation of tragedy in the name of hope." He even speaks of another form of happiness: "Prophetic Happiness, or "Sacred Discontent" born from times of struggle and despair. A wonderful analogy he uses is the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. Jacob says to him, "I will not let you go until you

bless me.” This is Rabbi Sacks’ mantra for his own life.

Still grieving over the loss of his mother he states, “When something bad happens, I won’t let go of the bad thing until I have discovered the blessing that lies within it. Loss and grief have taught me that so many things I thought were important were not. And out of that comes a new simplicity. And that is why sometimes, all the pain and tears lift you to a much higher and deeper joy when you say to the bad times, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”

We are a people all too familiar with suffering, expressed by the author of Ps. 22’s woeful exhortation, *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*” And yet, the psalmist doesn’t give up the hope, proclaiming in vs. 23, *“I will proclaim Your Name to my brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will praise You.”*

Although we are a people that has experienced insurmountable pain, by remaining in relationship with God, even if that relationship is temporarily one of anger and doubt, we can fight our way back to life. As Woody Allen astutely put it, “Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering - and it’s all over much too soon.”

A family member of mine was going through a period of depression a year ago: unable to get out of bed without shaking, severe anxiety, feeling like he had lost control of his life and future. I desperately

wanted to help “fix” him; offer solutions, come up with a game plan. But my astute CPE supervisor, Rabbi Michal Springer, told me something that I will never forget. She said, “All change begins with *‘I can hope for something better.’*” And if that family member couldn’t envision that change for himself, there was nothing I or anyone could do.

For happiness to be a possibility, especially for those who are suffering from Complicated Grief or depression, there must exist within them the desire to experience life differently, the realization that they don’t have to, nor do they deserve to, live an anguished life, that change is possible if they have the courage to seek the help they need. So the long answer is yes, if there is room for hope, there is room for happiness in the future. The Dali Lama, who has experienced a lifetime of suffering, goes as far as to say that our life depends on hope. Prayer can help as well. When we pray, we are reminded that we are not alone. God joins us in our suffering.

I want to end by going back to the beginning and answering the original question: ***is it possible for adults to recapture the unadulterated happiness of childhood?*** I’m going to answer the question with a question: should this unadulterated happiness be the happiness that we seek? Seeing it now, unadulterated happiness

has a lot in common with “Me Happiness” – the exhilaration of getting what you want when you want it.

I remember Jeremy’s college essay, when he wrote that what gave him happiness was sitting down on Shabbat with an ice cold sprite and a brand new edition of Vogue magazine. Being honest about his “Me happiness” helped assure him a place at USC. Now he’s the photo editor of Vogue’s website, and probably the last thing he wants to do when he gets home is read that magazine. And instead of the ice cold Sprite, I predict he more often has a glass of wine. Or two.

“Me happiness” is great when it all works out, but it’s not the kind of happiness that will last. We need to temper it with “Free Happiness,” *Osher, Shalom*, enduring contentment created from living a life of meaning and purpose, and with “We Happiness,” *Simcha*, creating a live of giving and sharing in community. To me, the synthesis of these three modes is what grown-up happiness looks like.

In this New Year, I wish for you a year of rediscovery, health and wholeness, and the blessing of, not *unadulterated*, but simply, *adult* Happiness. Amen.

