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Happiness: What's in Your Cart?

Suppose tonight on Kol Nidre we had a kind of Jewish Kmart evening, an eternal light special. You could put in you cart something that would make you happier in the New Year. What object, quality, or action would it be? Findings from various studies of happiness suggest something surprising about our choices. Take wealth, for instance, and all the delightful things that money can buy. "Research by Edward Diener among others has shown that once your basic needs are met, additional income does little to raise your sense of satisfaction with life. Does a good education? Sorry Mom and Dad, neither education nor for that matter a high IQ paves the road to happiness. Youth? No again. In fact, older people are more consistently satisfied with their lives than the young. And they're less prone to dark moods." Marriage? A complicated picture: but married people are generally happier.¹ Religious faith and friends seem to be a big positive.²

Before making additions to our cart, we might want to consult an expert guide like Martin Seligman's book, *Authentic Happiness*.³ "As a result of his research he finds three components of happiness: pleasure (the smiley face piece), engagement (the depth of involvement with one's family, work, romance and hobbies,) and meaning (using personal strengths to serve some larger end). Of those three roads to a happy, satisfied life, "pleasure is the least consequential," he insists. This is newsworthy because so many Americans build their lives around pursuing pleasure. It turns out that engagement and meaning are much more important."

Tonight we confess the *Al chet*. The word *chet*, or sin, in Hebrew, comes from the word that means, "to miss the target." Our job then this night is clearly to see what makes up the target of human happiness and to see how to better hit that target in the New Year. One of the best Jewish scholars today to apply the traditions of Judaism to the study of human happiness is Joseph Telushkin. You may remember that he wrote *The Book of Jewish Values: A Day by Day Guide to Ethical Living*. He just came out with a new book, *A Code of Jewish Ethics: You Shall Be Holy*. Most of the chapters in his new book are about the spiritual development of character that can improve the quality of our lives. It turns out that when you compare his writings to California happiness researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky we find what helps us to live everyday holiness in Judaism also is at the core of everyday happiness. Lyubomirsky's first suggestions are to "count

¹ (Time Magazine January 17, 2005 p5A).

² (Time Magazine January 17, pA5-A6)

³ (Time pA7)

your blessings” and “savor life’s joys.”⁴ Telushkin explores how to do this in his chapter on Becoming A Grateful Person.⁵

One of the ways we shape a consciousness of gratitude is to begin each day with a prayer of gratitude. We pray upon waking thanksgiving for the very gift of life and breath. It’s called the Modeh. Mode ani le-fanecha, melech chai ve kayam, she he che zarta be nishmati be chemla, raba eh mu na techa. I am grateful before you living and eternal Sovereign for returning my soul to me with compassion. You are faithful beyond measure. We can enhance our happiness quotient just by sincerely thanking God each morning for the gift of life renewed. Each time we eat the recitation of the Motzi gives us a chance to pause and feel grateful that we have food to eat. Rabbi Meir taught that we should recite 100 blessings a day. We may utter a prayer of gratitude when something good happens during the day; even so seemingly ordinary, like cleaning our glasses and realizing that we can see. On Shabbat before the blessing of the sweet wine I always ask the congregation to recall something sweet that happened to you during the past week. Participating in Shabbat worship is an experience of immersing ourselves in gratitude. So many of the prayers help us remember and savor our blessings. We leave the service feeling much more fortunate and blessed than when we entered the sanctuary. One of my favorites is Miracles,⁶Ahava Rabbah,) “We look for miracles in the extra ordinary while to often we remain oblivious to the miracles which abound in the ordinary moments of our lives. Our lives are drenched in miracles. Miracles are all around us and within us. We are each walking miracles. When we are bruised what miracle heals us: When we sleep what miracle restores us? When we see beauty what miracle elevates us? When we hear music what miracle moves us? When we are suffering what miracle saddens us? When we give and receive love what miracle warms us? When we pray what miracle renews us? Every springtime is a miracle; every snowflake is a miracle; every newborn is a miracle. The thoughts we think, the words we utter, and hopes we cherish each is a miracle.” We live from miracle to miracle. That’s why the modim reminds us to be thankful for God’s miracles which are daily with us.” After reciting a prayer like this we leave the service feeling a lot more grateful.

In addition to our rituals and prayers, we develop an attitude of gratitude when we live by expressing gratitude towards others. Telushkin writes,⁷ “In addition to being the right thing to do, gratitude is also a prerequisite for happiness. Consider the mindset of a grateful person: ‘Look what Sam did for me; he really likes me. Look how Barbara helped me, she really cares about me.’ At the very moment that we cultivate the feeling of gratitude we also cultivate a feeling of being loved.” “Conversely, what is the mindset of an ungrateful person: ‘the only reason Sam helped me is to make sure I’ll reciprocate when he needs me.

⁴ (Time Magazine PA8.)

⁵ (Code pp.96-113.)

⁶ (p110)

⁷ (Code p. 96)

Barbara spoke to so and so on my behalf so that she can ask me to do something for her.' An ungrateful person reveals not only a suspicious and mean-spirited disposition but how profoundly unloved she feels. Ungrateful people cannot imagine that others care enough about them to be generous with no thought of quid pro quo." Expressing gratitude helps us carry in our everyday lives a sense of blessing and goodness. Telushkin reminds us⁸ that Hakarat Tov, recognition of the good another has done you uplifts the soul. "Grateful people look forward to helping those who have helped them."⁹

We read in the Talmud that Ben Zoma once saw a crowd on the steps of the Temple Mount. He said. "Blessed is He who has created all these people to serve me." (For he used to say, "What labors did Adam have to carry out before he obtained bread to eat? He plowed, he sowed, he reaped, and he bound the sheaves, threshed the grain, winnowed the chaff, selected the ears, ground them, sifted the flour, kneaded the dough, and baked. And only then did he eat. Whereas I get up and find all these things done for me:) Babylonian Talmud Berachot 58a.

⁹(Values 238-239) "Clearly, Rabbi Ben Zoma specialized in the mitzvah of expressing gratitude (Hakarat Tov). Thus, viewing an enormous crowd of people, the sort of sight that provokes some to misanthropic observations ('a herd of sheep,' 'a mindless mob'), inspired gratitude in Ben Zoma. Not just gratitude but creative thanksgiving... Instead, Ben Zoma conjured up how many of the people in the faceless group helped him in his daily life, preparing his food and garments, thereby enabling him to devote himself to his passion, a life of Torah." When it comes to Hakarat Tov, Telushkin reminds us not only to strangers but to also "Express gratitude to your family members and friends. Many of us take the people closest to us for granted, and show far greater appreciation to strangers who have done us a favor than to those who have undoubtedly done us hundreds."¹⁰ He suggests, "If those close to you have made it known that they do not feel appreciated, resolve that... you will treat your spouse, children, siblings and parents with the same courtesy and gratitude you extend to strangers." Hakarat Tov, the rituals and prayers of gratitude that shape our sense of joy and thankfulness combined with living out our appreciation shown to others is a core source of happiness and holiness of hitting the target of happiness in the coming year.

A second major target of happiness according to happiness studies is major investment in good relationships with family and friends. Here Telushkin explores in the majority of the book "You Shall Be Holy," pathways to reach that goal. Family and friendship are very complicated relationships that involve many complex dimensions and qualities. He examines Jewish wisdom in Judging

⁸ (Code p. 96)

⁹ (Values, 237-239)

¹⁰ (Code 101).

Others Fairly, Repentance and Forgiveness, Envy, Hatred and Revenge, Criticism and Fair Speech. Tonight we are looking into disrupted relationships and at the core of those are often what he covers in his chapters on Anger and Conflict Resolution.

Anger is a natural emotion, which we all experience. Yet it comes from the more primitive part of the brain and can often lead us astray when we respond to it in unhealthy and harmful ways. Telushkin writes that ¹¹, “Uncontrolled anger can be one of the most destructive of emotions.” When God rejects Cain’s offering while accepting that of his brother Abel, Cain murders Abel in a fit of anger. Telushkin reminds us of a rabbinic teaching that when a person becomes rageful God becomes no consequence to him.” (Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 22b.) It’s also a rabbinic saying that “When angry a wise man’s wisdom deserts him.” ¹² Because Moses acted hurtfully out of anger he was not permitted to enter the Promised Land. The people were clamoring for water and God told him to speak to the rock and draw water from it. Instead he got mad at the people for their impatience and lack of faith and in anger struck the rock twice with his rod. The rabbis differ as to what upset Moses. His sister Miriam had just died and he perhaps was angry because they were not mourning and treating her with respect. He had done so much for the people and perhaps he was angry that they were ungrateful. How many times do we lose our tempers when others seem to trample on our feelings or express ingratitude?” As it was for Moses, the consequences can be devastating.

This is particularly true when it comes to relationships between spouses or significant others. Anger expressed in a hurtful way can over time undermine and corrode a relationship.¹³ “The Bible depicts Both King David and his wife Michal as temperamental and verbally harsh.¹⁴ When Michal sees David dancing before the Ark in a manner she considers undignified, she rebukes him sarcastically, ‘Didn’t the king of Israel do himself honor today, exposing himself in the sight of...his subjects just like one of the riffraff ?’ Stung, David lashes out at her: “It was before the Lord who chose me instead of your father and all his family and appointed me ruler over the Lord’s people Israel (that I danced).” David’s barbed response came only a short time after Michal’s father and three of her brothers had been killed in battle against the Philistines. The next verse records that Michal was childless. It seems likely that after such an exchange, David and Michal were never intimate again. The Bible’s point is as clear today as it was in 1000BCE. How many times do we in anger strike out at a spouse, a sibling, a friend and hit bellow the belt? If a spouse’s or two siblings or friends don’t hold their tongues when they are upset (and hit bellow the belt in anger) their love is unlikely to survive no matter how deeply they care for one another.”

¹¹ (248 Code)

¹² (253 Code, Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 66b)

¹³ (p. 251 holy)

¹⁴ (II Samuel Chapter 6:16-23)

Telushkin reminds us that we are capable of controlling anger.¹⁵ He suggests that if someone were to offer us two million dollars to reduce our outbursts over the next six months by 75%, most of us would find a way. The first step he tells us is to admit that God has given us free will and we should fully acknowledge that we are able to control our temper and not be controlled by it. He suggests that we try to pinpoint when it is that we most likely get angry and over what issue and creatively work it out.

Another technique Rabbi Telushkin suggests is to try to see things in perspective.¹⁶ “Rabbi Abraham Twerski notes that Rabbi Israel Salanter used to say that ‘people are frequently provoked to anger by items of relatively little importance, but which at that precise moment, appear to be significant. If one observes an infant, one will note that if someone takes a brightly colored wooden block away from him, he may become very angry and cry. Obviously the deprivation of the block of wood is meaningless to a mature mind, but to the juvenile mind, it means a great deal. So do we, even as mature adults sometimes perceive trivia as being of great importance and react accordingly with anger.’ Rabbi Salanter pointed out that if a person were engaged in a major transaction where he stood to profit greatly, he would ignore irritating trivia. The overriding goal would obscure the minor irritations.” Can you stop at times of rising anger and remember how precious a relationship is to you? Since our relationships are so precious, putting annoyances in perspective and not allowing them to ruin an important relationship is a way to deal with our anger.

Anger is a natural emotion and we are bound to feel it. We need to use constructive conflict resolution and fighting fairly to keep it from ruining relationships. “When angry we often attack the character and or personality of the individual who has infuriated us in unfair ways. This was the case with David and Michal. Many of us use words like ‘always’ (‘You always mess up everything you touch.’) and ‘never’ (‘You never care about anyone except yourself’).¹⁷ Such verbal assaults demoralize the person to whom they are addressed and make it impossible for her to acknowledge a fault without simultaneously confessing to being an utter incompetent. (“Yes, it’s true, I always ruin everything) or totally self-centered (“Yes you’re correct, I am totally selfish I only think of what’s good for me”)

Continues Telushkin, (“A guideline I have found very useful in trying to control my temper-and my tongue - Restrict the expression of your anger to the incident that provoked it. Be as critical and annoyed as you like but as long as your words remain focused on the incident that caused you to become angry, you are unlikely to say anything permanently damaging. But words like “always” and “never,” or the tendency to summon up every action the other person has every

¹⁵ (P.262-263 Code)

¹⁶ (Code 265)

¹⁷ (Values 33-34)

done that has hurt and enraged you leads people to make comments that are difficult to forgive and impossible to forget.”¹⁸

We have explored living with gratitude and ways to maintain relationships with family and friends in the face of inevitable anger. The third target mentioned by Seligman for finding happiness is that of meaning, of using personal strengths to serve some larger end. Telushkin takes the title of his book from chapter 19 in the Book of Leviticus that says, you shall be holy as I the Adonai your God am holy. He reviews a famous Midrash in which God is portrayed as clothing the naked in making clothes for Adam and Eve, visiting the sick when God visits Abraham after his circumcision, and burying the dead, when God buries Moses on Mt. Nebo.¹⁹ We find happiness when we use the Divine spark within us to imitate God by performing Mitzvot, good deed and worthwhile deeds that improve the life of the planet, nature, society, our community and friends and family. It turns out that everyday holiness in tikkun olam and mitzvahs is according to extensive research, one of the three main sources of happiness in life. Being God’s partner in bettering the world does give us a “helper’s high.”

One of the most important new books to explore the value of ethical living and helping others is ‘The Language of God by Francis S. Collins.’ Dr. Collins is one of the nation’s leading geneticists and the long time head of the Human Genome Project. (His book is subtitled, “A scientist presents evidence for belief.” (In it he writes about the value of religion and believe while affirming the science of Charles Darwin.) He describes how he went to the village of Eku in the delta of the Niger River on the Western coastline of Africa to volunteer in a primitive hospital serving a village with rampant tuberculosis. Without any of the modern drugs and medical machinery available in the modern hospitals where he practiced, Dr. Collins came upon a man from whose sac surrounding the heart it was necessary to insert a needle, without benefit of ultrasound or anesthesia. Dr. Collins began to fret about the small amount of aid one person could offer to a population in which tuberculosis was so prevalent and medical assistance so limited. The day after the procedure, Dr. Collins approached the patient’s bedside where the man was reading his Bible. Collins writes, “But then this young Nigerian farmer just about as different from me in culture, experience and ancestry as any two humans could be spoke the words that will forever be emblazoned in my mind: ‘I get the sense you are wondering why you came here,’ he said. ‘I have an answer for you. You came here for one reason. You came here for me.’²⁰ I was stunned. Stunned that he could see so clearly into my heart, but even more stunned at the words he was speaking. (I had plunged a needle close to his heart; he had directly impaled mine...) He was right. We are each called to reach out to others. On rare occasions that can happen on a grand scale. But most of the time it happens in simple acts of kindness of one person to another. Those are the events that really matter. The tears of relief that blurred

¹⁸ (Values p.34)

¹⁹ (Code p20)

²⁰ (216-217 Collins)

my vision as I digested his words stemmed from indescribable reassurance - reassurance that there in that strange place for just that one moment, I was in harmony with God's will, bonded together with this young man in a most unlikely but marvelous way."

Collins continues, "...but the simple act of trying to help just one person, in a desperate situation where my skills were poorly matched to the challenge, turned out to represent the most meaningful of all human experiences. A burden lifted. This was true north. And the compass pointed not at self-glorification, or at materialism, or even medical science—instead it pointed at the goodness that we all hope desperately to find within ourselves, and others. I also saw more clearly than ever before the author that goodness and truth, the real True North, God himself revealing His holy nature by the way in which He has written this desire to seek goodness in all of our hearts."²¹

In our own congregation people do find meaning and worth and God's presence in performing various mitzvot. Congratulate yourselves. We are celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the Mazon program to feed the homeless at the River Street Shelter. I have also seen the sense of meaning and purpose when others have sponsored an Oneg Shabbat in memory of a loved one. You can see the fulfillment on their faces, the sense of goodness of honoring the memory of a loved one on a yahrtzeit as a holy act. Often I see it in the mitzvot performed by the volunteers of the caring committee. Recently a member of the Temple, a young grandparent, died suddenly and unexpectedly. The family drew strength and courage in the observance of Shiva services at home in the evening. Those who responded to the email sent out by the Rabbis and helped make up the minyan drew sacred satisfaction from helping the family in their time of grief. One of the volunteers beautifully said after the service to the widow, "We are honored that you have included us so that we can provide comfort in your mourning. It is an honor to serve." One of the volunteers who came for a Minyan turned out to have gone to the same synagogue as the deceased in Flushing, New York, where he had become Bar Mitzvah and she Bat Mitzvah. And she had gone to the same summer camps as the grieving widow. As Collins wrote about his experience, who knows if God did not send her just for that comfort provided by such a surprising meaningful connection. Collins and Telushkin teach us what research also confirms, investing ourselves generously in mitzvot, actualizing the holiness in our lives, greatly adds to our feeling of happiness in our lives.

Tonight we confess the al chet, for missing the mark, for missing the target. Our tradition as Joseph Telushkin teaches has much wisdom about hitting the target of human happiness. It is achieved by Judaism's everyday path of holiness. Happiness after the basics does not correlate with wealth or prestige. It comes from three main sources. Living with a sense of gratitude on a daily basis. Maintaining quality relationships with our family and friends and colleagues at work. Finding meaning in life by giving of ourselves in ways that help others in their lives. I hope you will utilize the prayers of Judaism daily upon waking and

²¹ (Collins 217-218)

before eating and weekly at Shabbat worship to enhance your sense of gratitude. I hope you will see others with appreciation and act towards them with gratitude. I hope you will strengthen loving relationships in your lives by working to reduce the corrosive expressions of anger. I hope you'll give the natural feelings of anger their proper channeling into expressing them constructively and fighting fairly so that you don't end up like Moses or King David and Michal. I hope that you will volunteer around the Temple more this next year and feel the sense of goodness that comes from giving of yourselves.

Tonight is an eternal light special. You can put any of them in your cart and be well on your way to greater happiness in the New Year. I hope you have a Shana Tova, a happy new year.

Sources

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