

Anyone who has looked over the English side of their prayer book is likely to tell me that they have been the victim of a “bait and switch.” I have wished you a Happy New Year, so have your friends, that is what you came here today to pray for. But the prayers that we say today often don’t even mention the things we associate with a Happy New Year - health, wealth, happiness. The truth is I defy you to find the word happy in this book. Sure there is an occasional reference to health, an odd prayer for *parnasa tova* - successful business, and there is a few references to being inscribed in the Book of Life. Turn to almost any page and you will find one Melech, the acceptance of God as King. You may have come here to pray for happiness, but it was God as King that you found.

Pondering this bait and switch, I think about the places where we go to find happiness: My personal but fickle favorite, the refrigerator, Sometimes I will open it again and again, thinking that some new happiness will magically appear, alas it does not. We go to lots of other places to find happiness, Starbucks, and Artigiano, Ikea and Pottery Barn, Holt Renfrew, Lu Lu Lemon, some of us go to Stanley Park, the endowment lands or even Tofino in search of Happiness. And if the research is correct, nearly 70% of us go to the lottery; does not the lottery represent the ultimate in happiness, the great fantasy of having all that you might wish for.

The truth is that all of the above might contribute to happiness, but none of them can actually bring us to that ever coveted place of simply being happy. Blissful late night visits to the temple of the refrigerator are inevitably followed by mornings of bulging remorse. Starbucks and Artigiano offer momentary highs followed by low sugar moments in the afternoon. The luster of Ikea and Pottery barn fades after looking over your new wares for the 50th time. Stanley Park, Tofino and the endowment lands seem to offer little more hope, but do require a commitment to visit. The greatest false fantasy, and false happiness in the world is actually winning the lottery. Bankrate.com recently published a story of 8 lottery winners who lost their millions, some are in jail some are on food stamps. The misfortune of those who win the lottery has become not an urban legend, but an urban truth. And yet 70% of us still play.

So if we can’t go to our refrigerators for happiness and we can’t find it at Holt Renfrew, or Lulu Lemon then where? (I can hear you thinking - *Come on, Rabbi you cannot possibly tell me that you are going to find it in the pews. Listening to prayers in ancient Hebrew, you are not seriously going to argue that in a book that cannot even bring itself to mention the word happy, that I will find the zone.*)”

Several weeks ago I was intrigued by media frenzy about the most popular course at Harvard University. It draws 1400 students a semester and nearly 20% of Harvard’s undergraduates take the class. The name of the class is Positive Psychology and it is taught by Tal Ben Shachar a former Israeli national squash champion. Positive Psychology is a relatively new field and it is essentially a mix of traditional psychology and self help. Instead of focusing on the potential illnesses, depression, borderline, anxiety disorders etc., positive psychologists ask how the healthy mind can function at

its peak. Self help books may offer good advice or they may not. There is often little research and no testing of the advice and counsel that they provide.

Positive Psychology changes that and demands rigorous research and testing to substantiate its findings. If 20% of the undergraduates are taking this course year after year, more than are taking freshman chemistry or biology, or even economics, there must be something in this course on positive psychology worth finding out.

Tal Ben Shachar wrote a book, one which extracts from the basis of his course. It is called *Happier*. But what makes a former Israeli national squash champion qualified to write such a book? Well, by his own admission, it was an unhappy disposition. He recalls the story of training and turning everything he could toward winning this championship. He told himself if only I win this championship I will be happy. When he won he was elated for a few hours, but by the time his head hit the pillow he was wondering why the feeling of happiness had not lasted with him.

This is a story which I imagine is familiar to a lot of us. If I just get accepted to this college or that medical school, I will be happy, or if I just get that job or finish this house. Once I get this project done I will be happy. But then on the other side of “If I just... is the realization of that goal and the happiness is only temporary.

What really qualifies Ben Shachar to write such a book are degrees in philosophy and psychology and the research that went into the book. I will tell you what I found most profound in the book. A person cannot find happiness, if he or she does not find meaning in his or her actions, activities, work possessions and yes pleasures. This essentially means that we have to separate between our pleasures and our happiness. A late night trip to the fridge, a good movie, retail therapy or a double latte might bring us pleasure but it will not bring us happiness if it is not connected to a higher purpose, to a goal that is intrinsically meaningful. Starbucks sells pleasure, not happiness.

And it turns out that meaning is not enough. That meaning must be something that we believe in strongly and it must challenge us to climb, to make more of ourselves, to be in a constant and blissful struggle to improve both ourselves and our world. There is a story they tell about two Chaddidic rabbinical students who were studying together in Yeshiva between the world wars when Jews were poor and hungry. One somehow received a salami, a treasure beyond imagination. His friend said to him it is too much to ask for a slice, but would you allow me to put my knife into it and lick off the fat. The student in possession of the salami said no. Rumor has it that every erev Yom Kippur thereafter he called his friend, the one who, literally, did not get a lick, to ask his forgiveness for having denied him what he asked.

The story is a fascinating one about continuing to ask for forgiveness, but I ask you do you think that as he ate the Salami he found happiness there? He may have derived some pleasure from that salami, but I cannot imagine that he derived any happiness. How can one be happy when in full knowledge that he/she is denying another? Even pleasure is quickly displaced when we realize that we deny another. We cannot find happiness

without also finding meaning. The relationship between meaning and happiness is woven into the fabric of our Mitzvot. Take for example an obscure mitzvah, Tevilat Kelim, the dipping of new dishes in the mikveh. Even perfectly new, perfectly clean, perfectly devoid of pork, lobster, or any other non-kosher substance dishes must go into the mikveh. Why are the dishes impure, no? So what are they doing going swimming in the Mikveh.

The answer is Kedushat Yisrael. The dishes go to the mikveh to get a purpose. There is a special sanctity that all dishes need when they become yours. They do not require this sanctity when they belong to another, not when they are never going to see the table or a guest. The mitzvah teaches us that dishes have a purpose. The vehicles that carry the gourmet food and the cappuccinos have to be about more than satisfying one's own pallet and one's own sense of style. They have a mission, a purpose. What is that purpose? It is creation of family and community, and of welcoming a guest and saying I love you to a child. They will distinguish the Shabbat and remind us of what is ethical to eat and what is not.

There are occasions, many occasions, when I am preparing for a funeral and as I am asking for a list of memories and stories I am getting a menu instead. My mother used make, blintzes, kufalahs, rugelach, blueberry cake, honey cake, chicken soup, her own gefilte fish, and the list goes on. And the family digresses into a culinary portrait. Is that foolish, are we so ridiculous that all we can think of is food? God forbid. The torah did not miss what Emil Legasse loves to say all the time, food of love.

That is exactly what it is. There is a special affection, a connection and a true statement of *I love you* that comes when your children or for that matter when anyone else eats your food. What are the meals that you most remember? I can tell you mine are the Shabbat, Yom Tov and Seder meals that I have shared with my family and community. I can tell you now that they are moments when I felt in the zone, truly happy and they are also the moments where I felt most that I grew up, began to think and inherit an important set of values. Rav Soloveitchik, teaches that accepting God as King on Rosh Hashanah has a corollary and that is that each and everyone of us has a mission that we have to accept. The more faithful we are to accomplishing that mission, the happier we will be. The Talmud in Niddah, teaches that when each of us is born, just before our entrance into the world, the angel taps us above the lips creating that indentation. At the same time the angel forces us to swear, "You shall be righteous and not wicked. Even if the entire world tells you that you are righteous, you should still see yourself as one who needs improvement. You should know that God is pure and the soul that He has placed in you is pure. If you guard its purity, all will be well for you; if you do not guard its purity, God will recall your soul."

Rabbi Solovietchik stresses that the purity spoken of here is our individual missions, our commitment to the principles of the Torah and more. It is also that special contribution that only we can make. There is an inner resonance between our soul and our mission. When we are on track, when we achieve meaning and fulfill our mission, we are happy.

One of the examples that Ben Shachar brings is from a philosopher named Robert Nozick. He posed the following scenario. Suppose there was a machine, a set of electrodes that could stimulate your brain in such a way as you could feel pleasure and pleasurable emotions, and it could even be done in a way that you are not aware at the time that you are connected to the machine. Most people rejected the opportunity to derive pleasure from the machine, because the pleasures that they derived were unattractive without meaning.

You can decorate a beautiful room, but if your house is not a place to gather family community, if you refuse to host the parlor meeting for the charity or open to a guest, then how much happiness will you get from it.

Ben Shachar's course and book are powerful because he penetrates beyond theory into practice. He notes that athletes training for a competition often have rituals - when they get up, what they eat, the order in which they exercise. Happiness is no different. The use of rituals can be critical. I never thought of the Shema that way until now, but upon reflection, I see it. The prayer that we say every morning and evening. That I will serve God with all my heart and all my soul and all of my possessions. Is this not a ritual that keeps me focused on what is truly meaningful in my life? That ensures that I direct my collection of possessions to helping others. The hustle and panicked pace of everyday life so often distracts us from those things that are truly important the things that can bring us the most happiness. Is not Shema the perfect time to remember those values that the Torah lays out for us? Is it not a fantastic time to remember how to use our energy and resources? Another suggestion Ben Shachar tells us is clinically proven to make people happier is to take time at the end of everyday and recall those things for which you are thankful. How many of us end the day with a list of complaints and people who have been full of Chutzpah, or let us down or who need an attitude adjustment. Turns out that if you want to be happy you need to list the things that you are thankful for.

Here there is another prayer. The Shemonei Esre, most specifically the second to last blessing in which we tell God how thankful we are for our lives and the blessings he has given us. This prayer, actually forces us to stop complaining and look around and to give thanks.

So it is true that the machzor does not ask us to pray for the delivery of a magically happy New Year. But it's not a bait and switch. Because no matter how much plenty God showers down on us, no matter how good our investment returns, no matter how delicious the food we taste our year will not be happy unless we find meaning and we are faithful to it.

So on this day, Rosh Hashanah, when we over and over again, declare God is King - it is not so much about God, as about us. It's about accepting the true meaning that was gifted to us in the Torah. It is about recognizing that spark of the Divine that was breathed in to all humanity on this day and that must be nurtured and attended to by constantly looking for that meaning. It is about accepting our mission.

Let me tell you a story. The Chafetz Chaim, an important Rabbinic figure who lived at the beginning of the last century was known for, more than anything else, his kindness and his refusal to speak ill of another, his refusal to speak lashon hara. The story goes that one of the students in his Yeshiva had one to many shots of vodka on Purim, a practice which I oppose. Nevertheless, the young man in his stupor said to the great sage – “Rebbe, save me a place next to you, in heaven. Again he jeered, Rebbe, save me a place next to you in Olam Haba.” After the third such jeer, the Rabbi replied, “I will save a place for you next to me, you only have to promise me one thing, you will never gossip about another again, you will forswear Lashon Hara.” Quickly in a rush of adrenaline, the young man became, both sober and silent. Seconds turned to minutes, that went on for nearly half an hour. At which point the Chafetz Chayim announced, “behold a man who stands on the threshold of Paradise and refuses to step in.”

I am convinced of the relationship between meaning and happiness as I am of the laws of Gravity. I urge you not to tarry on the threshold of happiness. Embrace meaning, and embrace it bekol levavicha, bekol nafshecha, uvekol modecha. With your entire heart, your entire soul, and with everything that you own. And then you will merit a happy new year.