

YK AM 5772

You walk down a busy sidewalk, crowded with pedestrians. You carry a clipboard, so no one thinks it odd when you ask for a moment of their time. You introduce yourself as a pollster, and ask your respondents to tell you, in one word, what in the world it is that they most want.

We can imagine the responses. (Those who are Jets fans would no doubt respond, “nothing, there is no hope.”) The idealists say, “peace.” The avaricious say, “wealth.” Those who are lonely respond, “love.” Those who are ill respond, “health.”

But I suspect that if we gave people time to think, and consider their answer carefully, and look for one word that sums up everything they hope for and wish for, all would arrive at the following answer: “happiness. I want to be happy.”

I want to be happy. Don't you?

The American Heritage dictionary defines, happy: “characterized by good luck. Fortunate. Showing pleasure, satisfaction, or joy.” Seems a bit shallow.

There is a line from Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* that has stuck in my head for nearly forty years. The narrator sees a billboard he likes: “It is hard to be unhappy when you are eating Craig's Ice Cream.” Can't argue with that...though it is a bit transitory. When the ice cream is gone, it's gone.

This afternoon we read the story of Jonah. And we read about another kind of happiness. After all the drama of God telling Jonah where to go, and Jonah fleeing from God, and God sending a storm to capsize Jonah's ship, and Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish, and Jonah finally, finally, making his way to Nineveh...he prophesies to the residents, and then goes outside the city and sits in a huff and waits. In the hot, hot sun.

And then we read that God sends a plant to give Jonah shade, and Jonah is “happy” because of the shade.

Only a handful of times in the entire Tanakh do we read that someone was “happy.” And one of those because a plant gave someone shade?

We all want to be happy. At some level, we feel that we *should* be happy...that we *deserve* to be happy. That if we pay our bills and live within our means and are kind to animals and help old ladies across the street and give generously to our synagogue...in other words if we do what we are *supposed* to do....then happiness will come our way.

Except none of us is that naïve. We know better. We know too many stories. The family whose life savings disappear in a Ponzi scheme. The child struck with a horrific disease. Indeed, we still live in the shadow of the Shoah, and it is a legitimate question to

ask how in this age we can even speak of happiness as anything other than a wondrous privilege.

The Indo European family covers virtually all the world's languages except Arabic, Hebrew, and the Oriental languages. And in all of them, the root of the word "happiness" is the same as the word "luck." Historically, for much of the world, to be "happy" meant to be "lucky."

As one historian writes, "happiness was in the hands of the gods, dictated by Fate or Fortune, controlled by the stars, not something that you or I could really count upon or make for ourselves." In other words, happiness was something that happened to us. It was largely out of our hands.

This is most disturbing...until we remember one thing. The world of long ago was a different place. Until relatively recently, a large majority of humanity lived in poverty. To sustain oneself and one's family was a genuine challenge. Despotic sorts of governments – if we can call them governments – terrorized their own populations and indentured servitude and slavery were common. The world was a brutal and brutish place.

Happiness was simply not part of the equation...and those who found it certainly must have felt as if fortune had smiled upon them. Thankfully, we really don't share the concerns of our forebears....yet, strangely, happiness seems equally elusive.

A couple of days ago I went to amazon.com. I clicked on Advanced Search and filled out just one space, for a keyword, I typed in "happiness." A few seconds later I had 21,380 results. Here are the first few titles:

*Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill*  
*The Happiness Trip: How to Stop Struggling and Start Living*  
*Stumbling on Happiness*  
*The Happiness Advantage*  
*The Art of Happiness*

Do we sense a pattern?

In his classic 1957 work *The Hidden Persuaders*, Vance Packard explained the forces that convinced consumers to purchase goods they do not necessarily need or even want. Today these same forces, even more intensely, try to convince us that everyone else is happier than we are, and if we want to be happy as well, we too must buy a particular good or go on a particular vacation or live in a particular house or look a particular way...and the happiness just follows.

None of us really believe that, but it still affects us. We're only human. But what affects us even more, is a feeling that, at times, I think we all have. At least once in a while,

don't you wonder, why does it seem like so many people are happier than I am...what am I doing wrong.

I am not talking about situations that create genuine, real concern; the loss of a job, illness, specific personal challenges. I mean, even when things are going okay...don't we all sometimes think, shouldn't I be happier?

When we Jews have a question, especially during these *yamim nora'em*, these holy days, we look to the Torah. We unroll the scrolls, and discover something quite surprising. The word "happiness" – in any form – appears just 14 times in the entire Torah. And when we look at the entire Biblical canon, it's not that much more. And when we look at each of those fourteen instances, we note that all have one of three things in common.

1. In the book of Exodus, we read that God speaks to Moses for the first time, from the burning bush. He introduces himself to Moses, tells Moses who he, Moses, really is, and charges Moses with freeing the Israelites from Egypt.

Moses is scared. He has a speech impediment and he does not know how he will speak effectively to the masses. "Not to worry," says God. Aaron, your brother, will speak on your behalf, and even now he is heading toward you, and he will be happy when he says you."

Aaron will be happy when he sees Moses. Moses his brother, his long lost brother. Aaron loves Moses, and has missed him. To be with those we love, makes us happy.

2. We turn back to this afternoon's Haftorah, and to Jonah. God causes a plant to grow up and to provide shade for Jonah. Jonah is now happy. But why, exactly, is Jonah then happy? Is it really the plant? Even in a desert, can shade make someone happy?

Maybe Jonah was relieved, or grateful, or certainly more comfortable. But, "happy?" I don't buy it. Jonah was not happy because of the shade...but because of the one who provided it. God provided Jonah with the shade because God cared about Jonah. God cared. And Jonah knew that God cared because of what God did.

When someone does something – not because it is a responsibility or an obligation, not because they are told to – but when someone, simply because they want to, does something that makes us know they care. That makes us happy.

3. All of which is well and good. But the third Biblical usage of the root for happiness, is a little more complicated, and is also the usage found far more than any other.

On the holiday of Sukkot – You shall be happy before the Lord your God  
Upon entering the Promised Land – You shall be happy before the Lord your God  
When you establish your new settlements – You shall be happy before the Lord your God

The message is clear: we are happiest, when we do what God wants us to do.

God came to Abraham and said, “Abraham. Let us establish a covenant. You will be my people and I will be your God.” Abraham agreed. And he and his descendants were blessed with land, with food and water in the desert when times were hard, with victory over enemies who sought to vanquish them. It was a good arrangement. Given the challenges of the ancient world, we can easily see how doing God’s bidding would make our ancestors happy.

But we live in a different world. Times are different. We are different. How can such an antiquated and simplistic notion apply to us? To find happiness in being with those we love...goes without saying. To feel happy when someone shows us they care...to be sure. But just because we follow God’s word? We may think ourselves, committed, devout, even be pious. But happy?

Scientists study happiness. (That’s gotta be a neat business card.) And recent research shows something interesting...ancient notions of happiness are surprisingly valid. As one researcher sums it up, “there are solid connections between hope and happiness. And between gratitude and forgiving, and happiness. And between altruism and happiness.” This is not psycho babble. These are conclusions from serious scientists.

And when we do what God wants us to do...we are happy. But...what is it that God wants us to do? Even to ask the question seems...a bit odd. Except it’s not. It is the most important Jewish question there is. If we believe that being Jewish means something, we have to look back to our roots to learn just what that something is. Or put another way, what is that God wants of us?

Three thousand years ago King David answered, “love peace, and pursue it.” Three hundred years later the prophet Micah answered, “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your god.” And just a scant five centuries later Rabbi Hillel answered, “do not do unto others that which is hateful to you.”

God wants us to revel, to be happy, in the gifts we are fortunate enough to enjoy. But as these three giants of our tradition make clear, we are commanded make life good for those around us. It is not optional. But it will make us happy.

David Brook’s column in last Sunday’s New York Times quoted City University philosopher Jesse Prinz, who by coincidence is the son and grandson of former occupants of this pulpit. Prinz says, “empathy is not a major player when it comes to moral motivation.” In other words, it makes people feel good...but it doesn’t get anything done. Prinz goes on, “empathy often leads people astray...it influences people to care more about cute victims than ugly victims...it leads us to react to shocking incidents like a hurricane, but not longstanding conditions, like global hunger or preventable diseases.”

When we react to that which most touches us, which most moves us...we may not be acting on behalf of that which must needs our attention. Our tradition demands that we

help where help is needed, irrespective of the glamour, or lack thereof, associated with the cause.

I call that, doing what God wants us to do.

Science and Judaism agree. If we want to be happy, a key component is to help those less fortunate than ourselves. To work on their behalf. Indeed, happiness requires work. For if it did not, would we not all be happy all the time?

A synagogue is a holy place, and part of it being a holy place is for it to be a place where Jews do what Jews are supposed to do. And so in the year ahead, through our social action committee, we will expand our offerings to give all a chance to expand their own happiness.

This morning I specifically mention three such offerings.

1. After months of searching for a new home, the Community Soup Kitchen that we and other houses of worship sponsor, will resume operation again, this time in the Salem Seventh Day Adventist Church in East Orange. Those who have helped out know, our clients are the chronically poor and needy, those who especially suffer in these complicated times. With dignity and compassion, we provide food for many who would otherwise go without.
2. Through the good offices of the Jewish Vocational Service, in a few weeks time we will host a family of Sudanese refugees from Darfur. They flee genocide, so who can therefore understand them better? We will help with furnishings and clothing, and especially with all the little parts about assimilating into a new country. No doubt there will be opportunities for many of us to provide all sorts of meaningful help.
3. Last spring, the graduation speaker at Montclair High School caught my attention. I introduced myself after the ceremony, and over the summer Claudia Minde, who works with our high school students, and I visited his Newark office. His name is Carlos Lejniaks...which is what happens when a woman from Ecuador marries a man from Latvia. Carlos is the head of Big Brothers/Big Sisters in this part of New Jersey.

We are probably vaguely aware of how the program works. Individuals become a “big brother” or “big sister” to an at risk school age child...one who may lack a strong parental presence or gotten into trouble at school. Virtually all are from households below the poverty line. Training is provided and the big brother or sister is to be just that, an older, secure presence who cares about the “little” brother or sister, and whose caring is felt. A constant in a young life without many constants.

Big Brothers/Big Sisters has been around for a while and decades of research have shown that, compared to a control population, program participants have increased school attendance and get better grades. They have greater self esteem and self confidence, have

lower pregnancy rates, and are less likely to get involved with the Juvenile Justice System.

It sounds lovely. And it is lovely. And here is the amazing part. Big Brothers/Big Sisters asks for a commitment of four hours a month. Four hours a month. Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Essex, Union and Hudson serves 1,000 youngsters...and Carlos believes that is less than 2% of the number of children whom his agency could benefit. Four hours a month. Some of us watch more television in a single evening.

There are brochures in the lobby...and you will be hearing more about this.

And one more thing. My parents had four children. After 54 years of it, I am tired of being the youngest. I am going to become a Big Brother. Perhaps you, too?

The Torah teaches. Science confirms. Happiness comes when we achieve a sense of value. When we attain a sense of self worth. When we believe that our very presence causes the world to be a better place than it otherwise would. When our actions specifically make the life of another better.

If that is what it takes to achieve happiness, why isn't that something we all just naturally do? Because it is not easy. Because like anything worthwhile it requires effort, and time, and energy. God does not command us to do things we would do anyway. God commands us to do things that are hard, that we may not recognize will bring us joy.

Saturday night of every Thanksgiving weekend, we take 100 teenagers into Newark to distribute a full truckload collected goods among the homeless and the poor. We bring hundreds of pounds of food with us. The teens spend a couple of hours working with the scores who come to find clothing and food and toiletries and other life necessities.

Afterward, we go to the old Temple B'nai Abraham and make Havdallah. It is well into the night by now. The kids talk. They talk about what they have seen, what they have experienced. Their eyes are newly opened.

I tell them, our children, that they have won the lottery. By an accident of birth, they are were born into the live they have, those on the streets are where they are. Lotteries have winners, and they also have losers. Being a winner is better; but being a winner has responsibilities.

Psalm 100 begins, *ivdu et adonai b'simcha*, serve the Lord in happiness. The word happiness, *simcha*, ends the phrase. The point is not that happiness is what we bring to God. Rather, when we serve Him, we serve one another, and by so doing, happiness becomes ours.

Shanna tova.