

Yom Kippur (Yizkor) 5767
Happiness: Finding it, Generating it,
Keeping it, Recalling it
Rabbi Jay M. Stein

Every couple of months it happens so let me finally come clean. Something funny will happen on the bimah that goes completely unnoticed by the congregation but the Cantor and I see it and as a result we giggle a little. Depending on whether or not we look over at each other we might end up hysterical. Now I realize it may seem unprofessional and I realize that standing in front of the open ark is from the holiest moments and we ought to be completely focused on that moment but we loose it. Week after week we ascend this bimah and we try to create an inspirational experience for the hundreds of people who come to celebrate, to mourn, to seek and to find something special here. We don't mean to laugh but it just happens.

Let me tell you why this can happen. It is because we love what we do and there is joy in it. *Ivdu et Hasem b'simcha*, we serve God in celebration. Yes, there are times that are difficult and trying but in total we love what we do. So, if you see our shoulders moving up and down or if you see me raise my hand to wipe my forehead or all of a sudden you notice we have stopped singing while we are facing the ark it is probably because we are working really hard to stop laughing before we turn to face the congregation. Each time we think about something that has occurred we might even smile or have another chuckle. I can't imagine how difficult it would be to come to a place everyday where there is no happiness, where there is no joy, but it happens all the time. Thank God this is a place of delight, even at the times of sorrow there is light in this place and we must all find that enjoyment in life.

When I went to college, happy hour meant something completely different than it does today. Today, I long for one hour of peace and quiet. I search for a place where I can find some solitude and some contentment. I would like to come home and for just one hour hear no yelling, complaining, or arguing. That would be "happy hour."

Today, "Happy Hour" seems so much harder to come by. You and I both know that happiness isn't something brought on by some intoxicating beverage. In fact, I'm not sure it ever did. I am confident that if you are miserable, a drink is only going to make it worse. Happy hour ought to be about deciding when you are going to devote time to being happy. "*Yismach lev mivakshei adonai*, Those who seek God rejoice in their hearts." (I Chronicles 16:10)

However, you have to make that determination and decide when to put down the baggage. The Dubner Maggid tells the story of a traveler who is offered a ride. As he gets into the coach and sits down he refuses to take his satchel off his back. When the driver suggests to him to put his bags down on the floor, the journeyman says he doesn't want to take advantage of the hospitality of his host. He remarks, it is so kind of you to offer me a ride; you don't have to give a ride to my luggage as well. Don't you see how

silly that is? It doesn't matter whether you carry your baggage or not, it will still be there once you get off at your stop and you can pick it up again.

Today I say the same to you – you are the journeyman and I know how attached you are to the baggage of your life. So, for today's journey during the High Holiday season, I ask you to put down your baggage and just come along for the ride. I promise you that when we are done if you still want to pick up your baggage again, you can schlep it out of here. However, I bet you will be prepared to leave at least some of it behind - and I'll make you another promise. I will keep it safely guarded for you so that if you want it again you can come and claim it.

A few weeks ago I saw a movie that wasn't really all that profound. In fact, I don't think I can even tell you what the message was, but it was filled with one funny image after the next. For the next week, every time I thought of the movie I would smile, sometimes even chuckle a bit under my breath. I felt happy - and that is the first of three guiding principles about happiness.

1. *Happiness comes from recalling moments of joy.* If you want to find happiness, all you have to do is remember something happy. If you want joy in your life then you have to recall a time when you were happy. So you see, you don't have to do anything and you don't have to eat anything, you just have to remember.

We were sitting together as a family having dinner and one of the children began to tell a story about something funny that had happened to her that day. Even before she was able to begin the story she began to smile which, as she began retelling the story, the smile turned into a laugh. Even before we could figure out where the story was going I could see smiles on the faces of our other children. Even before anything amusing was said, the laughs began. You know the feeling watching someone laugh and you begin to feel that joy. Because of principle #2

2. *Happiness is contagious but you have to want to catch it.* Like a yawn, when others are doing it you can't help yourself. If you want happiness you have to surround yourself with happy people. If you want joy in your life then you have to find yourself in the company of others who are happy. You just have to get away from the people who are negative and encircle yourself with people who are positive.

Researchers at Loma Linda University in Southern California say they have found a physiological change that occurs when people laugh, and it lasts long after the laughter subsides. Laughter, according to the scientists, stimulates the production of beta-endorphins, also known as the body's own morphine, and human growth hormone, which helps tune up the immune system. The effects add up and remain long after the laughter is gone.

The third principle. ***Happiness has a lasting effect.*** You are hard wired to reap

the benefits of happiness for a long time. We may experience joy and then the feeling subsides but the remnants of that emotion remain. They provide you with the resources to be able to confront the difficult times. It is a system that you have to tap into. The holidays of the year and the celebrations of the life cycle prop us up. Live in the moment of happiness, dance at a wedding, sing at a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. You just have to live in the moment and the effects will last you a lifetime.

A man relates the following story to his friend:

I recently picked a new primary care physician. After two visits and exhaustive lab tests, he said I was doing "fairly well" for my age. A little concerned about that comment, I couldn't resist asking him, do you think I'll live to be 80?"

He asked, "Do you smoke tobacco or drink beer or wine?"

"Oh no," I replied. "I'm not doing drugs, either."

Then he asked, "Do you eat rib-eye steaks and barbecued ribs?"

I said, "No, my other Doctor said that all red meat is very unhealthy!"

"Do you spend a lot of time in the sun, like playing golf, sailing, hiking, or bicycling?"

"No, I don't," I said.

He asked, "Do you gamble, drive fast cars?"

No," I said. "I don't do any of those things."

He looked at me and said, "Then why do you care?"

The world we live in is difficult. The moments of pain are many but we are given the tools and resources to find happiness. The Talmud tells us that we must participate. God will hold us accountable for all the delicious foods we saw but did not taste. [TJ Kiddushin 4:12] We spend so much of life unhappy, anxiety ridden, angry, sad, but we must put that down and *Ivdo et ahsem bisimcha, bo'u lifanav birnana* – serve God with joy, come here with a song. There is so much to do in this world; our society is in desperate need of repair. *Ivdo et ahsem bisimcha, bo'u lifanav birnana* – serve God with joy, come here with a song. God doesn't want disgruntled employees. God wants people to come in joy. God wants us to experience delight.

I know it is not that easy. I realize there are issues of self-esteem, empathy, friendship, love, and achievement all weighing heavily on us. In fact, that is why Memorial Hall in Sanders Theater at Harvard University starts to fill up half an hour before Tal Benhahar's lecture on happiness begins. When Ben-Shahar teaches there, it is packed with students, young mothers with strollers and a few couples in their 60's.

Ben-Shahar is negotiating the publication of a revised and updated edition of the small book (112 pages) he published in 2002, "The Question of Happiness: On Finding Meaning, Pleasure and the Ultimate Currency." Indeed, the demand by 850 students to take the course compelled the university to allocate the largest hall on campus.

When asked," How do you explain the success of your course?"

Ben-Shahar responds, "People want to be happier ... According to one study, 45 percent of college students experienced depression once in the past year to a degree that did not allow them to function" (World Jewish Digest, July 2006, Posted On: 6/22/2006 **Happy Hour** by Haim Handwerker © 2006 *Ha'aretz*. Reprinted with permission.)

I do believe the same could probably be said about the people sitting in this room today. The problem is that our employers, employees, distributors, coworkers and colleagues do not really care. So I remind you:

Happiness comes from recalling moments of joy

Happiness is contagious

Happiness has a lasting effect

When asked if he would consider himself a happy person Tal Ben Shahar responds, "Today I am happy with my lot, but it is not the end of the road. I hope that in the next 10 years I will be happier. This doesn't mean that I don't have ups and downs. Fluctuation in feelings is part of the full life of every human being—mine too. It really is not unusual."

We all feel the ups and downs, the joy and the sadness, but on this day of scales we must recognize the critical place happiness must play in our lives and we must work towards tipping the scales in the direction of happiness.

Tal Ben-Shahar suggests happiness lies at the intersection between pleasure and meaning. Whether at work or at home, the goal is to engage in activities that are both personally significant and enjoyable. When this is not feasible, make sure you have happiness boosters— moments throughout the week that provide you with both pleasure and meaning. That can happen here. For many that come through our doors here weekly either to study or to pray, to do committee work or to just hang out, this place provides moments that are both personally significant and enjoyable.

In less than a week we will celebrate the holiday of Sukkot, called by our sages as *Z'man Simchateinu* the season of our joy. So I beg you, I implore you to come back. Don't let the entirety of your Jewish experience be the formality and the seriousness that is the marker of this day.

Reb Nachman of Breslov dying of tuberculosis suffering under the persecution of Napoleon taught: *□□Mitzvah gedolah liheeyote b'simcha tamid* - "it is a great mitzvah to always be at a *simcha*." There are times for being sad, but God wants you to be happy as well.

Let me conclude with one last story. It was the first week of Creation. All the newly formed animals were busy testing their abilities, flipping and hopping, running and whirling. However, there was one animal that was limping along watching in envy as his friends sped past him. Frustrated, he turned to God and cried, "God! Why did you make me the most pitiful of all your creatures?!"

God comforted the pained animal. "My creature, I will help you rise above all the other

creatures." All of a sudden two heavy appendages appeared on both sides of the animal. At first the creature was pleased, but when he tried to walk and run, he found that these appendages only weighed him down. He returned to God and complained, "These only make things worse!" God replied, "Silly bird, those are wings. Use them to *fly!*"

Sometimes our greatest obstacles can become our greatest sources of growth. It all depends on our perspective. There are times of sadness - and now begins one of them. However, when we are down, put that sorrow down and we will watch it for you. We will set aside time for sadness and you can come and claim it. Now is one of those times.

Even though we know happiness will tied us over until the world to come, we now arrive at a moment of sadness. A time when we recall those we love and who are no longer with us. We now recite the Yizkor prayers. Yizkor – memory, recollection is powerful and now we seek to tap into that force so that we can further add meaning to our lives.