

ROSH HASHANAH 5772
“On Happiness”

Shana Tova! It's such an honor to be standing on your bima once again, sharing with you in these Rosh Hashanah services. May this be a sweet year for all of us, and a peaceful year for our world...

[PAUSE]

“Yes but could you be happy?” Gabi asked.

We sat on the porch of our little yellow house on Fessenden St. in Washington DC. The cherry blossom tree in our front yard showered petals like pink snow onto the ground. Gabi had just been offered the job to serve here, on this bima, as your cantor. And I had just finished jumping up and down, extolling this incredible opportunity. And her first thought, her first concern, was not of her own success, but instead of me and my happiness.

“Yes but could you be happy?”

Six simple words with so much meaning packed in. Six simple words that came as the reminder that day who God had given me, and why I love her so much.

“Yes,” I said, “yes I can be happy. I will be happy! It'll be so much fun doing for the family what you've done for us the past three years.”

You see Gabi and I had made a deal before our engagement. Never two separate synagogues at the same time. It has since become a pillar of our partnership – along with never going to bed angry – that we believe defines our success as a family. A move to New York would mean me stepping away from the pulpit, taking a time-out in my career, and being a stay-at-home dad.

Could I be happy doing this? I told Gabi yes, but the truth was I didn't know. Forget the fact I, like many folks here, have ancestors and relatives who suffered from clinical depression. Answers to such questions are never simple. Forget the fact that, at the time, I really had no idea what a stay-at-home parent does. I think if someone had given me an entrance interview, I probably would have at some point said something like, “Wait, I'm going to do how many hours of laundry a day? But how is that possible? This isn't a Russian military barrack. This is a family of four. And two of us are tiny!”

No, the challenge was more existential, more personal, more emotional than the blissful ignorance I maintained toward the wonderful vocation that is stay-at-home parenthood. I didn't understand what happiness was. And I know I didn't understand it, because in so many ways the concept eludes me today.

What is happiness, after all? How do we know when we're truly happy? Is happiness something that can be achieved on a more permanent basis? Or is it ever-fleeting – its frequency ebbing and flowing each day and week, each month and year of our lives?

We even wonder what happiness looks like. Is it joy? Is it contentedness? Is it freedom? Is it a general attitude? Or, is it something that must be earned?

And what makes us happy? Do our families make us happy? Do our careers make us happy? Do we have to feel fulfilled in order to feel happy? Do we have to feel successful in order to feel happy? Do we have to have a certain sized house, or a certain amount of stuff to be happy? And what if we are struck with tragedy? Is it possible to be scarred beyond any ability to experience happiness? And if it is, does that mean happiness is and always will be, ultimately, selfish?

It's not hard to notice opportunities for happiness all around. We find joy in a beautiful day, in the embrace of a loved one, in the pursuit of a hobby or a career we love. We find joy in following a sports team, visiting a museum, going to a concert, reading a book. And we find joy in community, in our friendships, in the moments we get to help others, and in some ways in the moments we find ourselves helped by others.

But there are challenges as well – deep, important, historical challenges to happiness. All you need is five minutes a day on CNN – or any news channel for that matter. When was the last time happiness seemed so unobtainable? Between economic crisis and political dysfunction, war and drought and famine, disasters both natural and human, we understand all too well just how shaky the ground feels beneath our feet. Uncertainty never leaves much room for happiness.

Or at least common wisdom would tell us that. But something interesting has been happening the past number of years in an annual Gallup poll which assesses and ranks the happiness of every country in the world. They base their ranking on citizen satisfaction in the quality of healthcare available to them, opportunities for work, opportunities for social advancement, educational opportunities, social freedom, cultural richness, and the level of violence a society experiences.

Israel always rates high on the violence scale. Here the level of violence doesn't just mean a society's crime rate. The fact the Israel has fought in so many wars, that just about everyone joins the army, that if you're Israeli, you've slept many nights in a bomb shelter, and you've definitely lived through wars, all these things rates Israel among the highest in violence. Yet, despite that, and here's what I found so interesting in that Gallup poll, both last year and this year Israel ranked in the top ten happiest countries. Higher than us!

How can that be? Is this the same Israel that sat so isolated at the UN this past week? Is this the same Israel that seems to be either losing allies or exchanging enemies for worse enemies everywhere you look in the Middle East? Is this the same Israel that deals with a

government that approaches every issue with hyper-intensity and is often dysfunctional? How can they be happier than us?

Some of it is economical. While we've watched most of our industries decline, Israel has experienced a real boom in industries like technology. And even the protests that have brought hundreds of thousands of Israelis on the streets have been more about, "No, look, we've got something good here, let's not ruin it with bad policy" than anything else. They feel passionate enough about it to rise up in unbelievable numbers. Yet, that same summer, this past summer, they rank ninth in world happiness.

Ninth.

Gallup attributes the high score to general Israeli satisfaction with their healthcare system, their freedom of expression, their opportunities for rest, and other things like their access to goods. But many Israelis have said that there's something else, something unique about Israel that lifts the feeling of happiness in her citizens.

It's a community, they explain. Israel is not just a nation, it's an experience. And everyone who lives in Israel needs people to experience it with. Whether it's your family, or the friends you make in the army, in school, at work, on kibbutz, through other friends, these people live the intensity of Israel with you, they experience it with you.

Galvanized by common threats, Israeli society makes itself happy through the opportunities it creates, and the connections with others it values.

There's so much for us to learn there.

Our American forefathers thought happiness was important enough to put it in the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident," Thomas Jefferson wrote, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Our forefathers were certainly guilty of limiting who had these rights, but the idea of happiness here isn't just some loose, flowery concept meant to inspire the masses. Many believe that Jefferson meant something more specific, something measurable. For him happiness was nothing short of a person's ability to live their life with freedom, dignity, and opportunity. Our American forefathers understood it the responsibility of government to provide that ability. They also understood it to be the ultimate measure of the quality of life.

Another icon of American culture, Toni Morrison, in a recent graduation speech to Rutgers University, commented that she wished Thomas Jefferson didn't use the word happiness at all, and instead wrote, "'life, liberty, and the pursuit of 'meaningfulness' or 'integrity' or 'truth'. I know that happiness has been the real ... goal of your labors here,'" she said to the graduating class. "I know that it informs your choice of companions, the

profession you will enter. But I urge you, please don't settle for happiness. It's not good enough." Valuing happiness over social justice, for example, is like "looking good instead of doing good." It's shallow.

The concept of happiness in Judaism is as dynamic as everything else in our tradition.

In the bible true happiness can only really be attained through God's attention and by following God's laws and statutes. Our biblical ancestors' fortunes were understood God's will. Happy is the person who fulfills God's commandments, who lives by the guidance of our Torah. Happy is the person who knows and heeds the Law. Here happiness is the just reward for reverence. Our Bible asserts that if we believe in God, that if we dedicate ourselves to God, we will always be happy.

Of course we know this not to be true. The faithful face the same challenges to happiness as everyone else. Belief in God does not shield us from tragedy – prayer does not protect us from harm. Even the authors of the Bible came to understand this – just ask Job about the relationship between religious dedication and happiness.

Early rabbinic thought recognizes that there are at least two main categories of happiness – the happiness we experience through the joys of daily living, and the happiness we experience historically, as a people.

Some places in the Talmud, for example, claim that true happiness is something that can only be experienced in Olam ha'Ba – the world to come, the world of the Messiah. The sentiment here is that we are a glorious people living through a destitute time. We feel hated, we lament. We study the history of anti-Semitism, we lament. We worry about the future, we lament. Without a Holy Temple, without the coming of the Messiah, we can never truly, really, be happy. So we lament.

Yet there is a personal, daily, regular happiness as well that the Talmud recognizes. I know it's a morbid proof-text, but when the Talmud mentions the suffering of children, for example, it often laments that they suffered before they lived long enough to know happiness, to experience happiness. Here happiness is something that can only be achieved in adult years. Many have commented that it seems connected to finding love and building a family.

We see that idea of personal happiness in other Talmudic narratives as well. One, for example, references happiness as something that can be given away in moments of selflessness. We read in the Talmud of a man who keeps bad news to himself on the day of his daughter's wedding. He knows the news will upset her, just as it upset him. So he chooses not to tell her. He sacrifices his happiness for the sake of his daughter's. And his decision is applauded.

Happiness in our tradition is also a theological concept. We the chosen people believe that our primary source of happiness, and therefore the most important moment in our

cultural history, occurred when God chose us to be His people in the first place. Makes sense, right?

A more esoteric theological statement found in a midrashic source on the Song of Songs claims that the Torah is, in fact, God's happiness – happiness in the form of written word. How great was the gift of Torah? When God gave it to us, like the father at his daughter's wedding, He gave away His own happiness. Forget for a second about what that might actually mean, God making a personal sacrifice. In a world of selfish and fickle Greek gods, the selfless Hebrew God sat in direct contrast to them.

And in just a moment we will sing what has become an iconic song in our reform Jewish tradition: *Etz chayyim hi l'machazikim ba, v'tomcheha meushar*. The words from Proverbs refer to the Torah: It is a tree of life to them who hold fast to it, and all of its supporters are happy.

The Torah, our ultimate guidebook. The Torah, our most important gift from God. The Torah, our source of happiness.

But how? How can a book, as important and unique and historical as it may be, be a source of happiness? How can a collection of words give us that?

Our tradition teaches that the Torah gives us happiness by challenging us to live the process of life – to face our mistakes, our fears, our imperfections, to celebrate our victories, our triumphs. But beyond that, our tradition teaches that there are many ways to connect ourselves to something larger, so many ways to find the sense of purpose in living that is happiness. If the good book doesn't speak to you, in other words, our tradition teaches that something else will.

We think about Thomas Jefferson, who asserted that happiness is an unalienable right, intrinsically connected to the value of human living. We think about Toni Morrison, who claimed that happiness wasn't enough. We think about the various sources of happiness and sources of pain in our own lives, and how they are often so interconnected. We think about the stories of hope and despair found in history, and our potential for both in the future.

But Judaism teaches that while these things are important, it's also important to focus on something else. So I think about Gabi on that porch that Spring day in Washington DC. I think about those six magical words:

Yes but could you be happy?

I said yes that day not because I knew I would be happy as a stay-at-home dad. I said yes that day because those six words reminded me just how happy I am. And I knew, just as Gabi's first instinct in the moment of her own personal success was to think of me, that we would take every step as a team, that we wouldn't stop working, ever, to increase our sense of happiness.

And here I don't mean happiness as liberty or freedom, or opportunity, or success, or health, or welfare, or meaningfulness, or truth, or even social justice. I mean happiness as Judaism understands it.

Happiness isn't something that can be excluded from the clinically depressed. It doesn't work that way, claims our tradition. Happiness is found in engaging the process of living. Happiness is found in challenging ourselves to be better, to do better. Happiness is found in the ability to stop and, even against the wind, appreciate the great gift that is life and all the blessings therein. Happiness is found in the constant struggle to make and nurture connections – connections between people, connections between ideas.

Happiness is meaning.

[pause]

So it's been over three years since we joined this incredible community. Have I found happiness? Like everyone else here, at times yes and at times no. There really is nothing like the privilege of raising children. But I really, really hate laundry. It's like the blob, it won't die! No matter how many times I kill it, it just keeps coming back.

But that's the trade-off, our tradition teaches. Regardless of how we achieve it personally, happiness always requires effort.

You can't have success without challenge. You can't have peace without comfort and stability. You can't have justice without argument. You can't have learning without food. You can't have hope without opportunity. You can't have love without trust. You can't have happiness without any of these things. And you can't have any of these things without effort.

Happiness is not something we do. And we know it's not a given. Happiness is something we try to do. And while our tradition recognizes that we will not always succeed, it demands that we always try.

May we all, on this New Year, during this High Holiday season, once again find the strength and renewal to face everything life has to offer, to take the time to find happiness in the small, personal moments of our lives, and to continue to hope, strive, and work toward a better tomorrow for all our neighbors – and indeed the entire global community.

After all, as our tradition teaches, we only have a certain amount of waking hours a day, a certain amount of days in a year, and a certain amount of years on this earth. We might as well make the best of it. We might as well stride toward happiness, wherever and however it may be found.

Ken y'hi ratzon. May this be God's will. Shanah tovah. A sweet and happy New Year.