

Creating a Happy- and Good New Year

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Did you know that winning the lottery won't make you happier? It will make you richer, but it won't make you any happier. Indeed when the Beatles wrote the lyrics "Money can't buy me love", they were absolutely right that we can't buy the things that really do make us happy. Yet, we live in a society that so often equates happiness with material possession. Studies show that recent lottery winners tend to return to their original happiness level, after several months. Even the Forbes 100- the wealthiest among us- are only slightly happier than the average American. Once we reach a modest level of material comfort, more money doesn't mean more happiness. Truth be told, our happiness levels are in large measure set for us because 50% of whether we are happy or not is genetically hard-wired into us- happiness is an inherited trait. Only 10% comes from life circumstances- like winning the lottery. In fact, when good things happen to us, it effects our happiness only for a short period of time. This is called the hedonic adaptation- that what is originally a source of joy for us will soon become part of the unnoticed background of our lives, losing its power to impact. So what will make us happier, in a long-term, ongoing way? On a night when we feel the excitement of new beginnings, when we turn to each other and wish each other Happy New Year, what are we really saying to each other, and to ourselves?

It may be that our Hebrew expression "l'shana tova- a good new year" gives us Judaism's philosophy of the path to happiness. A TOV new year implies that our happiness comes from having goodness in our lives, and goodness is morally based, not materially based. And that is the kind of happiness we really are in pursuit of, not a happy emotion, which is fleeting, but a pervasive happiness with life that speaks of living a life that is purposeful, that has quality. And this kind of existential happiness is a serious pursuit, judging from the many books, theories and studies about happiness. Their prevalence tells us that many of us feel we can be happier, but we are not always sure what can make us happier.

So I'd like to suggest that rather than "happy new year", we wish each other a "l'shana tova", a year where we do good things. That's right. If 50% of our happiness is genetically encoded or hardwired into our brains, if 10% of our happiness is circumstance, then researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky of UC-R says that the remaining 40% of our happiness comes from what we do, ¹and doing good things makes us happy. So it stands to reason the question on this night of "Happy New years," is what kinds of things can we be doing to bring us happiness in the year ahead? And since we are saying goodbye to 5774, here are 4, very Jewish paths, to how to have a happy new year, by bringing more goodness into your life.

1. Cherish your relationships. I want you to think to yourself an answer to this question: at what age do you think most people are happiest? A 22- year study on veterans found that older people are happier than younger people, and in fact, the height of happiness was reached at age 65, and didn't begin to taper off until age 75. Much of that

¹ Reform Judaism, Winter 2011, p. 56

happiness comes from the stable and significant relationships one has cultivated and maintained in one's life; the blessing of family, friends and community. A number of years ago my cousin Marvin decided to write eulogies for all his friends. The caveat is that they were all still alive. He wanted them to know, while they were living, how much he valued them, rather than telling others how much he valued them, after they were gone. Why not go home and send off a few Rosh Hashanah cards and let some of those people you cherish know what they mean to you? I am not just talking about old, dear friends. Creating ongoing new and significant relationships is a key contributor to happiness. We are often reticent to create new friendships, thinking we are too busy or someone else is too busy to set aside time to invest in a relationship. So look around you- a new dear friend may be a pew away. Jewish path to happiness #1: cherish, nurture, appreciate the relationships in your life.

2. Focus on Giving, not Getting. Judaism is quite clear that happiness comes from what you give to others; the "getting" part is the happiness that you get in return for giving. In other words, happiness is the result of your actions. So deeply engrained in Jewish life is the idea of giving, that the medieval scholar Maimonides wrote: one who settles in a community even for just 30 days must give to the charity fund, along with all the other members of the community. One who settles there for three months must give to the soup kitchen. One who settles there for 6 months must give clothing to the poor. One who settles there for 9 months must give to the burial fund for the needy. (*Mishneh Torah Laws of Gifts to the Poor*). Even the poor must give, so they are not deprived of the personal happiness that comes with being able to help others. Judaism compels every one of us to be a giving person, because it transforms us and transforms others. As one Hasidic teacher said, "Somebody else's material needs are my spiritual duties."² Jewish path to happiness #2: If you want to receive happiness, first give of yourself.

3. Live with Purpose. Do you know that in a 2013 Happiness poll, Israelis were ranked 11th of more than 150 countries polled?³ It is clear that happiness, then, is not linked to a stress-free life. When I talk with American Jews who have visited Israel, one of the things that American Jews envy about Israeli counterparts is that their lives seem to have a sense of purpose; they know who they are, they have a clear and proud identity with a people and a country, and they have a sense of mission about their lives. That mission is about nurturing their families and contributing meaningfully to society. For many, that identity and mission emanates from their Jewish lifestyle and values, and for many a sense of relationship with God. In our individualist society, we spend half our lives wrestling with who and what we are. We think our purpose is something we go out and find, like a vision quest, rather than having a sense of purpose nurtured in us from the start. Here is how I would define Jewish purpose: to act with personal integrity, give of yourself to others, sustain your people, work toward a just world, and cultivate a relationship with God. Jewish answer to happiness #3, is to live purposefully.

4. Forgive. I guess you could have expected this would be on the list since it is the High Holy Days, but teshuvah, forgiveness, is a real and recognizable key to happiness. It is

² RJ, pg. 62- quoted by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

³ OECD, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

pretty draining to the soul to harbor hurts and disagreements. Judaism teaches us to take responsibility for the hurts we have caused, and to accept the apologies of those who try to make amends with us. Always work toward reconciliation. I continue to be inspired by Yuval Roth, whose brother was murdered in 1993 by Palestinians in Israel. Yuval joined the Forum of Bereaved Families of Israelis and Palestinians. Four years ago he founded the organization Derech Hach-lama (The Way to Recovery),⁴ whose 150 volunteers pick up sick West Bank Arabs at checkpoints and deliver them to hospitals in Israel for their treatment. He does this, so that sick children, men and women don't have to wait hours each day to go through the checkpoint. And I think, that if Yuval can overcome his hurt—arguably the greatest anger to forgive, the death of a loved one by terrorists—if Yuval can hold on to the person he wants to be, and the values he believes in, and not let his soul be poisoned by hate, then I can find my way around to forgiveness too, of those who have hurt my soul. Happiness, existential happiness, comes with letting go of the things that poison our soul, and most of those begin with forgiving someone for something, and maybe even forgiving ourselves. Jewish answer to happiness #4: Let go of the things that poison your heart. There is no virtue in carrying the torch for past hurts.

Some of you may wonder why I would start off the High Holy Days talking about happiness, when the world seems to be in such turmoil. Everywhere we look we see suffering, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. How can I focus on personal happiness? It is precisely because the world is so challenged that we begin with each of us. We have to know that we can change our own future, in order to know that we have the ability to change the future for others, to make our world a happier, more purposeful place. When we commit ourselves to goodness, and giving, then that is what we bring into the world. Jewish tradition teaches us that we begin by cultivating peace within ourselves, then in our families, our communities, our nation, and finally the world. A teaching: you must not subsist on meager portions, because then you will think that if its ok for you, its ok for everyone else to live with such austerity. So it is with existential happiness. If we strive for a life of contentment and goodness, then we will want that for all people. On this Erev Rosh Hashanah, we say “today is the birthday of the world”. In truth the Hebrew means today “eternity is waiting to be born”. The future is pregnant with possibilities- both for ourselves and the world. Are we able to influence our happiness, by the way we cherish others, by the way we give to others, by the way we forgive others, and by living with purpose? If we can strive to make ourselves more fulfilled, then we can tackle making the lives of others more fulfilling too. May 5775 be such a year for all of us.

⁴ Jerusalem Report, 2/24/14, Road to Recovery, by Patricia Golan