

Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann
Memorial Church

Stanford University
August 8, 2004

The Search for Happiness
(Deuteronomy 11:26--28; 12:10-12; Psalm 34)

Standing in line at the supermarket check stand, I scanned the magazine headlines. One caught my eye--Us Weekly's cover consisted of a photo of 8 celebrities with the words across their bodies, "Finding Happiness: Are Fame and Wealth Enough or Is It all about Love?" The celebrities who posed for the cover photo--Madonna and Brad Pitt among them, clearly had fame and wealth, which, in the minds of the magazine writers, were prerequisites for happiness. Not so many of us achieve fame and wealth. But in an interesting twist, what does seem to be in the realm of the possible for those of us without Hollywood addresses and posters of ourselves in teen's rooms, is love. Perhaps, the headline suggested, even with their copious gifts, celebrities who we emulate were not as happy as we imagine them to be. Fame and wealth may be necessary, but not sufficient, to create happiness. Or, perhaps the headline suggests, fame and wealth may even undermine happiness by making love more difficult to attain.

What do we regard as a formula for happiness in our culture? Is it, as the magazine publisher suggests, fame and wealth? Is it love? And how much fame, wealth or love is sufficient for happiness? There is an unexamined quest for pleasure in our culture--from Hollywood to Berkeley, from Madison Avenue to Montana. But there is also ample evidence of the failure of such a quest. Addiction to drugs, alcohol, work, shopping, food is rampant in our vocabulary and among our acquaintances and in our families. So many of us are not particularly successful in this quest for happiness. And those who are unhappy are likely to regard themselves as the problem rather than questioning the goal.

How much happiness is enough? Are we ever satisfied with what we have? Several years ago, Morris Smith of the Magellan fund called a press conference to say that he was leaving the company to go to Israel to study religious texts and to spend time with his young children and his parents. He had wealth and was opting for love, in this case, love of tradition, love of family, and love of community. People assumed that he had some inside financial information and they pelted him with questions about why he really was leaving. He had a hard time convincing them that he had decided that his happiness didn't necessitate acquiring more wealth. Finally he said, "I made 240 million dollars last year. What should I do? Make another 240 million dollars this year? It's enough."

Ellen Gould, a thirty-something actress created a one-woman tribute to her two Bubbes, her two Jewish grandmothers. She reflects on her own life as an accomplished

modern woman with many choices and describes herself as a “granddaughter who was standing in the middle of a narrow bridge, frozen in her fear.” With irony, she comments that her grandmothers came to America for freedom, and she says, “...and now I’m free, and I have so many choices I can choose not to make any choice at all. So I’m alone, and lonely. The kind of lonely you feel when you’re losing touch with the past and the future’s going on without you. Bubbe Meises, Bubbe stories, with their life in every line, is there something in these stories which could help me to live mine?” Ellen Gould, like Morris Smith, understands that there are limits to unlimited possibility. That the pursuit of happiness can paralyze.

Ellen Gould’s grandmothers had no expectation that they would ever have wealth or fame. They had hard lives as immigrants to America, but they seized happiness in large and little ways. For one Bubbe, happiness came from dancing with her son in the kitchen using her washboard as a drum. For another, happiness came from being loved by her husband who proudly presented her with a necklace which she knew he must have saved for years to buy. If these grandmothers were anything like my Eastern European grandmother, they didn’t spurn happiness as a desirable goal. Like my Bubbe, they probably repeated to Ellen countless times in a combination of English words and Yiddish syntax--“I want only that you should be happy.”

In today’s text, rejoicing is an integral part of ritual observance. Indeed, the Bible is full of not just the hope, but even the commandment to be happy, “V’samachta bechagecha, “You shall rejoice in your festivals and holy days.” “Ivdu et hashem b’simcha, bou lefanav birnana” “Serve God with joy, come before God with rejoicing.”

This commandment to be happy is an art form in the Chasidic community, replete with ecstatic singing and dancing. One Chasidic master and storyteller, Rabbi Nachman of Braslav even taught, “mitzvah gedola lehiyot b’simcha tamid”--It is a great commandment to be filled with joy always.” Not an easy task, but in his mind, an obligation--How does one do this? By seeing ourselves, at every moment, as recipients of the gifts of the Holy One, and indeed, one of the greatest gifts we receive is the capacity for happiness.

How does this differ from our celebrities? What pleasure would bring both God and ourselves delight? Secular pleasure is self referential--if it feels good to me, it is good. Religious pleasure, obligatory pleasure, if you will, is a reflection of God’s presence in the world, of God’s gifts, and of our capacity for gratitude. There is a tradition in Judaism of occasional blessings, which are called in Hebrew “Birkot Haneenim”--blessings of enjoyment. These are blessings over things which give us pleasure, but whose presence we might have missed--blessings over food and drink and smelling fragrant trees and plants; fruits and spices and oils. Blessings for seeing a flash of lightening or a rainbow or for witnessing the wonders of nature. There are blessings for high mountains, great deserts, for rivers and for seas. Blessings for a gathering of people, for a reunion with a friend, for eating the first fruits of the season. There are blessings for acquiring a new home, new clothes, new household items. Blessings for hearing good news, for seeing trees in blossom and for seeing the president. There are

blessings for seeing a learned person or a Torah scholar. The Talmud says that one should recite 100 blessings a day. Think of how much attention you would have to pay to things that bring you enjoyment to say 100 blessings every day?

In the section of the Talmud called “Blessings”, the rabbis teach that it is forbidden to derive pleasure from the world without first reciting a blessing. Enjoying God’s world without offering a blessing is tantamount to stealing from the Holy One, as we read in Psalms: “the earth and all that fills it belongs to God” (Ps. 24:1). However, the rabbis challenge, doesn’t the Torah also say, “The heavens are God’s heavens but the earth God gave to human beings?” (Ps. 114:15). If the earth God gave to human beings why do we need to bless what it yields? Here is how they reconcile the two contradictory verses: Before one blesses, ““the earth and all that fills it belongs to God” (Ps. 24:1), but after one blesses, “the earth God gave to human beings” (Brachot 35a)

In many families, when children receive gifts, they must first write a thank you note before they are allowed to enjoy the gift. So it is here. What we might enjoy is not fully ours until we give thanks. Our happiness reflects on the gifts of God.

You don’t need to know all the liturgy that the rabbis set down for occasional blessings to thank God for the happiness which is present in your life. You don’t need to have the one hundred blessings that the rabbis enumerated to count your blessings. What you need to know is that this formula for happiness has gratitude as its companion.

In today’s Psalm (34), we get yet a further elaboration of how to attain happiness-- “Mi ha ish, ha chofetz chayim? Who is the one who delights in life? “One who loves his days and looks for good. One who turns his mouth away from evil, and his lips from speaking deceitfully. One who turns from evil and does good, one who seeks peace and pursues it.” There are a lot of verbs in this description--one who delights in life is actively involved in choosing delight, actively seeking to see and speak of the good. One who delights in life does not lead a life untouched by evil or disappointment, but seeks Shalom--wholeness, completeness, and peace and even pursues it when it is elusive.

We can be actors in our own happiness. We have the capacity to delight in life. We have the ability to look for good. We have the capability to love our days. God has granted us copious gifts within ourselves, in forming bonds with one another, in the world around us. It is up to us to pay attention, to count our blessings, to write thank you notes and speak words of gratitude. It is up to us to understand that happiness is God’s reflected glory. It requires practice. Happiness is not a goal in and of itself, but a byproduct of the attention we pay to God’s presence in our world.

May you enjoy these last few weeks of summer with renewed attention to the many opportunities for delight in your own life. May you be showered with and shower others with love. May your happiness be borne of gratitude and may your awareness of delight be contagious.