

### The Richness of Happiness

As I watched the snow falling in Yosemite in last week, I was struck by how open, how free of pressure is a snow-blanketed landscape. The white silence stood in sharp contrast with much of what characterizes our pressure-laden culture-- anxious adults afraid to take a vacation without a laptop, cell phone and blackberry turned on 24/7, professional athletes disgraced by doping scandals, and most ominously, privileged but distressed children who have everything, yet carve the word "empty" into their arms.

As we welcome back to campus some of our country's brightest students, I think of the hurdles behind and before them. The pressure to achieve and to excel starts in the preschools and permeates the workplace. Affluent parents court their children's coaches to ensure a place on the team and then in the starting line-up. Childhood is now about building a resume and it's never too early to begin. I heard this joke about the first day of school: Dropping his child off at the classroom door, today's father says, "Now remember, Aaron, -- it's not kindergarten, it's pre- pre- pre- pre- pre medical school!"

Sadly, the focus on *learning* has faded, but the push to achieve never ends: high school is the prep for college; college the prep for grad school or the six-figure job; and once in the workplace, coworkers learn to see each other either as stepping stones or impediments to the next rung on the ladder. And these are the winners! These are our so-called *success* stories.

My colleague Rabbi Jerry Davidson tells of a mother who came into his study to discuss her child, a sweet and thoughtful young girl, who by our culture's standards was *not* a winner, *not* someone likely to attend Stanford. What brought tears to her mother's eyes was telling the rabbi her child's question: "Aren't there any prizes for just being nice?"

This girl had received the message all too loudly and clearly-- from school, from friends, perhaps from home and from inside herself that what really counts is being the best, being number one-on every scale.

A New Year has just begun. A time to look back and look ahead, to make resolutions and believe that change is possible. As we evaluate our hopes for the coming year, I hope we will also ask: What is the price of our privilege and achievement? How *high* is the cost? Do we somehow think that success, wealth and privilege will buy us happiness? Aren't we happy yet? Are there rewards for just being nice?

Take a moment to look around you. So many of us have a comfortable life in an exquisite place, choices galore...and all the angst that comes with them. I recommend to you a book by psychologist Barry Schwartz called *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is*

*Less*.<sup>i</sup> While reading it, I had it out on my desk for a few weeks, and it became an unintentional research tool. Person after person who read the title had fundamentally the same reaction, "**Why More is Less**... Isn't that the truth!" What truth is exposed by this title? What truth in our souls do these words capture? That we are so dazzled by all the possibilities within our reach that we are overwhelmed and paralyzed? That we feel some vast emptiness *inside* because we run in so many different directions there is no *center* remaining? The paradox of choice is that since there are always so many other brass rings to seize, we are rarely satisfied with what we have. We are confused, depressed or angry because we now have everything we thought we wanted ...and then we're told, and we feel-that it's still not enough.

This is not only a modern dilemma. Two thousand years ago, the rabbis of the Talmud argued about how much is enough and what brings us true and lasting happiness? "Who is rich," they ask. Their answer: "*Hasamayach b'chelko*"<sup>ii</sup>, "One who rejoices in his portion". The rabbis challenge our willingness to prep prep prep for the next big step *toward* a happiness that may or may not materialize. Who is rich? *Hasamayach* - the one who rejoices **now** - it is written in the present tense - it's you and me right now, as we are, who we are, with what we have now - a lot or a little.

The rabbis understood the human propensity to postpone happiness to a future date. Think of all the times we've said to ourselves: I'll be happy when... I get this job... I'll be happy when...I get into Stanford... I'll be happy when ...I find my soul-mate... I'll be happy when I retire...I'll be happy when...you fill in the blank. But psychologist Daniel Gilbert reveals in his new book, *Stumbling on Happiness*, why we are likely to be wrong. Most of the time what we *imagine* will make us happy in the future is predicated on who we are right now-- not on who we will be years from now. In Gilbert's words, "We insist on steering our boats because we think we have a pretty good idea of where we should go. But the truth is that much of our steering is in vain...because the future is fundamentally different than it appears through the 'prospectiscope'<sup>iii</sup> ... Foresight is a fragile talent", says Gilbert, "that often leaves us squinting, straining to see what it would be like to have this, go there or do that."<sup>iv</sup> Gilbert's research finds that once we get there, we usually want something else. We need, as the rabbis teach, to find happiness in *this* day's moments and in the person we are right now. Who is rich? The one who doesn't wait until tomorrow, but instead rejoices today.

I know this isn't easy. We want to live responsibly. We want to plan and consider—to do well in school, to build resumes, and to look to the future with a sense of vision and anticipation. But when do we, *how* do we appreciate precisely the place we are in, this day we are living, the immediate, the now--which after all, is all we know that we truly have? Living in the present and for the present is a skill we have to learn and practice, a skill not valued by a society driven by how fast we accelerate or by how much we accumulate.

How do we ever know, then, how much is enough? The Bible offers a powerful prayer to mark those moments we feel blessedly rich in spiritual strength: the Priestly Benediction. *Yeverecha Adonai v'yishmerecha*: May God bless you and guard you. As

the words flow over us, we sense the presence and protection of the Holy One. With what are we blessed and from what danger does the Holy One guard us? The sages gave one answer in the Midrash, probably with an ironic twinkle in their eyes. *Yeverecha*: May God bless you-with possessions. *V'yishmerecha*: And May God guard --against your possessions possessing you.

Too often our possessions do possess us--in the sense my mother used to use when she would ask incredulously, ‘Whatever possessed you to do that???’--that is, we conflate what we have with what we are due. Privilege can lead so easily to arrogance. The problem with having-- *is that it leads to demanding*. We have to feed the beast. If we are always chasing a bigger, better, more impressive portion, we are like thirsty people drinking salt water to slake our thirst. We will never be satisfied. How different it is to be grateful with our portion, which itself might be just a portion, a fraction, of what we still hope to attain in life. But if we are happy today with that portion, if we feel contentment and gratitude, then we are wealthy and then we are blessed.

Is it self-indulgent to rejoice, when we face a world overwhelmed by sadness and pain? Not if we live with a sense of sacred balance. Not if we embrace what is worthy of deep joy. Not if we celebrate the enduring goodness that surrounds us. Not if we pay attention to the easy-to-ignore blessings of the present. The Talmud teaches, “In the world to come, each of us will be called into account for all the good things God put on this earth that we refused to enjoy.”<sup>v</sup> God decrees that we enjoy the pleasures arrayed before us in this world, even as we work hard to repair it.

Think about some of those pleasures-- a wedding, a ceremony welcoming a new baby, a graduation, any occasion we can lift a glass and offer a toast to pleasure, to joy, l’chaim, to life! Look closely at those events, and what you see is both an important ritual in the cycle of life and also a coveted chance to stop, and feel and be joyfully, fully alive and present in the moment. Think about how often we dampen the happiness of those events by worrying about the inessentials. Instead, at those moments, please God, we should be *samayach b’chelko*, we should be happy with what is. We should know without a doubt what is most precious and meaningful in our lives: the people we love, the values we cherish, our connection to the past and our hope for the future.

When we pore over treasured photographs of our special times, we are transported back to those transcendent moments. But when the rabbis push us to enjoy the pleasures arrayed before us, they also mean the happiness woven into the ordinary fabric of life. The rabbis prescribe the custom of offering a hundred blessings a day, for all of the gifts around us. Do you think you could do it?

I rejoice in the holy blessing of...

a steaming bowl of soup;  
a friend listening attentively to my struggles;  
a long lunch over delicious conversation;  
an engrossing book;

a hike in the redwoods;  
a graceful string quartet;  
a fabulous idea;  
a hug of recognition uniting two in great pain or in great fortune;  
a heartfelt apology;  
an unexpected note of gratitude;  
a recipe that delighted the family...

Rejoice in the blessing of it all.

How tragic that such satisfying moments have become the *luxuries* of our high-pressured, and overscheduled lives? Too often we don't indulge in them because we're pushing ourselves to leap the next hurdle and win the next prize. The message I want for all of us to hear this New Year is the radical, *countercultural* message religious wisdom teaches: There *is* a prize for being nice, for being a mensch. The prize is the happiness, the blessing, the richness of living wholeheartedly, of living with purpose, of living not in *comparison* but in connection and in community with our fellow human beings. These are luxuries we all can afford, the ones that make us wealthy. And I want more of them! I want all of us to have more of them. I want us to enjoy them in abundance in the year to come.

When the rabbis tell us that “*hasameach b'chelko*” is the answer to who is rich, they press their point by adding a proof text from Psalms, “You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors: you shall be happy and you shall prosper”<sup>vi</sup>. We know that our labors can yield a variety of sweet rewards. There's certainly nothing *wrong* with getting into college and earning a good living! But, we must be sure along life's path, to labor in such a way that we cultivate and collect the fruits of both momentary and enduring happiness. Poet Mary Oliver captures the open-armed embrace of those moments in her poem, “The Summer Day”,

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean--  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down,  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?<sup>vii</sup>

Life is short. It flies by. Who is rich? *Ha Samayach B'chelko* – the one who finds blessing now, on this day of her wild and precious life. The one whose labors and achievements are real--- real by his heart's standards, not by his neighbor's gold standard. *Ha samayach B'chelko* – the one who knows how to rest, to absorb a quiet, snowy landscape, to linger, to play, to dream, to be grateful and to be satisfied. *Hasamayach B'chelko* – the one who answers God's invitation to drink deeply and often from the earth's good refreshments and toasts, joyfully, with each sip. May we all become rich with happiness in 2007. Happy New Year!

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<sup>i</sup> Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, Harper Perennial, 2005

<sup>ii</sup> Pirke Avot 4:1

<sup>iii</sup> Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling On Happiness*, Knopf, 2006, p. 23

<sup>iv</sup> Daniel Gilbert, p. 238

<sup>v</sup> Harold Kushner, *When all you've ever wanted isn't enough*, p. 82

<sup>vi</sup> Psalm 128:2

<sup>vii</sup> Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day" From *New and Selected Poems*, Beacon Press, 1992

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