

Pursuing Contentment

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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.”¹ Thomas Jefferson surely composed one of the most well-known sentences in the world when he wrote these words into our Declaration of Independence. In so doing he set forth the tone of a new nation. Other modern nation states adopted similar tripartite mottos including France’s “liberty, equality, fraternity,”² Germany’s “unity, justice, and freedom,”³ and Canada’s “life, liberty, and security of the person.”⁴ Unique, however, among burgeoning countries of its day was ours, enshrining happiness as a collective goal for the populace to chase after for the rest of our days. So, how are we doing in our pursuit?

If this room is a representative sample of the United States population, then about one third of us would self-describe as “very happy” with life.⁵ Kudos! It would seem, however, that as a nation we haven’t gotten markedly happier since we first began collecting statistics on this topic in 1972. In spite of embedding this quest for bliss into our founding documents, the United States currently ranks 21st amongst world nations in our population’s happiness.⁶ Or, perhaps, it is because we so explicitly laid happiness out as a goal for our nation that we, as a culture, find ourselves spinning on a societal hamster wheel in pursuit of a goal that lies just beyond our reach.

Writer Ruth Whippman, originally from England and now living here in the States, recently shared the differences she witnesses between how Brits and Yanks deal with this topic. “The American approach to happiness can spur debilitating anxiety,” she writes. “The initial sense of promise and hope is seductive, but it soon gives way to a nagging slow-burn feeling of inadequacy. *Am I happy? Happy enough? As happy as everyone else?*”⁷

I too regularly hear friends, peers, and acquaintances express their frustration with the great and lasting delight which lingers, perpetually, just beyond the horizon. “If only my boss would recognize the work that I’m doing.” “I just want that one thing...if I could only afford it, then...” “If she would only...,” “If he would only...” One more promotion, one more pay raise, one more person’s affection or approval, just that one more car, or toy, or gadget, or outfit for us to bring home. As “Rabbi” George Carlin taught the world, “That’s all your house is...a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get more stuff...And sometimes you’ve gotta get a bigger house. Why? Too much stuff.”⁸

¹ The Declaration of Independence, presented in Congress July 4, 1776

² The National Motto of France

³ Germany’s National Anthem

⁴ Canadian Charter of Rights

⁵ From [The General Social Survey](#) as cited in “America the Anxious” by Ruth Whippman, New York Times, September 22, 2012

⁶ Veenhoven. R.. *Average happiness in 149 nations 2000-2009*. World Database of Happiness. Rank report Average Happiness. Internet:worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/hap_nat/findingreports/RankReport_AverageHappiness.php

⁷ “America the Anxious” by Ruth Whippman, New York Times, September 22, 2012

⁸ George Carlin, Comic Relief 1986

How has this become our norm, and why is our pursuit of happiness making so many miserable? One reason is surely that we are often not great predictors of what will bring us the joy for which we yearn. In his 2004 address to the TED Conference, Harvard Psychologist, Dan Gilbert, noted that our human brains have built in experience simulators. We are able to predict, in our minds, how an experience will feel and make decisions based on that prediction. This is why, for example, we don't need to actually whip up a batch of liver and onion ice cream and taste it in order to know that it won't be a popular flavor. Gilbert asked the audience in attendance to contemplate two different futures, simulate them in their minds, and to indicate which one they preferred: in one future, you win the lottery and in the other you become paraplegic. The choice is a clear one, right? Interestingly, there is data on these two groups of people...and one year after losing use of their legs, or one year after winning the lotto, these two groups of people are equally happy with their lives.

Evidently our brains' future scenario predictors suffer from what is known as "impact bias." Our simulator makes us believe that different outcomes are more different than they really are. Winning or losing an election, gaining or losing a romantic partner, getting or not getting a promotion, passing or not passing a test have much less impact, less intensity, and much less duration than people expect them to have.⁹ No wonder, then, that every time one of our "if only this would happen then I'd be happy" scenarios comes to fruition we move on almost immediately, without complete satisfaction, to the next hypothetical state of being that will surely bring us the bliss we seek.

Yet we look with skepticism at the statistics yielded by Gilbert's research. "Winning the lottery would make me happy," we say. From whence do we get this engrained insistence that money is the key to our delight? Sometimes from the expectations of family members and the perceived standards set by previous generations, or siblings. Sometimes from peers and our never ending expedition to keep up with the Joneses without recognition that there will always be other "Joneses" no matter how great our fortunes. And, to be sure, we come to believe that wealth will buy joy because of the thousands upon thousands of messages we receive from our society each year which tell us just that.

Yet countless studies have proven the opposite to be true. Research has shown that, thanks to our impact bias, people predicted that earning twice as much annually, jumping say from \$25,000 a year to \$55,000 a year would double their happiness. In fact, happiness only increased by 9%, not 100%, and amongst households earning anything more than \$75,000 a year, there is negligible difference in happiness no matter how high the number gets.¹⁰

So too, the barrage of advertising and promotions to which we are subject becomes like the very air we breathe...we don't even realize the degree to which it surrounds and

⁹ http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy.html

¹⁰ Aknin, Lara B., Norton, Michael I. and Dunn, Elizabeth W.(2009)'From wealth to well-being? Money matters, but less than people think',The Journal of Positive Psychology,4:6,523 — 527

informs our lives. These messages muddle our perceptions about what actually brings happiness to our days. Research indicates that spending money on special experiences – family trips, a day at the museum, or an evening seeing live theater - brings greater happiness than buying “stuff.” And more surprising still...you know what brings people the greatest happiness from our money? Giving it away.¹¹

Few of the commercials I see on TV reinforce this reality, and I get why. Stoking our envy of others and fueling our sense that we need the newest, fanciest, biggest, fastest, and best are great ways to keep our economy healthy. But are these the best ways to keep us healthy and happy?

2,000 years ago our Rabbis framed the conversation differently. Ben Zoma asked, “Who is rich? The one who is content with his lot.”¹² Our personal fortunes are not necessarily external goals to be pursued and acquired. The lesson is exemplified in a classic Chasidic tale:

There was once a poor man who lived in the city of Prague. One night he dreamt that he should journey to Vienna because there, at the base of a bridge leading to the King's palace, he would find a buried treasure.

Night after night the dream recurred until, leaving his family behind, he traveled to Vienna to claim his fortune. The bridge, however, was heavily guarded. Every day the poor man spent hours pacing back and forth across the bridge waiting for the chance to dig for his prize.

After two weeks' time one of the guards grabbed him by the lapels of his coat and demanded gruffly, "What are you plotting? Why do you keep returning to this place day after, day?" Frustrated and anxious, he blurted out the story of his dream.

When he finished, the soldier broke into uncontrollable laughter: “What a foolish soul you are believing in dreams. Why, if I let my life be guided by visions, I would be well on my way to the city of Prague. For just last night I dreamt that a poor man in that city has, buried in his cellar, a treasure which awaits discovery.”

¹¹ “Don’t Indulge, Be Happy,” by Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Norton, [The New York Times](#), July 7, 2012. (Elizabeth Dunn is an associate professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, and Michael Norton is an associate professor of business administration at Harvard Business School)

¹² *Mishnah Avot 4:1*

The poor man returned home. He dug in his cellar and found the fortune. Upon reflection he thought, “The treasure was always right there in front of me, yet I had to go to such great lengths to know of its existence.”

What would it take for us to be able to survey our lives and to say, “I have treasures right here in front of my eyes that I’ve been failing to notice?” This is the very definition of the word “content.” It is derived from the Latin *contentus*, meaning “contained or satisfied,” as in “all of the contented person's desires are bound by what he or she already has.”¹³ Striving for contentment is a worthwhile but challenging spiritual exercise in our day and age. Can we survey our homes and say “this is enough?” Can we inventory our belongings and say, “this is enough?” Can we reflect on our relationships of meaning, and say with joy, “This is more than enough! I am rich!”

“But Rabbi Todd,” you may be thinking, “this is Yom Kippur. Isn’t this the time of year that’s all about improving ourselves, our relationships, our lives? About becoming better? Being more and striving for the best? If we are totally content with who we are now, why would we be motivated to improve in the new year?” Rabbi Susan Freeman teaches us that “Striving for something and being content with your lot do not have to be contradictory. Part of ‘your lot’ can be striving. Part of knowing who you are, knowing what your ‘place’ is, can be knowing who and what you want to become...As long as [our] striving is not mean spirited, as long as [our] motivation is not greed, as long as in [our] striving [we] do not hurt others and destroy relationships...then [our] ambitions and intentions may be considered acceptable, even worthy.”¹⁴ It is possible to be content but not complacent. We can be satisfied with our portion of the world’s gifts while remaining deeply dissatisfied with its inequities, imbalances, and injustices.

If it is time to replace our pursuits of an ephemeral and elusive happiness with a more lasting and enriching contentment, how might we engage in that quest?

First, when comparing ourselves to others, we should be careful not to always be looking up at the Joneses. It is important for me to remember that there are plenty of people in the world who would look at where I sit and long for precisely this position. So too, when we are feeling compelled by the natural inclination to envy those around us, we should recognize that when we wish we were someone else we deny ourselves the celebration of our own gifts. In so doing we reject who we actually are in favor of a perceived, and often false, happiness in someone else.

How much more productive our yearnings would be if they yielded thoughts like, “I really envy his learning,” or “I wish I had just a small sliver of his generosity,” or “if only I could be as compassionate as she is.” These are longings which might actually yield enhanced happiness and satisfaction rather than increased bitterness and jealousy.

How else can we strive for contentment? We can remake our eyes to see what is beautiful, desirable, and right about our lives and not solely that which is not yet what

¹³ Online Etymology Dictionary: entry for “content (v.)”

¹⁴ *Teaching Jewish Values*, A.R.E. Press, 1999, p. 211

we want it to be. I love our family's back yard. It is green and lush and at many times of the spring and summer it blooms with a vibrant array of colorful flowers. But there is one spot...behind the shed...that is brown and lifeless. I am keenly aware that all too often, when I look out on our yard...all I can see is that horrible spot behind the shed. While that may serve as good motivation for me to improve the situation, it also ought not preclude my enjoyment of the rest of our yard in the meantime.

How do we retrain our eyes and hearts to see all the good along with those parts of world that are not as we desire? We can start by asking ourselves, "What are the things in life that I need the most in order to feel content and at peace?" Once we've each arrived at our top 3-10 items, consider which of these are already in our possession. We may be surprised to discover the treasures buried beneath the surface of our day to day lives.

Perhaps the best tool for nurturing soul-contentment is cultivating our own capacities for gratitude. Rather than listing all that we wish we had, we could start the new year by listing all that we do have. A number of people in our community have started keeping gratitude journals. This is a simple and powerful ritual practice. Each night before bed, write down at least one thing for which you are grateful from that day. Every once in a while go back and read a whole set of entries, count your blessings, and feel contentment take root in your heart.

Rabbi Chaim Stern penned words of prayer which serve to focus us on these goals in 5773: "May these quiet moments [of Yom Kippur] refresh our inner lives, and bring us tranquility. May we find contentment and peace, our desires for possessions abated, our hopes for advantage subdued. But let us not be content when others lack their daily bread, let us not be serene when some have no roof over their heads. Teach us to give thanks for what we have by sharing it with those who are in need. Then shall our lives be called good, and our names be remembered for a blessing."¹⁵

We could continue such prayerful meditations for days, but for now...this is enough.

¹⁵ Day by Day: Reflections on the Themes of the Torah from Literature, Philosophy, and Religious Thought, by Chaim Stern, Beacon Press, 2000, p. 99