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Tifereth Israel Synagogue
5776 – 2015

Erev Rosh Hashana
The Fisherman and the Magic Fish

There's an old Jewish joke about a Jewish mother who was walking along the beach with her young son when a giant wave rushed the shore and swept the boy out to sea.

The mother was frantic. She got down on her knees and prayed to God to save her child.

No sooner had she finished her prayer than another wave crashed against the shore. When it receded, her son was standing before her, wet and unharmed.

She looked at the little boy, raised her eyes to heaven and said, "He had a hat."

A contemporary poet wrote, "You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometimes you find you get what you need."

But that's not always true. Sometimes we try too hard and end up with nothing.

I want to share with you not a Jewish story, but a modern retelling of an old Russian story written by Alexander Pushkin. It is called the “Magic Fish and the Fisherman.”

One day an old fisherman was down at the sea fishing. He threw out his line and when he pulled it in, he discovered a beautiful fish on the end. But this was no ordinary fish. As the fisherman reached to take it out of the water, the fish opened its mouth and spoke.

“Kind fisherman,” the magic fish said, “if you will throw me back into the ocean I will grant you any wish your heart desires.”

The fisherman was astonished to hear the fish talk. He didn’t want to kill such a wonderful creature, so he quickly unhooked the fish and threw it back into the ocean. Immediately the fish swam close to the shore, and sticking its head out of the water it said, “Thank you so much for giving me my life, fisherman. Now I will give you your wish. What would you like?”

The fisherman hadn’t really thought about anything he wanted. He was quite content with life the way it was, but he remembered how hard his wife worked keeping things going in their little hut, so he said, “Magic fish, if you can, it would be nice for my wife to have a nice little cottage to live in instead of the hut we have now.”

“Go home, then,” said the magic fish. “You will find what you deserve.”

The fisherman turned around and went home. There, instead of the old hut, he found a delightful little cottage. It was pretty and new, with flowers in front and a garden in back. Chickens pecked happily in the yard, and he heard a cow mooing in the back. The fisherman was delighted. “What a wonderful place to live,” he thought. But then the door opened and his wife came out with a frustrated look on her face.

“Where on earth have you been,” she demanded? “I have been waiting and waiting for you to come home! And where is the fish you were going to catch for our supper?”

The fisherman looked at his wife in surprise, but he sheepishly answered, “Why, wife, I caught a fish, but I let it go. It said it was a magic fish, and if I saved his life he would grant me anything I wanted. And see, just look at this little cottage we have now. Doesn’t it make you happy?”

“Happy,” shouted the wife. “Of course it doesn’t make me happy! If the fish said you could have anything you wanted why didn’t you ask for something better than this tiny little cottage? You go back down to sea and ask that fish for something nicer than this!”

“Oh wife,” the fisherman hesitated. “Surely this is enough. I don’t want to make the fish angry.”

“He won’t be angry,” the wife demanded. “The magic fish told you that you could have anything you wanted. Now go and ask for something worthwhile.”

So the poor fisherman turned around and went back down to the sea. The water wasn’t as smooth and glassy as before, but he stood on the shore and called, “Magic fish of the sea, oh magic fish of the sea, my wife wants me to ask for something else.”

Pretty soon the magic fish swam up to the shore and asked, “So what is it your wife wants, fisherman?”

“I’m sorry to ask for more,” the fisherman began, “but my wife says if you promised to give me anything I want I should have asked for something better than a cottage.”

“How about a fine mansion?” the fish asked.

“Oh my,” the fisherman replied. “That would be wonderful!”

“Then go home, and you shall have what you deserve,” the magic fish told him.

So the fisherman turned around and went home. There, instead of the lovely little cottage, he found a fine mansion. It had beautiful parks and

trees all around it, and a servant was waiting at the door when he came in. Inside the rooms were big and finely decorated, but the fisherman found his wife standing in the great hall with a scowl on her face.

“What is the matter, wife?” the fisherman asked. “Isn’t this the finest mansion you could ever have imagined? Wasn’t it nice of the magic fish to give it to us?”

“No, it is not nice,” the wife answered crossly. “Why did you just ask for just a mansion? I want a castle. You go back down to the ocean and tell the fish I want to have a castle and kingdom.”

“Oh, I can’t do that,” the fisherman pleaded. “Surely this mansion is good enough for us.”

But his wife insisted, so finally the poor fisherman turned around and went back down to the sea. Now the wind was blowing and the sea was dark and choppy. The fisherman stood on the shore and called out, “Magic fish of the sea, Magic fish of the sea. Please come talk to me. My wife says she wants a castle and a kingdom instead of a mansion.”

The fish swam up to the shore and poked his head out of the water. “Why didn’t she ask for that to begin with?” he asked impatiently.

“I’m sorry,” replied the fisherman. “But we really do appreciate all you have done for us.”

“Go home then,” said the fish. “You will find what you deserve.”

The fisherman went home, and sure enough, there he found a magnificent castle with footmen and guards standing at attention. When he entered he saw his wife standing on the marble floor, looking around in anger.

‘You call this a castle?’ she shouted as soon as she saw her husband. “Why, even the King of France has a better castle than this. I don’t want just any castle; I want the finest palace in the entire world. You go back down to the ocean and tell that fish I want to be the emperor of the whole world!”

“I can’t do that,” exclaimed the poor fisherman in horror. “Come, wife. You have a magnificent castle and a kingdom! I can’t possibly go and ask the fish to make you the emperor of the world!”

But his wife would have none of it. She shouted and screamed at the poor fisherman until finally he left and walked back down to the sea.

Why is it that we are never satisfied with what we have? No matter how much money, power, or fame we have, we always want more. We are jealous of our friends and neighbors who may have bigger homes, fancier cars, and take more lavish vacations. We are jealous of our coworkers who

have higher positions and make larger salaries. We are jealous of siblings whom we believe are our parents' favorite. We crave the recognition that others receive.

We believe that happiness eludes us because there are deficits in our lives, and if we just had a little more we would be content. This jealousy can poison and embitter us. Sometimes the desire for more clouds the gratitude for the blessings we have.

We also know from our own experiences that having more of what we dream doesn't guarantee happiness.

Former Quarterback Vince Young earned 34 million dollars in the six years he played for NFL. In 2014 he filed for bankruptcy. How did he reach such debts? By overspending – he reportedly spent \$5,000 a week taking teammates out to the Cheesecake Factory and by making bad investments. He thought his money would last forever. Now, he is broke. He was on a quest for increased fame and increased fortune, but ended up with nothing.

The great sage Hillel, in *Pirkei Avot*, asks, עֲשֵׂי רֵוָה אִי יֵהוּהוּ who is the one who is truly happy? His answer? , בְּהַקְלָוֹת בְּהַשְׁמַחַת the one is content with what he or she has. Happiness comes from living within our means, and not on a line of credit. Happiness comes from finding satisfaction in our

work, and not from the job we don't have. Marital bliss results from loving your own spouse, and not someone else's. Contentment comes to those who savor their own blessings and not their neighbors'.

Hillel would encourage us to set goals and strive to improve our lot, but he also cautions us not to base our lives upon our lusts and our jealousies, because we will end up even more unhappy than we thought we were.

Now the sky was black and cloudy. Huge waves crashed upon the shore and the wind howled. The fisherman stood on the bank and called, "Magic fish of the sea, Magic fish of the sea. I am sorry to call you back, but my wife wants to be the emperor of the entire world."

The fish swam up to the shore and stuck his head above the waves. "She wants to be the emperor now, does she?" he asked. "Well, you go back home, fisherman. Your wife has what she deserves."

The fisherman turned around and walked slowly back to his home. There he discovered his wife, sitting on a rock outside of their old hut, exactly where she deserved to be.

(As retold by Gale, the Story Lady - <http://thestorylady-gale.blogspot.com/2012/02/fisherman-and-magic-fish.html>)