

## Rosh Hashana Day 1

As Cantor Leberman so beautifully and enthusiastically just reminded us, Rabbi Nachman preached, in what is one of my favorite rabbinic teachings of all time, *Mitzvah Gedolah LeHiyot B'Simcha Tamid*. That it is a great mitzvah, to always be happy.

It is a beautiful concept, but it makes me wonder, as to whether or not Rebbi Nachman, ever lived during a global pandemic. We may have an unalienable right to pursue happiness, but these days, given everything going on in the world around us, at times the pursuit seems rather futile.

Despite Rabbi Nachman's proclamation, while there are lots of words that we could use to describe how we have been feeling over the past few months, most of them are expletives. Weddings and B'nai Mitzvah have been postponed. Vacations have been cancelled. We are experiencing divisive politics, social injustice and unrest. Unemployment is at an all-time high and the Economy has tanked. Social distancing and quarantines will continue to be part of our lives for the foreseeable future. For all of these reasons and more, the very notion of wishing you a *Shana Tova*, or a Happy New Year seems somewhat offensive, insulting, and insincere.

Yet Rabbi Nachman is clear, it is a great Mitzvah to be happy always, not except when times are tough, or when there is a global health crisis, but we have an obligation to be happy always, given what is going on in our lives and the world around us a task that seems most impossible.

Now to be fair, this isn't really unique to the time of a pandemic. A year ago, Columbia University's Earth's Institute, in partnership with Gallup, released the eighth annual world happiness report. The report claimed that Americans in general, by and large, are miserable. Anyone want to guess where we ranked? Hold up some fingers ... Out of the thirty countries studied, we ranked 18th, we were behind the likes of cheery Germany, and the Netherlands, just barely beating out the Czech Republic. The kicker, at least for me, is that according to the study, each year, for as long as they have been doing the study, we as a country have gotten unhappier.

But, upon further reflection I think that has to do more with assumptions and expectations that we as a society place on the notion of happiness, and less about the many ways that happiness can manifest itself in our lives.

In the New York Times best seller, *The Joy of Missing Out*, Dr. Svend Brinkmann points out the pressure that society places on us to be happy. Social media outlets, television commercials,

lead us to believe that a good life, a happy life, can only be lived by over-stimulating ourselves with products that bring us happiness, and by experiencing as much as we possibly can.

We are always saving up or eyeing the newer model computer or faster car. God forbid our computer has an i6 processor instead of an i7, or the cameras on our phone shoot in 720p instead of 1080, how else we would post the most amazing pictures of our next exotic vacation, or the most delicious fish taco we have ever had on Facebook, and share with the world just how happy we are, making others jealous, wishing that they could be as happy as us. And then, after all the likes, we set our sights on what's next. We move on; we start planning our next trip, our next purchase, and think about how we can be even happier.

One of my favorite stories about Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, an early leader of the Chasidic Movement, is about an encounter he had with one of his followers who ran right by him, almost through him, in the marketplace, because he wasn't paying attention. And so later that day, the Rebi caught up to him and asked where were you rushing to? The man said I am so sorry, I was running after my livelihood. To which the Rabbi famously replied, how do you know that your livelihood lies before you, and not behind, how do you know that you actually weren't running away from it.

We spend much of our lives excited for our next big adventure, and in pursuit of material items that give us joy. We think about our upcoming vacation, even though it might be months away. We have an unalienable right to pursue happiness, we always seem to be chasing it, but what Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev reminds us is that if we aren't careful, we are in danger of running right through it, in pursuit of something we think could be better, or give us more.

In what has been one of the most popular undergraduate classes at Yale University, Psychology of the Good Life, Professor Laurie Santos challenged students to think about their own levels of happiness and unhappiness. One of the questions she pushed her class to think about was whether or not they valued money, or time. She shared insights from a survey done in 1967, when incoming freshmen in American colleges were asked what they valued most. Eighty seven percent reported that "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" was important to them, while only forty two percent thought it was important to be "well off financially." By 2005, those numbers were somewhat reversed: Seventy one percent of incoming college freshmen wanted to be wealthy, while only fifty one percent prioritized living a meaningful life.

It reminded me of a conversation I had with some of my students around Purim. We were talking about *MiSheNichnas Adar Marbim PeSimchah*, how during the month of Adar, we were supposed to be happy, and I asked the students what made them happy. They talked about

their video games, computers, clothes, and all of the money they needed to buy them. After a while, I somewhat judgmentally interjected you know, money isn't the key to happiness. To which one of the students responded: but with enough money, you could buy a pretty big key.

While money may not be the key to happiness, our High Holy Day Machzor tells us that there actually is one. At the end of the Rosh Hashana Shofar service we say *Ashrei HaAm Yodei Truah*, happy is the one who hears the sound of t'ruah. Now, at first, I thought it was unusual that the machzor picked the t'ruah as the shofar blast that we need to be able to hear, in order to be happy - after all, it is the most broken up of all the blasts. But after further reflection, I think that is actually the point. To be happy, we need to find the beauty in that which is broken. Because in reality, most of life is at least a little, broken.

The key to happiness isn't simply pretending that everything is perfect, going from *tekiah gedolah*, one great big beautiful blast to the next, but rather finding the beauty in the brokenness that is our lives and our world around us. The key to happiness isn't to chase down the things that we think might give us pleasure, but to recognize the beauty that is and the blessings that are right in front of our eyes.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim, one of the early Hassidic masters from Poland, liked to tell a story about a man from Pinsk, who had a recurring dream. Every night for months, for a year, he dreamt that there was a glorious treasure waiting, under a very specific bridge, in Minsk. So one day, he wakes up, kisses his family farewell, and runs off to Minsk. He searches everywhere, and can't find the bridge. After months of searching, he finally reaches out to a policeman and he asks for help. He says can you help me, I am trying to find this bridge, buried underneath; I believe awaits a glorious treasure. The policeman is stunned, he chuckles in disbelief. He tells the man; you know it is no coincidence we met: because I also had a dream. In my dream, God told me that one of the greatest fools in the world would come to Minsk searching for treasure, failing to realize that treasure he sought was buried all along, under the floorboards, of his home.

I think the great Israeli songwriter Arik Einstein put it best when he said "*Yesh anashim shetamid mechapsim*," happiness isn't found by those who are always searching, by those who climb mountains, travel, or acquire pearls...but "*aval ani ohev lehiyot babayit*," but happiness is found by those who love being at home, with a cup of tea with lemon, with old books, and with the people that they love."

We have all been there. Whether it is something simple, like tickets to the theatre or a baseball game, a family vacation, or something more grand, like a wedding celebration that we have been planning for years - Covid 19 has taken away many things in our lives that have traditionally given us joy; things that have been sources of happiness. As much as I would have loved to take the lavish cruise that we have been planning, and looking forward to for almost two years, take my daughter on a trip back east so that she could meet her great grandparents in person, Covid 19 has forced us to cancel and change our plans. But, for many of us, Covid 19 has also put things into perspective. While our fancy cruise got cancelled, we spent a week of peace, quiet, and relaxation at a secluded cabin in the woods. While we cannot have meetings or public gatherings in the synagogue, I have also had the opportunity to kiss my kids goodnight, and put them to bed, almost every evening for the past seven months, it's an opportunity which I wouldn't trade for anything in the world. While we couldn't go to Disney Land or the Zoo, I found renewed joy and pleasure, in a short daily walk, with my family, around the block.

See, while Rebbi Nachman may not have lived through a pandemic, he buried three of his four children before passing away from tuberculosis, at the age of thirty eight. He knew plenty of pain and sorry in his life, but genuinely believed that whatever came our way, it was a mitzvah to find happiness and joy, because happiness isn't a state of having or being, it's a state of mind.

If Covid 19 has taught me anything, is that too often in life, we measure and tie our own happiness to what we want, what we might be missing out on, and what we don't have. But, what Rebbi Nachman teaches us is that happiness; real happiness is about recognizing and being grateful for the blessings in our lives, amidst the chaos and craziness. *Pirke Avoth* put it best when it famously proclaimed *Eizhu Ashir*, who is rich, who is really happy, *HaSameach B'Chelko*, one who is satisfied, who is content, who is happy with whatever it is that is.

Which is why as we enter this New Year together, I want to remind us all that Mitzvah *Gedolah LehiYot B'Simchah Tamid*, it is a great mitzvah to be happy always. I want to sincerely wish you a Shana Tova, a happy and healthy New Year. While we can be disappointed by the things in our lives which will be different, and mourn the many losses that we face, we also owe it to ourselves to find happiness. We just have to make sure that we are looking in the right places. Real happiness is in the eye of the beholder, and my hope and prayer for all of us, is that over the coming year, we can help one another behold it, and be grateful and appreciate the blessings in our lives as well.

And let us say Amen