

## Happiness

### RH Day 2, 5762

Shana tova! — a good year — mostly translated around here as, “Happy, healthy!” I would like to spend some time this morning asking what we mean when we say happy? What is happiness?

A few weeks ago I read a great article in The Atlantic by Caitlin Flanagan, called, “I’ll tell you the Secret of Cancer.” Flanagan has survived cancer for 20 years now. She begins her essay:

“Are you someone who enjoys the unsolicited opinions of strangers and acquaintances? If so, I can’t recommend cancer highly enough. ...Stop eating sugar. Keep up your weight with milkshakes. Listen to a recent story on NPR; do not read a recent story in Time magazine. Exercise — but not too vigorously; exercise **hard**, like Lance Armstrong.”

One constant in all this advice, she found, was the notion that one’s attitude had everything to do with beating cancer and that it was therefore very important to do whatever she could do to think positive thoughts, meditate, visualize her tumors melting away, or whatever might help.

She writes, “...after a terrible diagnosis, a failed surgery, a successful surgery, and the beginning of chemotherapy, I just wasn’t feeling very...up. At the end of another terrible day, my husband would gently ask me to sit in the living room so that I could meditate and think positive thoughts. I was nauseated from the drugs, tired, and terrified that I would leave my little boys without a mother. All I wanted to do was take my Ativan and sleep. But I couldn’t do that. If I didn’t change my attitude, I was going to die.”

Ultimately Flanagan consults with a psychologist who tells her flat out that there is not a shred of evidence that having a positive attitude helps fight cancer. Not one iota. Shocked by this news, Flanagan pushes, “Maybe I couldn’t think my way out of cancer, but wasn’t it still important to be as good a person as I could be? Wouldn’t that karma improve my odds a little bit?”

Her psychologist responds that she has known many, wonderful and generous women who have come to her clinic, some of whom have died very quickly, “Yikes,” thinks Flanagan, “I had better come clean.” She admits she often behaved less than wonderfully. Even sometimes acting like an especially derogatory b word reserved for women.

The psychologist, not missing a beat, went on, “I’ve also seen some of the nastiest people (b words) come in, and they’re still alive.”

Hearing that, Flanagan writes that she had her very first positive thought. She imagined all those nasty b word women getting healthy and said to herself, “I think I’m going to

beat this thing.” Thinking of herself as one of those b word women, enables Flanagan to tap into that rebellious, empowered, take no crap energy that comes with b word territory. Of course I am not saying that rallying for a fight is better than meditating or having a “good” attitude. Her point is that there is no right way to fight cancer and our sources of strength don’t necessarily come from being conventionally “good.”

It is not just cancer patients who are confronted by the happiness chorus. Heck! It’s written in our Declaration of Independence, among our inalienable rights, “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” And Americans, I think, pursue it to the nth degree. In fact, people in the US suffering depression or feeling sad, frightened, or hopeless, are often made to feel as if their feelings are a moral failure, that it is their responsibility to be happy and anything less is evidence that they are at fault.

I want to be clear here. I am not arguing that there is something wrong with happiness. But I think that in the US the happiness mantra often becomes, as it did for Flanagan, oppressive. It’s like a mandate. You must be happy. And, in reality, even the happiness gurus have been forced to admit that much of happiness is beyond our control, both because we are born with a certain genetic predisposition and because many things that make us unhappy are largely out of our control.

In fact, as Flanagan writes with biting humor, the pressure to be happy ends up making people feel more unhappy. Or to say it differently, it is one thing to feel sad or frightened or hopeless. To feel bad and on top of that to feel bad that you feel bad, is to compound the injury, to rub salt into the wound.

So what does Judaism have to say about happiness?

There are, in fact, two words for happiness in the Bible, *osher* and *simcha* but *simcha* is much more central in the Bible, occurring ten times more frequently. *Simcha* doesn’t mean happiness, really but joy. Joy is in the moment. Joy is frequently a shared emotion, like when we come together as a community to sing or pray or celebrate. Joy is dancing with abandon at a wedding. Joy is the feeling we have here singing and praying together. Joy, to me, is all the small moments every day that make you perk up and breathe in — the smell of coffee brewing before you wake up, the feel of sunshine on your face, the smile on a loved one’s face... take a breath right now and think about what those moments are for you. I think that the secret to happiness is not trying to do things that make you happy or pursue happiness or trying to make yourself be happy in the face of terrible circumstances. Joy is in the moment, with the full knowledge that the moment will pass. And happiness, maybe, is stringing all those moments of joy together. It is being able to look back on the day, or the year, or our lives, and feel the string of those moments. To sing their melody line, as it were.

It is not an accident that Sukkot, the most joyous festival, whose joy is doubly commanded in the Torah, is also the holiday on which we highlight insecurity. We leave our houses and live outside in a fragile structure that could be toppled by the wind at any moment. We are exposed to the elements. And yet it is the festival of pure joy,

zman simchatenu. Why? Having realized, during the high holidays, that life is short and security is an illusion, we have given up our pretenses and our clever dodges. And there is joy in that surrender. We are flush with our lives. We sit in our sukkah, warm soup in our hands, stars above, and we drink in the blessing of being alive, sheheyanu, vkiyamnu, vhiganu lazman hazeh — that we have been sustained and have been brought to this moment. Not because it is for forever. It isn't. But because change is inevitable and life is unpredictable; the future an illusion and the past, a memory: this moment is all that there is.

I read a second article by a cancer survivor — this one not Caitlin but Kate, Kate Bowler. Bowler at 35 with end-stage colon cancer and months to live, is advised by counselors at the clinic to make a bucket list. She struggles with the task and ultimately rejects it. Something rubs her the wrong way about this list of aspirational experiences, as if life's worth was, in the end, a list of must-do adventures, a to do list you could check off. She notes that these lists often “skip the point. Instead of helping us grapple with our finitude, they approximate infinity. They imply that with unlimited time and resources, we can do anything, be anyone. We can become more adventurous by jumping out of airplanes, more traveled by visiting every continent, or more cultured by reading the most famous books of all time. With the right list, we will never starve with the hunger of want.”

But to be alive is to want more life. And a list of experiences belies the fact that life doesn't work like that, that the experiences of our lives that we deem most precious, can rarely be planned or put on a list. The joy of a baby's first smile. Having breakfast outdoors with a loved one or warming our feet by the fire. Laughing in the snow. Plunging through a wave. Reading a story and tucking a little one, clad in dinosaur pajamas, to bed. Eating a perfect tomato. Hearing the owl at night. Watching my flowers grow. So much joy, none of it on a bucket list or in the travel section of the paper.

Bowler concludes her essay with these moving words, “What strange math. There is nothing like the tally of a life. All of our accomplishments, ridiculous. All of our striving, unnecessary. Our lives are unfinished and unfinishable. We do too much, never enough, and are done before we've even started. We can only pause for a minute, clutching our to-do lists, at the precipice of another bounded day. The ache for more — the desire for life itself — is the hardest truth of all.”

Reading her words, I thought immediately of the words of the mahzor: מה אנו, מה אלהינו “What are we? What is our life? What is our goodness? Our achievement?...What can we say in Your presence?” Confronted with the fleeting nature of our lives, standing in judgment before an Omnipotent and Infinite God, what can we say? What can we do? In the end, it seems, we can only confess our sins, and beg for one more trip around the sun, “one more year of life, one more year of sun and rain and wind, one more year to labor and to love on this roiling green and blue ball.” Give me one more year to love my beloveds, one more year to watch what I have planted grow; one more year to understand better my

own beating heart. This is in fact what the High Priest asks for after he emerges from the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur: “a year of abundance, a year of blessing, a year of good fortune, a year of bountiful harvest, a year of prosperity and success, a year of song, a year of dew and rain and sun, a year of sweet fruit at the harvest...” One more year of the infinite joys and sorrows that make a life.

So more than a happy new year, I wish you a joyful year, a year of simcha, a year filled with joyous moments. I hope that you make the time to pause and notice those moments. In year which will inevitably have its challenges, I also hope that your cup runs over with blessing.