

“The Happiest Person in the Bible”

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I was recently asked one of the hardest questions I’ve ever been posed in my rabbinic career. It was not a complex halakhic question...It was not a question about some nuance in Jewish law; it was not an ethical crisis or a moral dilemma. But it *was* a stumper! And I haven’t stopped thinking about it in the several months since the question was first posed. I’d like you all to think about it for a moment as well. The question was: “Who is the happiest person in the Bible?” Now of course many people in the Bible experience episodes of happiness to be sure. They fall in love and get married, they have children, they amass fortunes, they experience victories of all sorts...but is there any single character in the Bible, my questioner wanted to know, that you would categorize as being happy?

Now you’re probably doing what I did when I was first asked the question. You are scrolling through the *sefer Torah* in your head to try to find such a character. It probably didn’t take you long to get through Genesis...Adam and Eve are like little babies...they don’t know how good they had it until they don’t have it any more! Their own children are plagued with fratricide. There is a quick descent into the generation of the Flood—Noah may be a lot of things...brave, obedient, righteous maybe-- but *happy*, I’m not so sure! The Midrash says that all he did night and day was feed and groom all those animals on the ark. And it took him a hundred painstaking years to build that floating animal shelter. Would you describe Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob; Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachel, or Leah as happy characters in the Torah? I’m not sure I would. The text focuses so much on their struggles, their conflicts, their mistakes and mishaps...While they are certainly important, wise, heroic figures, they just don’t strike me as being overwhelmingly happy.

Moving forward in the Torah, Moses, Aaron, Miriam and their families endure the bitterness of slavery and the exaltation of freedom, but then become mired in a cascade of rebellions and upheavals that take us all the way to the end of the Torah. I even started to think beyond the 5 books of the Torah; there are 19 other books and hundreds of other characters in the Hebrew

Bible! But the judges seem severe, the prophets dour, the monarchy unstable; forget about Job; I considered Ruth, but her life is really framed by her family's tremendous loss; Esther and Mordecai were possible contenders, except Haman really gets in the way of that. By the way, I conducted a little poll on Facebook over the last couple of days, asking people in my Facebook universe to weigh in on this question. Just prior to Shabbat, Abraham and Sarah were tied for first place, with three votes each. Right behind them were Solomon, Isaac, Betzaleil, Ruth, Joseph, and Caleb—each garnering two votes a piece. That group was followed by Jacob, Leah, Tamar, Benjamin, Rachel, Rebekkah, Jesse, Mordecai, Miriam, and Mrs. Noah...each capturing one vote. I did get one outlier, from my evangelical seat mate on the flight from Alaska...if you remember my High Holiday sermon you know who she voted for!

While I gave a lot of consideration to all of these candidates, I just couldn't decide on a clearly, unambiguously happy character in the Bible—until I re-read Parashat Vayechi. Specifically the exhortations Jacob offers his children on his deathbed. You'll notice that many of the final words Jacob imparts to his children are hardly blessings... "Shimon and Levi are a pair, their weapons are tools of lawlessness...let me not be counted in their assembly." Harsh words for a father to say to his sons. "Isaachar squanders strength and security only to become a *mas oveid*, a toiling serf!" Oy! "Gad will be raided by raiders," and so on. But one of these sons gets a true blessing. A deathbed promise that any child would love to receive from a parent: And that son is Asher. "Asher's bread shall be rich," says Jacob, "and he shall yield delicacies fit for a king." According to the Sifre, a 3rd Century midrashic collection, Asher was the peacemaker among Jacob's quarreling sons. It was Asher who intervened to settle their recurring disputes, and who brought *shalom bayit* to this contentious family. When Moses blesses the tribe of Asher in Parashat Ha'azinu, he says: "Most blessed of sons be Asher; may he be the favorite of his brothers; may he dip his foot in oil. May your door-bolts be iron and copper, and your security last for all of your days." Not a single reproach either from Jacob or Moses. Quite the contrary! Asher, whose name means happy—I should have started there!—is my answer to the question of who is the Bible's happiest character.

We don't know all that much about this particular character. He is the eighth son of Jacob, and the second of his children not with Rachel, not with Leah, but with Zilpah. Asher does not stand out in Biblical history; and his tribe does not give rise to a great ruler or national deliverer. His

association with Zilpah probably means that he had some Canannaites coursing through his veins, unlike the purer progeny of Jacob and Rachel or Jacob and Leah.

So what is so special about Asher? Why did he deserve such lavish praise from his father and later from Moses? And why in the world is he so happy?!

Well, if by happy you mean material wealth or vast land holdings or impervious physical strength or an impeccable pedigree you wouldn't be able to account for Asher's happiness. He's no slouch mind you...his numbers significantly increase during the sojourn in Egypt. He does have a substantial land allocation in northern Israel, though by no means the largest...in fact Issachar and Gad, who got so bitterly scolded by their father are numerically larger tribes than Asher.

Rashi provides an answer that I believe begins to fill in the picture... Rashi relates a tradition that the daughters of Asher were particularly beautiful, so much so that people from other tribes specifically sought them out to marry them. Not only that, but the priests of Israel in particular found the daughters of Asher to be the most desirable mates. Now the priests were from the tribe of Levi. Why would they look beyond their own tribe for potential spouses? And what kind of beauty did these daughters of Asher possess? Well, I am no priest, but I am a professional Jew in the service of God, of Torah, and of our sacred tradition. When I imagined long ago the kind of person I would marry, I not only dreamt of emotional and physical compatibility, but also a life partner who understood the lifestyle I was living and the vocation to which I dedicated my life; A person who would be my partner in the kind of outreach and community building that comes along with this job. When I met Sari, I immediately sensed that she was not only interesting and beautiful, but also that she was a person of deep Jewish faith; of sincere, heartfelt commitments to Jewish life. I imagine that the priests of antiquity, the ancient equivalents of today's rabbis and cantors also sought out partners who appreciated the sacred work they did; people who were similarly committed to God and to the Jewish people. Asher may not have been Rachel's son, or the chieftain of the largest tribe or the wealthiest tribe or the tribe possessing the most military might; but he does seem to have been the patriarch of a tribe where his family members were raised with an awareness and respect for the preciousness of their heritage, and virtuousness in their hearts.

Of course Asher's most famous descendant is not any of his four sons, but his one daughter, Serach. In our parasha, both Jacob and Joseph elicit promises from their families that they will not be permanently interred in Egypt, but that their remains will be brought to *Eretz Yisrael* for final burial. When Moses, several generations later goes to retrieve Joseph's bones when the Jewish people finally depart Egypt, he is able to find them only because of the presence of Serach bat Asher, the one surviving person from her father's generation. But she didn't only survive, she was the keeper of traditions. She was the wise woman who knew all the family history, all the stories going back several generations, all the traditions and recipes and lore of this special family, including, where the great ancestors were buried. Serach bat Asher leads Moses directly to Joseph's burial place (the Midrash says it was at the bottom of the Nile!), and so he is able to fulfill Joseph's final wishes. Again, one of Asher's accomplishments was to have raised a daughter whose priorities included family, tradition, and sense of honor for the past.

Our contemporary views of happiness bear little resemblance to those of our ancestors. Even the English word 'happy' is related etymologically to words like haphazard and happenstance—that hap- prefix means something that is random or that occurs only by chance. In Hebrew there are many words that could describe happiness, but simcha is one of the most common. Some believe that simcha spelled *sin-mem- chet- hey* is actually a conjunction of the phrase *sham moach*, or 'wherever your thoughts reside.' Rather than something hapless, simcha comes from prioritizing and emphasizing in your heart and mind the aspects of life that are truly important and meaningful.

Our ancestor Asher, whose name means happiness, was not focused on the hollow pleasures of grandeur, money, or fame. While he had moderate amounts of all of those commodities, it seems that his thoughts resided in cultivating a community within his tribe where kids grew up knowing who they were and where they came from. Where people respected each other and radiated unmistakable inner beauty. When Moses and Jacob extoll Asher and his tribe, lavishing praise and blessing upon him, it is clearly on account of his intangible, spiritual qualities. As we look forward this week to the beginning of 2013, may we all be blessed like Asher, in my humble opinion, the Bible's happiest character...and may we have the *zechut*, the special honor of seeing our children and those who are connected to us be a source of blessing for others. I can't imagine any greater source of satisfaction or happiness in this life.

