

**Move over Dr. Phil! Step Aside Dr. Oz! The [Jewish] secret to living a meaningful life is...  
Yom Kippur (Yizkor) 5775  
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Dear friends, as I look around this crowded sanctuary today, I am reminded of the story of the Jew who wanted to go to shul on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, only he didn't have a ticket. Most shuls, you know, require a ticket these days to get in, and this poor shlemeil didn't have one. So he went up to the usher and said, "look, I just want to give a message to someone inside. The usher said, I'm sorry, if you don't have a ticket you can't come in. The guy says Just let me in for minute or two and then I'll be right out." Alright says the usher, but we've got cameras in there, and I better not catch you praying!

So in our shul we have excellent ushers, we do have a camera in the back over there, but *the difference is I DO want to catch you praying*. If there's any day of the year to really davven, to truly recite these holy words with meaning and intention and passion and honest, this is that day. But I realize that sometimes we pray a little more, sometimes we pray a little less...even on Yom Kippur. I know that we come to shul for a lot of different reasons, and some of them having nothing at all to do with prayer. This is our community, this is our extended family. And every Shabbes of the year, except this one, there's a wonderful, sit-down luncheon where you can eat and socialize and schmooze. But no matter how much or how little you happen to be praying today, I know that everyone in this room is praying for one thing in particular. I'm not a mind reader or a mentalist; I don't have any telepathy skills or prophetic gifts. But I know without a doubt that there is something in this New Year that every single one of us wants more of, and that something is happiness. We even consciously mistranslate the most popular greeting of the season, l'shana tova (how many times have you said that in the past 10 days...how many cards

have you mailed with that phrase on the cover?), What does L'shana Tova mean: Happy New Year, right? Wrong! L'shana tova means a good year. But 'good' is so pareve. Good is so broad and unspecific. It's hard to get excited about good. Fantastic, Spectacular, Great...that's exciting. But good is the kind of word your English teacher circled in red and said, please use a more descriptive term here. What we really want is a happy new year, for ourselves and for each other. But happiness, to quote the title of the New York Times bestseller by Dennis Prager, *Happiness is a Serious Problem*. Happiness is elusive and ephemeral. How to get it, how to seize it, is a struggle that many of us undergo, sometimes for the better part of our lives.

Now before I go on, I want to distinguish between happiness and pleasure. Let me tell you about pleasure. Just this past February I turned 40. And I had a birthday party with the most enormous, decadent chocolate cake I've ever seen. Honestly I was a foot tall, with layer after layer of thick fudge and moist cake. I know this is really unfair on a fast day, right. Since I was the birthday boy, I of course got the first piece and the largest piece. The first fork-full was like bliss. It was *gevult*, I tell you, the perfect mélange of sweet and creamy and rich deliciousness. But by the time I plowed through that hunk of chocolate madness, I felt so sick to my stomach that even though there was a lot of left over cake, I didn't touch a single bite after that first piece. That's the difference between pleasure and happiness. Pleasure is fleeting. Pleasure is the first bite of cake, but by the last bite it's long gone. Pleasure is like a vacation...but what makes a vacation so pleasant is that it doesn't last forever, so you have to make the most of every day, of every waking hour. It's a week, it's ten days, it's whatever, but it also comes to an end. And sometimes after a really good vacation you're ready to come home, because it's served its purpose. You're rejuvenated, you're relaxed, you've got some good perspective on life, and you're ready to get back to your home and your family, and maybe even your job. But happiness

is something entirely different. Happiness is a state of mind. Happiness doesn't come one day and go the next...rather it is a way of life, a condition, a disposition, a sense of serenity and inner peace that really defines your existence. And everybody wants more of it! It's the holy grail that everyone is searching for, but they get mixed up you see...they get sidetracked and befuddled and lost in the weeds because they think they will find happiness in the places where they are really only finding temporary pleasure. That's why we binge on food, or buy things we think we must have in order to be happy, when at most they just bring us some pleasure for a while. But folks, you know as well as I do that there's always going to be a new i-phone, right! There's always going to be a new model or a sleeker version, or a faster connection, or a cutting edge fashion and everyone's going to run out and buy it because how can you possibly be happy without it. Until you realize that what is sleek and stylish today is slow and sluggish if you wait long enough. But we constantly allow ourselves to be convinced otherwise.

Thankfully, if you're looking for not just a good new year, but a happy new year...if you're looking for a way to embrace a lifestyle of happiness rather than fleeting pleasures, you have come to the right place. Because Judaism has understood the secret to happiness for a lot longer than Apple has been making i-phones, in fact it is encoded in the very DNA of what it means to be a Jew. What does it mean to be a Jew anyway? I'm not asking a philosophical question here, I'm asking what does the word Jew mean? Have you ever thought about that? We are one of the oldest religions in the world; we are the descendants of an ancient people...What does our name mean?? The word Jew and the word Judaism both derive from the name of the fourth child of our patriarch Jacob and his wife Leah. Now remember there are 12 tribes...12 children of Jacob, from two different wives and two concubines who could have been our namesakes, but only one of them stuck. Not only that, but we've had various names in our history, like Hebrews and

Israelites, but those are no longer our calling cards. The name that stuck is the name of that fourth child of Jacob and Leah, whose called: JUDAH, or in Hebrew (because there's no J in Hebrew), *Yehuda*. But how did Papa Jacob and Mama Leah come up with that name for their little boychik? Actually it was Leah who named him—Jacob had nothing to do with it. [It's like when I was born my name was Seth in the hospital. But when my maternal grandmother couldn't pronounce it, my mother unilaterally changed it to Adam.] So Leah decided unilaterally that her son would be called *Yehuda*...you can read about it in genesis 29:35

When the baby was born Leah said: *Odeh et Adonai*...I will give thanks to God! *Al kein kara sh'mo Yehuda*. Therefore she named her son Yehuda...that name that means GRATITUTDE.

So what does it mean to be a *Yehudi*, a Jew, a people with this namesake...it means that we are the people of gratitude. And when you think about it, the very first words that are supposed to cross our lips every morning when we wake up are *Modeh or Modah ani lifanecha, Melech Chai ve'kayam*...THANK YOU GOD for restoring my soul to me in this new day. It's not, 'where is my coffee,' or 'would someone please let the dog out.' The first words you say as you rub the sleep out of your eyes are *Thank You*. If you want to take on a new mitzvah this year...if you want to add something Jewish to your daily routine, try starting your day with that simple expression of gratitude *Modeh ani lifanecha*...see what a difference it makes for the first words you utter to be words of praise and thanksgiving, and how it can frame the rest of your day.

What I hope you'll think about on this holy day is that the happiest people are actually the most grateful people. Or as the Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast says:

*It's not happiness that makes you grateful, it's gratefulness that makes you happy.*

And Judaism conspires at every moment to make us more grateful. Do you know that it is a mitzvah to recite a hundred *berachot* every day. What does it mean to live in such a way that you are constantly saying blessings? It means to live with a constant awareness that your life is filled with wonder and gifts and sustenance. It means that from the most basic needs like food, water, shelter, health to the most sublime, like love, family, and companionship that you do not let a moment go by when those “things” become ordinary or are taken for granted. The most influential theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said:

“I feel only gratitude for my life, for every moment... Never once did I ask God for success, wisdom, power, or fame. I asked for wonder, and He gave it to me.”

To live a life of gratitude is to live in a state of wonder for all that is precious, and remarkable, and right in your life and in the world. So often we focus on what’s wrong or what’s missing.

You heard the story of the grandmother who took her little grandson to the beach one day.

Without warning a tremendous wave came crashing down on the little boy and a strong under toe pulled him out to sea. People flocked to the water’s edge, terrified that the child could drown.

The grandmother got down on her knees and prayed like she never prayed before that the child would be rescued. Before long another enormous wave deposited the child on the beach,

breathing, alive, unhurt. When the grandmother looked at her grandson she turned her face to the sky and said, “He had a hat!” I don’t know why we do this but we do... Sometimes we can

only see what we don’t have rather than appreciating what we do have in such abundance. You know in modern Hebrew the way you say “to show gratitude” is *hakarat ha'tov*. But that phrase

literally means, recognizing the good. What’s implied by that clever phrase is that the good is

already there. Showing gratitude is the act of noticing it, of focusing on it, of valuing it above all else.

It's amazing, we are about to celebrate Sukkot. The next of the fall festivals, which begins this coming Wednesday night. Sukkot is referred to as *z'man simchateinu*, the season of our happiness of our joy. And yet the central ritual is sitting in a make-shift, temporary structure, outside, vulnerable to the weather and the elements. This holiday teaches such an incredible lesson about happiness...the *simcha* of the holiday comes from the people who inhabit that space; taking advantage of holy time to rejoice with loved ones and friends; the meaning and hope that comes from living passionately as Jews. I don't know if you heard this, but the Gallup Gallup-Healthways Well Being Index came out recently with its results of the happiest people in America...Guess who they are? The answer, according to Gallup, is religious Jews. That's right, religious Jews. By the way it doesn't say Orthodox Jews, or any other denominational label. The happiest people in America are Jews who live and practice their Judaism actively, because, as I said before, the entire DNA of Judaism is meant to infuse our lives with gratitude and the recognition of the many blessings in our lives. You name it, celebrating Shabbat, regular prayer, being a part of a tight-knit, warm, inspiring community, studying texts that brim with wisdom and life-lessons, I could go on and on. But it doesn't come as any surprise to me that religious Jews know how to be happy; because they are trained to be grateful.

Now I want to tell you something that is courageous and defiant and revolutionary about our tradition. Judaism teaches that we must be grateful even during times of difficulty and sorrow. Listen to this teaching from the Mishna: *Mevareich al ha'ra-ah me'ei ha'tov*...One must recite a blessing even in bad circumstances, because even in the midst of pain and suffering some good can be derived. The blessing the Mishnah prescribes for bad circumstances is *Baruch Atah Hashem, Dayan ha'Emet*, Praised are You, God, the Judge of Truth. Nowadays, most people only encounter that blessing in the context of a funeral, specifically before rending a garment or

tearing a ribbon as the outward symbol of one's status as a mourner. I think it is incredible that our tradition places a blessing on the lips of mourners, just as they are about to face the reality and the finality of death and a funeral. How to we utter words of praise at a time like that, when all we want to do is cry. The wisdom, the psychological poignancy of our tradition is to say to us even in moments like that, that in the midst of your sorrow, there is still so much to be grateful for.

A former congregant in Texas once had a very successful career in a private internal medicine practice. When she was 36 years old, she was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma, and had to begin a rigorous, prolonged course of treatment to save her life. Even once the cancer went into remission, she lacked the stamina to continue to practice medicine, and began writing and lecturing to offer support and guidance to other cancer patients. In her wonderful book, *Happiness in a Storm*,<sup>1</sup> Dr. Wendy Schlessel Harpham writes:

“Practicing gratitude can bring you happiness in the shadow of loss and pain...After an appallingly delayed diagnosis, a patient stuck in anger toward his prior physician can't feel the same happiness as a patient who feels gratitude for the competence and caring of his new doctor. A patient who feels bitter about the hardships of treatment can't feel the same happiness as a patient who focuses on gratitude for the opportunity to receive treatment. Gratitude helps dissolve not only anger but also disappointment, frustration, jealousy, and self-consciousness that can get in the way of happiness...Take a few minutes,” Dr. Harpham advises, “to remind yourself of all the things that are right in your world—all the medical complications that could have happened, but didn't; all the possibilities for improvement that are still open to you; and all the love and caring surrounding you.” Maybe the Psalmist realized this when he wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> Harpham, Wendy Schlessel. *Happiness in a Storm*, 2005. Page 338.

*Tov lehodot lAdonai u'lezameir leshimcha elyon...* It is good to sing and offer praise to God—  
*lehagid baboker chadsdeich ve'emunatecha ba'leylot*, to speak of your love in the morning and  
the faith you keep with us at night.<sup>2</sup> Morning, night and every time in between, there is reason to  
be thankful. 365 days a year, fast days and festival days we recite the prayer *Modim anachnu  
lach*, the thanksgiving prayer in the Amidah, when the Hazzan stops chanting, and we have to  
say those words ourselves, forcing us to recall the *nisecha she'bechol yom imanu*, the miracles  
that are a part of our daily lives. No one is exempt from that prayer...not the mourners, not the  
widow or widower, not the depressed or disheartened. Everyone is required to be conscious not  
only of their pain but also of their gratitude. And I'll tell you I have met so many widows who  
have discovered they possessed an inner strength they never knew they had. Their spouses may  
have paid all the bills and taken care of all the housework, and now they find that they can  
handle that and so much more. They have created new lives, have learned to experience joy and  
pleasure again, and some have even found new love and companionship which they may have  
thought went to the grave with their husband or wife. In the aftermath of death and mourning, I  
witness people being embraced by friends and community in remarkable ways and holding onto  
precious memories that death can never take away. This is what it means to live a life of  
gratitude. This is why I say, if you want to be happy, if you want to truly have a happy life, be  
more grateful. Focus on what is good, and meaningful, and precious in your life; cherish what  
you do have in such abundance rather than grousing about what you don't have. And always  
know that what we should be most grateful for in this life are not things that you can buy in a  
store or on line; not stuff that we acquire or purchase...rather it is the people in our lives that are  
the most valuable and important. Always let them know in word and deed how grateful you are,  
and I guarantee, your life will be happier than you ever imagined it could be. As we turn now to

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 92



the Yizkor service, we do so with hearts filled with gratitude for the memories and legacies of the loved ones we remember and to whom we pay homage now...