

Erev Tov – Good evening.

I want to tell you a story. A story thirty years in the making. 29 years, 10 months and 22 days to be exact, but who's counting?

The protagonist is a 17 year old who - spoiler alert - is about to have his heart broken. He just doesn't know it yet.

Because all his life this 17 year old loved to play – catcher – not bad defensively – certainly better than he hit – although not a terrible hitter either. And like so many he dreamed of playing when he got older, like his grandfather and father, until that dream went by the wayside. Then he wanted to be a sportswriter and travel with the team - maybe even announce. It's why that 17 year old applied to Syracuse and Northwestern.

But that never came to fruition either, not that going to GW was some horrible fate. You know, things happen and life takes you where it takes you and, don't worry, in the end it turned out pretty amazing for that kid and every day he reminds himself that in the grand scheme he certainly has nothing to complain about. No, really, even when he says that and others say 'even if you did complain, who would listen anyway,' he thinks to himself: 'No, really, I can't complain. Modeh Ani - thank you God for letting me live this life one more day.'

But this is getting ahead of things because 10,919 days ago, that 17 year old found himself watching the most improbable event he could imagine. You see, for as long as he could remember they were bad – like epically bad. Until the magical year of Eisenreich and Stocker and Thompson and Nails and Dutch and The Krukker - it was like seeing a unicorn.

So, on that night in 1993 he was glued to the TV. It was Game 6. They were down three games to two but surely they wouldn't lose, they couldn't lose.

After the first inning they trailed 3-0 and when the top of the 7th rolled around it was 5-1. Hope was dwindling. And then Stocker walked and Morandini followed with a single. After Dykstra's home run made it 5-4 the comeback was on. Duncan singled and Kruk struck out, but Duncan stole second so when Hollins singled the impossible became possible as the Phillies tied it at 5! Later in the inning Pete Incaviglia hit a sacrifice fly and, lo and behold, against all odds, the Phillies led the mighty Blue Jays 6-5!

There was no question that this was a team of destiny, a team that would win that night to force Game 7 and the next night win it all! This was all but sealed with a 1-2-3 bottom of the seventh and a no run, no hit bottom of the 8th. History and Broad Street were calling and that 17 year old was ready!

And then this happened...

And that 17 year olds baseball heart was broken - crushed - like the ball Joe Carter hit deep into that Toronto night. He has watched that video a thousand times, because, well, as the great rabbis taught *hamaveen yaveen* - those who understand, understand.

That 17 year old looked on in sadness as his Phillies walked off the field, slowly, in disbelief and despair. Head in his hands, he asked out loud: what was Fregosi thinking? I mean it was clear Mitch had nothing left and still, still he put him in. In that moment, he resigned himself to knowing, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that they'd be bad the next year, the year after and for eternity. This was his baseball fate.

As the Grateful Dead once sang: 'Sometimes you get shown the light in the strangest of places if you look at it right.'

Almost 30 years and thousands of times watching that scene later, this now 47 year old realizes that he was looking at things all wrong.

Instead of watching the Phillies dejectedly walk off the field, he should have been watching Joe Carter. Because, you see, when you watch Joe Carter, you watch someone living the dream. Literally, living my dream. Maybe yours too. Maybe you spent time in your basement or in your backyard and you were up in the bottom of the 9th and it was you who hit the home run to win the World Series and you ran around those bases, just like Joe Carter, arms flailing, jumping as high as you could, touching them all, light as air, with total joy on your face and happiness in your heart.

So this is my message for 5784: Let's live life like Joe Carter did – nearly 30 years ago – with joy and happiness. Sure, there is much going on in our world that is challenging. And there are times that we look around at the state of politics both here and in Israel, the injustices being done to communities both near and far, the world around us literally getting hotter than it has ever been, and feel dejected or sad or like we were almost there and then it was all taken away from us. I get it.

In spite of it all, maybe even because of it all, I am asking you and me to find what brings you joy. Find what brings you happiness. And do it. Not to the financial detriment of your family or in a way that shirks your responsibilities. Look for the light in your life. It's there. Sometimes you have to change where and how you're looking to see that light. But, without a doubt, the light is there. And don't just take my word for it. Know that this idea has been part of what it means to live a Jewish life, well, since there have been Jewish people.

Psalm 100, read at almost every Jewish wedding, includes the words

עֲבֹדוּ אֶת־יְהוָה בְּשִׂמְחָה בְּאוֹ לִפְנֵי בְּרִנָּה:

Serve Adonai with happiness; come into God's presence with shouts of joy.

But, how do we serve God with happiness? And why? What's the point? According to the rabbis, the first way we do this is by bringing happiness and joy to others who are not as fortunate as we are. In his commentary to the Book of Esther, Maimonides writes: 'There is no greater and more splendid happiness than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans and the widows. One who brings happiness to the hearts of these individuals resembles the Shechinah, God's Presence.'

Think about it. By reaching your hand out to those who are in need you are likened to not only being in God's Presence, but being God's Presence. So this year, join us as we make and serve meals at Trenton Area Soup Kitchen and during our Code Blue efforts this December. Help us reach our goal of 16,000 pounds during our Food Pantry High Holiday drive and throughout the year as our Shir Ami family members of all ages sort and collect and distribute food to those in our community who are in the grips of food insecurity.

Join us as we give our time, energy and resources to those served by Jewish Family and Children's Services, Mitzvah Circle and Tree House Books. As Mitzvah Circle teaches us: 'Imagine a world in which kids and their parents do not feel less valued because they are lacking essential, daily items that many people take for granted...A world in which every person matters.' Imagine if we, as a Shir Ami family, did everything in our power to fulfill Tree Houses' vision: that every child in Philadelphia has access to books, and every opportunity to pursue their dreams.

Giving of ourselves is life changing and brings joy and happiness into the world.

Speaking of giving, do you know what the Hebrew word for 'giving' is? Before you answer that question, I know – Hebrew grammar as part of an Erev Rosh HaShanah sermon – your dreams have come true! 5784 - best year ever!

So, do you know what the Hebrew word for ‘giving’ is? Natan. The word *natan* is spelled with just three letters - nun/tav/nun. Tal Ben-Shahar is an Israeli author and teacher in the fields of happiness and leadership. Google him to learn more, but suffice to say, Tal Ben-Shachar literally wrote the books on happiness. Ben-Shachar teaches that the spelling of “natan” has a powerful meaning. It is a palindrome, signifying that when we give happiness and joy to the world, joy and happiness come right back to us.

As we enter 5784, I need to tell you something: I am tired of talking about things. This year I want to *do* things, and I hope you’re in the same boat. To truly embrace the idea that happiness won't come if we pray for it or talk about it or think about it. Happiness will come when we do something. When we give of ourselves to others. And that when we truly give - natan - from our hearts, happiness will come right back to us.

In Proverbs 15:30 we read: **מְאוֹרֵ-עֵינַיִם יְשַׂמְּחֵ-לֵב:**

What brightens the eyes gladdens the heart.

The great rabbi Rashi asks the question: What actually brightens the eyes and gladdens the heart? His answer is step two to bring happiness into our lives: that which is right in front of us, if only we would take the time to see it. What delights the sight of the eyes and cleanses the sadness of the heart? A vegetable garden and flowing rivers.

I am showing you this picture for a couple of reasons. One, the Hebrew name of that handsome guy on the left is Me’or, the same word found in our verse of Proverbs. Two, it brings this verse in Proverbs to life. Taking poetic license I would retranslate this verse to read: Look into Meor’s eyes – he is happy in his heart. He is happy and filled with joy because he is doing something he loves – playing baseball – with people he feels incredibly close to, in a place he feels most comfortable – the baseball diamond.

And so, I ask you:

When you go home tonight, look in the mirror, look into your own eyes and ask: What gladdens my heart?

When you've had a tough day, and things seem challenging at work or there is despair in our world, look in the mirror, look into your heart and ask: What brightens my eyes?

When it gets dark and cold, or windy and rainy, and there are things in your family life that are challenging and you feel your stress level rising, look in that mirror, into your eyes and deep into your heart and ask: What truly makes me happy?

And then...go do it.

Do the things you love most. Surround yourselves with those that gladden your heart and those you wish to make new, meaningful connections with. Go places you feel free and alive, even if that means somewhere new that you long to explore. See it with your own eyes. Touch it with your own hands. Don't just talk about it or dream about it. Do it.

Maybe you are like me and those places are in the great outdoors where no stop lights or sounds of cars are echoing in the distance. Or with a fishing pole in a flowing river in Utah thinking about nothing at all or swinging a golf club while sharing a joke with friends and family. Or at a baseball game, with the smell of freshly cut grass, the warmth of the summer sun and where time seems to stand still. Or hearing your voice on the phone when we speak to celebrate your birthdays and anniversaries. Or somewhere in Northern Israel, where the hills roll and the cool breeze touches your skin and the myriad of flowers in all their colors make you wonder if what you are seeing is real or a dream.

Wherever those places are and whatever those experiences may be for you, do them. Whoever those people are and no matter how long it's been since you've seen or spoken with them, find

the time. Our journey on this beautiful earth is short and, yet, we spend so much time looking for what's wrong and focusing our days on what is not working. And all the while, we forget that there is so much to be happy and joyful for in our lives. If we are honest, in my humble opinion, when we focus on what is not working and what is 'wrong' we do the exact opposite of that verse in Proverbs – our eyes are not brightened and our hearts not gladdened. Instead, our eyes grow dim and our hearts are filled with sadness. We miss the light in our lives and take for granted the experiences and people and places that we have been given. We miss out on what life is truly about and discard the greatest gifts anyone could ever ask for.

One last thing: The great Chasidic Rabbi, Pinchas of Koretz, asks: with a newborn, what comes first, tears or smiles? As a newborn enters the world, that child cries, not sure what to make of his or her surroundings, a place with sounds and smells and sights that this child has never experienced before. What does this teach us, the rabbi asks. That 'joy is on a higher plane than grief. With a newborn child, tears come first and smiles only later. Joy constitutes a higher stage, for it springs from higher worlds, from the glory of God. Thus it is that joy washes away all sin.'

If you take nothing else from what we have spoken about tonight, take this as we enter into the Yamim Norai'im, the Days of Awe, during which we are to reflect on our own lives and 'return' to the people we were meant to be: Jewish tradition teaches that living a life of happiness and joy brings you closer to perfection as a human being. That we can achieve complete teshuvah – to return to the people we know we can be, the people we were meant to be, the people who are just a little more perfect than we were last year – by living a life of joy and happiness.

If only that 17 year old knew all this thirty years ago. If only he knew the rabbinic teaching: Mitzvah Gedolah L'hiyot b'Simcha Tamid – It is a great mitzvah to always be happy. If only he knew that *natan* was a palindrome and that if you gave of yourself and your happiness into the world that happiness and joy would come right back to you. If only he knew that the world around us, the people who surround us and the experiences we have are truly what brightens the

eye and gladdens the heart. If only he knew that living a joyful and happy life brought a person one or two or three steps closer to perfection as a human being. If only he had known these things then – on that night when his baseball heart was broken.

But he knows them now, and he understands more than ever that life is a gift, that the people who he gets to spend time with are treasures and the experiences he has, and will continue to have, can never be taken away and are worth more than their weight in gold. That joy and happiness can, and always will, defeat sadness and despair. That a life of happiness and joy is his song – the song Judaism wants him to sing.

And he also hopes that you know all of these things now – especially that a life of happiness and joy is your song too.

Shanah Tovah.



