Five Levels of Pleasure

As I look out upon this congregation, on this most sacred night, I think back to ancient High Holidays held on foreign shores. For so many generations, our people worshipped in fear of the outsider. Our people came to the synagogue to find solace from a life of poverty, misery and despair. Indeed, we had a heightened sense of mortality as our Yom Kippur suggests, because they could barely afford to feed their families, let alone go to a hospital, or see a doctor. Without a doubt, we today, have won the lottery of life. As we touched upon during our Second Day of Rosh Hashanah, we are the most fortunate Jewish community to ever live in our long history.

While our ancestors were concerned with survival, we are devoted to pleasure. More of us read "Philadelphia Magazine" and "People" than "The Jerusalem Report." We want to know where are the best restaurants, which stores offer the best prices where are the best places to take our families on vacation. When the Torah was written, Moses admonished his people to seek life, for death was a real threat. Now, we admonish our children to seek happiness. Ask yourself, what is it that most of us want for our children, the answer is "to be happy." Tonight, of all nights, I want to speak about our pursuit of pleasure.

Let me be clear, Judaism has no problem with pleasure. I’m proud of the fact that we encourage the pursuit of pleasure as a gift from God. The Puritans, on the other hand, elevated denial to new heights. Self-sacrifice for them was the ticket to heavenly pleasure in the afterlife. In many Christian denominations vows of poverty and abstinence from a host of earthly delights attest to saintliness. The utilitarian, John Stuart Mill echoed a religious line from the Calvinists when he wrote, "I have learned to seek my happiness by limiting my desires,
rather than in attempting to satisfy them." Buddhists teach that all of life is suffering and that we can avoid it, only by detaching ourselves from the pleasures of life. If we don’t get attached to life and its pleasures, we won’t suffer when we lose it. Judaism takes a completely different approach.

"Zeh Hayom Asah Adonai," declares the Psalmist. "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us take pleasure in it." Savor life as a precious gift. Don’t shun pleasure: embrace it. Genesis chapter one proclaims, "And God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good." Creation is a source of joy, hope and pleasure. The rabbis of old have taught that it is a sin to fail to enjoy this wondrous gift of life, which God has granted. Ecclesiastes wrote that one of the gravest vanities of life is when a human being works endlessly and dies without having the opportunity to really find pleasure in the fruits of labor.

Pleasure, or getting what we want, to most of us means material pleasure, such as a good meal and a fine home. I must confess, we Jews have taken this good idea to extremes. Far too many of us have become obsessed with pleasure. We devote excessive energy in the seeking of material opiates. We have grown shallow, materialistic and narcissistic. When Christians were asked, in a recent poll, what is their goal in life, they answered to fulfill the will of God or to do some good. When Jews were asked the same question, we answered to maximize their own pleasure and happiness. Our kids go to the mall for stimulation, rarely to the library. We go shopping when in need for an emotional pick me up. We consume at an ever increasing pace, believing that we will find contentment in our possessions. Too many in our community have regrettably taken this idea of seeking the good in life, and concluded that the material world is all there is.
Well, those who live like that will grow weary of their pursuits. After awhile, seeking pleasure from things of the physical and material world no longer brings us joy. In time they bore us. Sex without love needs further stimulation to keep it interesting. If it’s just fine food, we must travel farther and spend more to find the thrill. One house won’t do, we need a second or a third. "The Porsche was great, but now we need the new Audi TT." Our Bar and Bat Mitzvah parties are growing ever more lavish, to the point where the true meaning of the sacred occasion is often obscured. Our shallow relationships, they too fail to nourish, so we move on, leaving a trail of destroyed lives. Those who seek only mundane pleasure must always have something else to grab the eye and touch the psyche. Adultery, theft, bribery are largely the consequence of a community that finds pleasure only in the pursuit of low-level joys.

The "Unatane Tokeff" asks a penetrating question of us. "Who shall be poor in the midst of possessions? Does this ancient line describe our modern condition? Tonight, we seek renewal so that, as the prayer says we may "go forth with rejoicing," to a year of great goodness. In other words, we need to seek pleasure in ways that will not bankrupt us in the end. We need to experience a Jewish understanding of pleasure. According to Rabbi Noah Weinberg of Jerusalem, there are five levels of pleasure. For point of clarification, let’s imagine ourselves on a walk through our synagogue, for a moment. There are five levels in it. There’s the preschool level in the basement, the main floor, Rabbi Yerushalmi and Cantor Green’s upstairs floor, the next floor, where the youth lounge is and finally the roof. I want you to envision each floor as representing a level of pleasure that I believe we, as Jews should pursue.

The basement, just below us, is a delightful place to be. It’s full of joy. Each classroom is full of playthings that stimulate our five senses. Though many elevated spiritual things, of course, happen there, for tonight let’s think of
this level as representing material pleasure. This is the level of pleasure that can be bought. We can eat it, own it, hold it, drive it, live in it, and trade it. We shouldn’t feel guilty for enjoying ourselves at this level. As I said, it’s a mitzvah to enjoy life. Our liturgy has prayers not only for health and peace but also for prosperity. There is no sin in amassing and enjoying our wealth, however great or small it is. There are some, regrettably, who feel guilty for their success. I’ve heard some members comment, that they feel badly that life is so easy for them, when they know how their parents and grandparents suffered. But I firmly believe that they would want us to know joy and to bring it their children. But, as I clearly said, shame on us, if this is our only source of joy in life.

The next level or the main floor, if you will, can best be taught with this question. What is worth more than all the money in the world? The answer is love. Our main floor beautifully symbolizes this powerful emotion. It’s where we kiss each other Shabbat Shalom. Our sanctuary is regularly punctuated with the sounds of kisses following all of our services. One of my favorite services is Selichot, which falls on Motzei Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. Our custom is to end the service in silence. No words are spoken. We conclude only with the sounds of love: our kisses. On this floor, brides and grooms embrace under the chuppah. On this floor parents kiss their children before they go off to learn Torah in our school.

Victor Hugo of "Les Miserables" fame wrote, "What is love? I have met in the streets a very poor young man who was in love. His hat was old, his coat worn, the water passed through his shoes and the stars through his soul." Those who have seen me conduct a wedding ceremony have heard me quote Disraeli many times, "We are all born for love." God is indeed good to us, when we know love, true love. Profound pleasure is discovered by those who truly love.
As wonderful and as essential as love is to life, it’s not enough. There’s more. Up one flight, our religious school children study. As they pursue the noble act of learning, they grapple with tough questions about the meaning of our traditions. They do mitzvah projects to do their part to repair the world. They are beginning to understand that life has a higher purpose than possession or passion. This floor if you will symbolizes the pleasure we can find in knowing that we have a purpose to fulfill in life. Think of all the veterans of our land, who left their families to serve their country. Think of all the Israelis who daily put their life on the line to ensure a Jewish presence in a Jewish State. Think of some of your friends, who give of themselves often at personal risk, because they believe in something. Don’t tell me that money is what drives teachers, firefighters, civil and government servants and so many others. It’s meaning.

I’m reminded of the Israeli, Udi ben Uri. Do you remember, a few years ago, there was a terrible earthquake in Kenya and after that in Turkey? Israel immediately sent a team of people to help look for bodies in the rubble. The head of the team was Udi ben Uri, an Israeli concrete worker who devotes two nights a week to his unit. He goes to emergency sites around the world, and rescues individuals trapped in the rubble. He goes to earthquake sites, bomb sites and just about anywhere that his reserve unit sends him. When asked by a reporter of the "Jerusalem Report" why he did this tough work, he replied that it’s meaningful work. His life is hard, but it’s productive. He knows that he puts his life in harm’s way, but he finds peace, and I believe pleasure, in the knowledge that he has taken many more out of it.

It is the same with us. Until we find a cause that moves us, we’re only chasing pleasure and love. Not bad, but in the end, we’ll miss a lot. In 1967, three Israeli soldiers were among the first to liberate the Western Wall. All of us have seen the picture of the three soldiers. What we don’t know is the story behind the photo. As they
approached the Wall, the depth of the moment overwhelmed one of the soldiers, who for most of his life dreamt of standing before the Kotel. Caught up in the moment, he began to sob. This moved the second to weep. The third friend said to the second, "Why are you crying? What’s the wall to you?" He answered, "Ani bocheh al mah she’ani lo bocheh." "I’m crying because I have nothing to cry for." Do we have a cause that so moves us, it brings us to tears? Do we give for the betterment of others? Many of us do, and they are the richest ones in this room. To find meaning, we don’t have to put our lives on the line. We just have to care about another person, another cause, something other than ourselves.

A renowned preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of my homiletics mentors wrote, "Pleasure at its deepest and best is not the portion of a cushioned life which never struggled, overpassed obstacles, bore hardships, or adventured in sacrifice for costly aims. A heart of joy is never found in luxuriously coddled lives, but in the men and women who achieve and dare, who have tried their powers against antagonisms, who have met even sickness and bereavement and have tempered their souls in fire. The unhappiest world conceivable by man would be a world with nothing hard to do, no conflicts to wage for ends worth while: a world where courage was not needed and sacrifice was superfluity." How true.

But, let’s not stop here, let’s go upstairs again, even higher to find a pleasure that arises from creativity. On the top floor of the mansion, our youth groupers dream, create alternative services, conjure up beautiful programming and reinterpret our sacred traditions. With their creativity, they give our meaningful traditions a fresh new twist. One of the greatest thrills that I know is the joy of creating a decent piece of writing. I usually sweat it out, but when I’m done, I feel terrific. We’ve all known it. Each of us is a creator. Doctors use creativity when they find new ways to heal. Lawyers employ
innovative paths to bring about justice. Inventors and entrepreneurs improve the quality of life. Parents inspire. We touch upon the essence of God when we use the gift of creativity given to humans alone.

I will always remember the joy my father experienced when he wrote a sketch or monologue of which he was proud. It was daunting for him to look at a blank piece of paper in the typewriter, but he struggled, created and felt great when he had filled that page. The Bible begins with creation, illustrating a model for our existence. Our task, as God imitators, is to create something out of nothing, to fill that blank page in the typewriter. One of the great Jewish visionaries of this century, Man Ray wrote, "It is marvelous that we are the only species that creates gratuitous forms. To create is divine, to reproduce is human." We can find great joy when we act upon a spark of inspiration that can bring beauty, joy and hope to an ailing world.

Now, let’s climb out on the roof of the building. From there, we can see the canopy of trees that surrounds the building. From there, we can see farther than anyone in the region. In truth, Beth Or is the highest building around. I don’t want you on the roof, but from there we can see what others cannot. From Beth Or’s summit, we can find pleasure in awe. The highest level of pleasure is standing in reverence before God and creation. Why is it that the elderly become more religious? Is it because they are closer to death, and they want a good insurance policy? I don’t believe so. I think it’s because after they have acquired all that they need. After they have spent numerous years creating, building, loving, serving and dreaming, they often recognize that it isn’t enough. They want to get in touch with the transcendent dimension of life. They recognize that there is more to life than themselves. We have all had those brief moments of awe. Moses had it when he beheld the presence of God. Ezekiel heard, when he listened to the still small voice of his conscience. Einstein understood it, when we argued
that the world is too ordered to be self-creating. Most of us have had glimpses of these moments. We’ve stood by the beach and beheld the vastness of the seas. We’ve stopped on the mountain to behold the glory of life and the world, which so sweetly embraces us. We’ve marveled at the workings of the human body and at the marvel and miracle of birth. Wonder or radical amazement is the ultimate intangible pleasure. My watchword comes from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who said so poetically "The earth is crammed with heaven, and every bush aflame with God, but only one who sees takes off his shoes. The rest just sit around and eat blackberries." What a pity, if we, so caught up in our world of analysis and judgment fail to revel in simple awe before the glory of this world. What a pity if we fail to teach this profound insight to our children. Reverence is indeed the beginning of wisdom, and wisdom, our tradition teaches, leads to pleasure.

My friends, pleasure is a blessing according to our tradition. I will never get up here and tell you to live a life of denial. When God grants you the opportunity, seek pleasure, find joy, but not just the material kind. Climb out of the basement and seek love, not just romantic, but the love of life, wisdom, another. It is our mainstay, our ground level. Then reach even higher, find a cause that gives strength to others, find a noble purpose to energize your days. Now you’re upstairs. Then stretch even more—venture further. Create some light in our dark world; top floor. Finally, aspire to the highest point of all--Stand in reverence before God and creation; look out from the roof. Never think that you’re alone. Strive for the heights in this New Year and God willing you will soar.

I conclude with how I began. "This is the day the Lord has made, let us find pleasure in it."

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