

שבענו מטובך: Finding Satisfaction from the Inside Out
Rosh Hashanah 5773
Rabbi Michael Safra

It is said that in the town of Chelm, a magical, mythical place known for its pious but not so wise Jews, two citizens were engaged in an argument about how people grow. The first said that people grow from the ground up, while the other was adamant that people grow from the head down. Both men were sure the evidence supported their assertion.

The gentleman who believed that people grow from the ground up said, “Just look at the army as it marches by, and you’ll see that I am right. None of the soldiers’ heads is at the same level, but they all have their feet on the ground. That is proof that people grow from the ground up.”

The other gentleman suggested looking at the members of the marching band as they pass. “The pants on their uniforms don’t all reach their shoes,” he said. “Some of the pants are too long and some are a little short, which must mean that people grow from the head down.”

When the two men realized they could never resolve this dispute on their own, they went to see the rabbi and pleaded their case before him. The rabbi listened to them both and concluded, “My fair gentlemen, you are both wrong. Humans do not grow from the top down or from the bottom up. It is true only that people grow from the inside out.”

From the inside-out. There’s a lot of talk nowadays – especially in the middle of an election season – about the secret to achieving the American dream. Ours is among the highest standards of living on earth. We all want the necessary stuff to “live comfortably.” And much of the upcoming election boils down to choosing which candidate or party you think will better get you there. Do we believe that the economy grows best from the top down, or do we believe we must strengthen the bottom to allow it to grow from the ground up? Do we believe that government best imposes its will from the top down, or that it must give people the opportunity to grow themselves from the bottom up?

I’m not going to answer those questions. Instead, on Rosh Hashanah – as we contemplate the year that has past and the dreams and uncertainties that lie ahead – I want to talk about how we can grow as human beings and as Jews, indeed how we can best find satisfaction from the inside out.

When our people were about to enter the Land of Israel for the first time, Moses stood before them and warned about what life might be like when they completed their journey. For 40 years it was relatively easy to connect with God. Theirs was a top-down existence. They heard God from on top of a mountain and they received nourishment in the form of Manna. And they always had exactly enough. The Torah says that each morning the people were to gather as much Manna as they needed. Some people gathered too much or too little, “But when they measured it by the *omer*, he who had gathered much had no excess and he who had gathered little had no deficiency.” They knew where it all came from.

But what would happen when they reached their destination, the promised Land of Israel, and farmed for themselves, and began to reap the benefits of their own labor from the bottom up?

“השמר לך,” Moses warns. “Take care, lest your heart grows haughty and you say to yourself: It was my power and the might of my own hand that have won this wealth for me! Remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to get wealth.” Success breeds a certain amount of expectation and entitlement.

In the Talmud, Rav Acha teaches, “מלי כריסיה זני בישי,” Filled stomachs are a source of evil.” When things are good, we start to think we earned all that we have on our own. All of the material things we have only make us want more material things. And when we start to think this way, we look around and see what others have. And from the outside-in there is literally no limit.

In 2007, Cornell professor Brian Winsink conducted a study to try to understand why France doesn't seem to share America's challenge with obesity. He asked 133 Parisians and 145 Chicagoans about how they decide to stop eating. And he found that while the French respondents tended to refer to internal cues like no longer feeling hungry, the American respondents spoke about external cues, such as whether their plate is clean. He concludes that the French think from the inside-out, while Americans think from the outside-in.

We know the effect of large portion sizes in restaurants. We eat what we see, we want what others have, even if it is far more than we need. I just think about the closets and pantry in my own house. I can't be the only one who has “smart closets”. No matter how big they are, they seem to fill themselves. We have a hard time determining how much is enough.

In Hebrew the term is *sova*, which means “satisfaction.” Speaking to the Israelites on the edge of the Promised Land, Moses commands: “ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את ה' אלהיך,” You shall eat, you shall be **satisfied**, and you shall bless the Lord your God.” You may recognize these words from Birkat Hamazon, the Grace After Meals. The Torah doesn't say you will be full, מלא, or that you will have everything that everybody else has. The Torah creates an internal standard of satisfaction. And in our world of seemingly endless consumption, the challenge is to recognize when we've reached that point.

I think back to my first visit to Israel with my parents. I was eleven years old; we went for 5 weeks. My mother wanted to show me some of the places that were important to her as a child. She had left Jerusalem for Miami Beach in 1970, when, a few years after my grandfather passed away, my grandmother remarried and brought the family to America. My mother was a young, idealistic woman raised in a very Zionist home and environment, and she didn't take easily to the consumerist culture of America. She was working to save enough money to buy a ticket back to Israel when she met my father, and you can imagine how the rest of the story played out.

My mother took us to see the apartment where she grew up, 48 Ben Maimon Street, in the heart of Rechavya – once the premier neighborhood of Jerusalem. Next door, 46 Ben Maimon was the old Prime Minister's residence where every prime Minister up until Menachem Begin lived. My grandmother told me that she had shared a cleaning woman with Paula Ben Gurion.

But even in a premier neighborhood, that little apartment of my mother's childhood seemed nothing like the home I knew. There were three rooms for a family of six; and only one bathroom. The beds were trundle beds that all turned into couches for use during the day. The tiny kitchen looked like a museum, with its small appliances from the 1950s.

But my mother wanted us to understand that for her family growing up it was really quite sufficient. They had been very happy there, with their school and their friends and neighbors. And they were living the Zionist dream.

We went traveling that summer with my mother's best friend from high school, Sara, her husband Shlomo, and their three children around my age. Shlomo had served heroically during the Six Day War; he was part of the unit that captured Tel Facher, a Syrian stronghold on the Golan Heights. And he was one of those people who knew how every stone in the entire country came to be, and why it was significant. They also had a tiny apartment, a fraction of the size of our home in Atlanta. But they were comfortable, and very happy. Even as an 11 year old, I could sense their pride and satisfaction in being part of something much larger than themselves, the miracle of Israel. They could not understand why Jews would want to live in America. They were living from the inside-out.

Over this summer I learned about a man named David Bruno, who had somewhat of an epiphany I could relate to after he and his family had spent an entire weekend cleaning up his house. He went to look for something on his desk and realized there was no way he was going to find it in the midst of all the clutter. He walked into his bedroom closet and couldn't see through the piles of clothes and adventure gear. He had similar experiences with the kitchen cabinets and the garage. And that was at the *end* of the weekend cleaning the house.

At that moment, David embarked on "The 100 Thing Challenge." For an entire year he would limit his possessions to 100 things. There were a few loopholes, as some "things" were really categories that counted as one: like his library of books or his underwear or socks. But he had to give up a lot of stuff. And over the course of the year, he came to learn what he calls the "dirty little secret" of the 100 thing challenge. In his words, "Life is just about the same without an abundance of stuff ... except without all that [stuff] there's more room for living life to the fullest."

When the year ended, Bruno went back to a more "regular" lifestyle, but he was now more aware. He still buys new things, but he remembers now to ask himself some important questions. Not "What would I like to have?" But "What do I really need?" "How much is enough?"

My challenge this morning is to confront the consumerist mentality that says more is always better, and to offer instead a mentality of *sova*, of satisfaction, of having enough. The *Sova* Quotient is different for different people; *sova* is not minimalism. But I think it behooves each of us to find it. For one thing, it is not clear how long our consumption mentality can sustain itself.

Today the 12% of the world population that lives in North America and Western Europe accounts for 60% of private consumption, while the 33% who live in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa account for only 3.2%. The good news is that more and more people in developing countries are rising out of poverty, so nearly half of the 1.7 billion members of the consumer class now live in developing countries. But the increased demand for limited resources is also a challenge. Scientists tell us that if all 7 billion people on earth today were to live the way most Americans live, we would need 5 earths to satisfy the demand.

We should be grateful for what we have, and I would never want to suggest that I know better how one person or another should spend their money. But we have to be more aware of the effect of our consumption on the rest of the world. We have to think beyond ourselves. We have to live from the inside out.

You may have heard the old Hassidic tale about a man who wanted to discover the difference between heaven and hell. He was escorted by an angel to hell, where he discovered a large banquet hall and a group of people sitting around a table filled with all types of delicacies. But the people were miserable, hungry ... even starving. Upon close inspection, the man discovers that their elbows are locked. These people see all the food in front of them but they cannot partake because they cannot bend their elbows to reach their mouths. The man understands their misery and he asks to be taken to heaven, where he finds a similar scene. He sees the same banquet hall, the same tables filled with the same fine foods, and the same people with the locked elbows. But this is heaven and the people are eternally happy, because in heaven they have learned to feed each other. Sometimes our personal reward is greatest when we reach out to help others. That is satisfaction. That is heaven. That is *sova*.

It's an important point. *Tzedakkah* in our tradition is a *mitzvah*, a commandment, an obligation. It is not simply a voluntary act of charity. Even the poorest person in the community is required to give *tzedakkah*.

On the whole, the Jewish community should be proud of what we do to sustain synagogues, schools, community welfare, and culture both in our community and beyond. But it is not so simple. There are indications and fears that the Jewish value of *tzedakkah*, a hallmark since biblical times, is diminishing. For the next generation, for people just starting out, it is hard to make that transition from being supported to supporting others. All I can say is to write that first check; help your children to write that first check; make it habit forming. Put a *tzedakkah* box next to your Shabbat candles and let your children add a few coins each week. We need to lead by example and make *tzedakkah* an important part of our lives.

In another week we will celebrate Yom Kippur by not eating for 25 hours. Philo of Alexandria, who lived in the 3rd century, says that the purpose of *fasting* is to remind us what it is to want. And to develop empathy towards the people in our society who experience that feeling every day. When you come to Kol Nidre services next week, be sure to bring with you a bag of canned foods for the [Manna](#) food drive. You can also write a check to [Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger](#), which works throughout the country. Consider a check for the amount of money you would have spent had you been eating. As we begin the new year, let us feel satisfied on the inside and let us reach out to those who could use our assistance.

It's also important to give of our time - to serve the synagogue and community institutions, to help others on [Mitzvah Day](#) and beyond. We should be active in the community. There are so many volunteer opportunities, low hanging fruit if you will, which we can do on our own or with children or friends to enrich our lives, our community and our world. When we have eaten, when we are satisfied, we must do our part to bring satisfaction to others.

And growing from the inside out means reaching towards the divine as well. It begins with the awareness that we are not solely responsible for all the good things we enjoy. We know that when we eat food, we are supposed to recite blessings – eight or ten words to acknowledge God's role in our experience. I thank my son Ethan for coming home from kindergarten and insisting that every one of our meals begin with the Hamotzi. There is a principle in the Talmud: “ כל הנהנה מן העולם הזה בלא ברכה ”

מעל, Anyone who enjoys something in this world without a blessing is considered as having stolen from God's sanctuary." The blessing creates awareness and adds to the sense of *sova*.

I find similar meaning in the observance of Kashrut. The designation of some animals as kosher and others as *treif* is somewhat arbitrary. But it forces us to think about what we put into our mouths and transforms a subsistence activity into a sacred activity.

Some in the Jewish community also talk about an expanded form, eco-kashrut. Don't just choose the right label. Sacred eating includes being aware of the conditions in the plant where your meat was packed; understanding the impact of the packaging and other resources used in the preparation; and even being more health conscious or spending more time cooking and eating meals, sitting down at the table. Eating takes place from the outside in, but sacred eating, satisfaction, *sova*, is achieved when we build awareness from the inside-out.

And we celebrate Shabbat in the same vein. I could cite statistics that suggest that Americans are chronically overworked. But we don't need statistics to tell us what we already know. And with smartphones and texting and constant connections it is even worse. I have a cartoon in my office of the proverbial rabbi preparing for the holidays. His nose is buried in a book, he's got papers in his hands, and he is standing on top of his children – oblivious to their needs and desires.

We need Shabbat now more than ever. To quote my colleague Rabbi Stephen Brown, Shabbat is our tool to "slow down and live." It's not that the Torah denigrates work. Spirituality does not replace the drive for material success. The Torah commands: "ששת ימים תעבוד", Six days you *shall* work in all your labors. And then the Seventh day shall be a day of rest." Shabbat sanctifies work. But it is quite satisfying to say we've done enough; and to live for those 25 hours *as if* we have everything we want. We can reach out to family, immerse in study, visit the synagogue and do the other things that remind us why we work in the first place.

On Rosh Hashanah, on Shabbat, and on every festival, in the central prayer of the Amidah we ask God to sanctify us with the commandments, to give us a portion of all that is good. And we add: *שבענו מטובך ושמחנו בישועתך*, Let us feel satisfied by Your goodness and find joy in Your salvation. That is my prayer as we begin the new year. Let us enjoy the many blessings our world. Let us feel satisfaction with our many successes and material possessions. Let us grow – not from the top-down or the bottom up or the outside-in – let us grow from the inside-out.

לשנה טובה תכתבו, May we all be inscribed in the book of goodness, the book of enoughness, the book of life. Amen.