

“Don’t Worry - Be Happy! ”
First Day of Rosh Hashanah - September 19, 2009
Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham

Every rabbi needs a place to work. I have a study here in the synagogue, and I have a study at home. They’re very similar, and they have similar things in them: a desk, a chair, a lamp. I have a set of Talmud there, I have a set of Talmud here. I’ve got other books, files, knick-knacks. But the two rooms are different. I have some things here that I don’t have there, and *vice versa*.

One thing that I have in my home study that I don’t have here at the shul is a singing fish. It’s made out of rubber and is mounted on a fake-wood plank. It’s animatronic, and it has some sort of motion detector inside it. When you turn it on, if there’s some movement in the room, the fish will start to move around and sing kitschy songs. It’s kind of random: you never know when it will start singing. Most of the time, I don’t keep it on, because, if, say, I get up to get a book, it starts singing; if the phone rings, it starts singing. But every now and then, I do turn it on, because it’s fun to listen to.

The fish has a limited repertoire. One song is “Take me to the river, drop me in the water.” That is just for fish. But the other song it sings, loudly, is an excerpt from the classic Bobby McFerrin song from 1988, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy!” I want to share it with you. Now since it’s Shabbat and Yom Tov, this isn’t the time to bring the fish to shul, so I’ve asked Hazzan Bogomolni if he could play the part of the fish. The song goes like this:

[Webmaster’s note: During services Rabbi Perkins and Cantor Bogomolni sang a 30-second section of the popular song.]

Happiness is on our minds on the holidays. Now it’s true that the traditional greeting on this day is not “*Hag Sameach*,” “Happy Holiday,” but “*Shanah Tovah!*”—which means, “Have a **good** year!” But many of us also say, in English, “Happy New Year!” to one another.

It is perhaps not surprising that there is a rabbinic tendency to try to draw a distinction between “*Shanah Tovah*” on the one hand and “Happy New Year” on



the other. The idea is that maybe we shouldn't say, "Happy New Year." Saying "Happy New Year"—maybe it trivializes this day. This day, after all, is about **goodness**. Happiness is beside the point.

I want to suggest a different approach. I'm here to advocate for happiness.

Now it is true that today is our *Yom HaDin*, our Day of Judgment, which naturally brings a note of sobriety to the day. Other holidays—such as Sukkot, which comes in two weeks—are more obviously associated with joy and celebration. After all, regarding Sukkot, the Torah says, "*V'samachta b'hagecha!*"—"Be happy on your holiday." The Torah doesn't say that about Rosh Hashanah. And so happiness is not the first thing that comes to your mind on Rosh Hashanah.

And yet, I would like to argue that Rosh Hashanah *is* about happiness and can teach us about the nature of happiness and how to achieve it.

In our Torah reading this morning, in the very first *aliyah*, we read about two very happy people, Sarah and Abraham. We read how Sarah became pregnant and delivered a healthy baby when both she and Abraham were at an advanced age. That was incredibly good news—after all, neither was convinced that it was ever going to happen. Abraham names the baby, "*Yitzhak*," meaning, "he laughs," or "he rejoices,"—alluding to the joy Abraham felt when he learned that Sarah would have a baby (Gen. 17:17). Sarah says, "*Tz'hok asah li elohim*,"—"God has made me **rejoice**! Whoever hears of this birth will **rejoice** with me!" As you would expect, Sarah and Abraham then host a *mishteh gadol*, a big celebration—we would call it a *simcha*.

In the *haftarah*, as well, we're exposed to joy. Hannah, after many years of infertility, finally conceives and bears a child. When that happens, she couldn't be happier. What does she say to God in her prayer of thanksgiving? "*Samachti bishuatechah*": "I rejoice in your salvation."

These are happy people.

On the other hand, they're also real people, so they're not happy all the time.

Just after that feast that Abraham and Sarah held in honor of Isaac, things begin to fall apart in their household. Sarah insists that Abraham send Hagar, the surrogate wife, and her son—that is, Abraham's other son Ishmael—out into the wilderness.

What happened to that happiness we were reading about? Who's happy now? Certainly not Hagar. She's in agony, tearfully watching her child almost die of thirst in the desert. Sarah? However justified she might be, whatever the reasons for her behavior, can she really be happy after driving Hagar out of the house? Is she ever again going to "rejoice" like she did when her child was born? And what about Abraham? Abraham is clearly not happy! "*Vayerah ha-davar m'od b'einei Avraham.*" Abraham is now **very** distressed. He is stricken.

In the *haftarah* as well, it is clear that most of the time, Hannah is not very happy. After all, as in the Torah reading, there are two women living in one household with one man: not a set up for marital bliss. Penina, the other wife, torments Hannah. Does a happy person do such a thing? Hannah herself is, of course, miserable ("*marat nefesh*"—"bitter of soul" is just one of the terms used) for most of the story because she is unable to conceive and because of the way she is treated. Elkanah, Hannah and Peninah's husband, who is ineffectual and obtuse, feels unappreciated by Hannah, and yells at her. How happy could he be? Hannah goes to the local temple, and the priest yells at her too. How happy is he? True, Hannah eventually gives birth to Samuel—but how long does she stay happy? After three years, she brings Samuel to the temple to serve as a priest. One wonders how empathic either Peninah or Elkanah were when she arrived home *alone* after that journey.

These two tales are set thousands of years ago, but they are believable stories. In the real world, people have happy moments and they have sad ones too. Our health might be good one year, and not so good the next. In the real world, people are not always nice to one another, even—maybe even especially—within families. [George Burns once said. "Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family—in another city." That's an acidic joke, isn't it? But it points to the real challenge of maintaining happiness.] For a variety of reasons, life is not one solid happy moment; indeed, happiness is precious because it is ephemeral and fleeting.

They recognize this in Denmark. Recently, a British university ranked countries from all over the world according to how happy they are. It turns out that Denmark was found to be among the happiest countries in the world. Why? Well, Denmark has the three things most closely associated with happy societies: a good welfare system, a good educational system, and a good health care system. [By the way, I'm not going to get distracted by that—but it does speak for itself.] But Denmark has something else that we saw in our Biblical readings this morning: a recognition of **the ephemeral nature of happiness**. Whenever a new study comes out confirming Denmark's status as a happiness superpower, the newspaper headlines

invariably read, “We’re the happiest—*lige nu*.” [Pronounced: “LEE-yeh NU.”] *Lige nu* is a Danish phrase that means, “for the time being”—but probably not for long. (See: “Lowered Expectations, by Eric Weiner, Happy Days Blog—NYTimes.com 7/19/2009) Denmark is a land of reasonable expectations, which is helpful to have when it comes to happiness.

This is life, as we all live it and as we all know it. Happiness takes work to achieve, and we can’t always sustain it for too long, not necessarily through any fault of our own. [Much is out of our control: **our** health, the health of our **loved ones**, the **economy**.] When happy moments come to us, we should experience them and be grateful for them.

There’s another lesson we can learn about happiness from Rosh Hashanah.

Who is the central character of Rosh Hashanah? A case can be made that it is Isaac. It’s Isaac’s birth that we read about this morning, and tomorrow we’ll read about the *akeidah*, Abraham’s binding of Isaac. What, after all, is the shofar? The shofar, the central symbol of Rosh Hashanah, is a reminder of the ram that was a stand-in for Isaac.

Isaac’s name means “the one who laughs.” It’s a curious name for someone who endured quite a bit of suffering during his life. After all, he doesn’t get along with his older brother and then, when he is barely three years old, that brother disappears. Some time thereafter, his father comes close to sacrificing him on an altar. One could understand it if Isaac’s smile disappeared from his face. And yet, unlike the other patriarchs—unlike Abraham, his father (who was born Avram, and whose name was later changed to Avraham), and Jacob, his son (who was born Ya’akov but who later acquired the name Yisrael), the name Isaac received at birth—“the One Who Laughs”—is the name by which he is known his entire life. When his mother dies, and Abraham’s servant brings him back a woman to marry, we are told that he falls in love with her. When Abraham dies, Isaac doesn’t hesitate; he joins with his half-brother, Ishmael, to bury their father together. **Isaac doesn’t lose the capacity to live, to love and, apparently, to laugh.**

The happy person isn’t the one at whose door tragedy has never knocked; the happy person is the one who—with the help of God, family and friends and strong values—can endure, can persevere, can respond, can adapt.

Perhaps one of the most useful words in this regard is one that I hear in my car several times a day: “Recalculating.” As we know, living requires detouring

around the obstacles to well-being and happiness. If we can keep “looking up,” keep smiling, we have a lot going for us.

Happiness comes up not just in the Torah and haftarah readings today, but in the liturgy. In the Rosh Hashanah *amidah* there is a prayer that speaks explicitly of happiness.

“*U’v’chen tsaddikim yiru v’yismachu,*”—One day, we pray, the “righteous will be glad, the upright (*ha-y’sharim*) will rejoice, and the pious (*ha-hasidim*) will celebrate.” That sounds terrific, so of course the next question is, “When will this happen?” “When will good people be happy?” The prayer goes on to give us the answer: Good people rejoice when “wickedness vanishes like smoke,” “when evil is silenced,” “when arrogant, oppressive regimes are destroyed.”

Similarly, in the *haftarah* that we will recite on Yom Kippur, we’re told that if we “remove oppression from [our] midst, ... if [we] put [ourselves] out for the hungry and relieve the wretched,” then “our gloom be as bright as noonday.” Our “light will shine in the darkness.” Joy—true joy—comes to us, this passage tells us – when we do our part to eliminate the suffering of other people.

That’s what makes good people happy. *That’s what makes us happy.* When innocent people are set free, when evil people are captured, when freedom expands, we rejoice. When we take efforts to alleviate suffering, when we work to make the world a better place, it makes us feel good.

Look around the room. Dozens of members of our congregation regularly engage in efforts to help other people: to fight oppression in Darfur, to help victims of terror in Israel, to support the work of the American Jewish World Service—the list goes on and on. Why do they do it? Many reasons. Many good reasons. Whatever the underlying motivation, though, people will also tell you that when they do it, it gives them pleasure. As a congregation, we’ve decided to bring this joy into our lives in a more formal and organized way.

This coming year is the year we will focus on “*g’milut hasadim*” or “loving kindness” in our community. We’re going to be doing lots of social action work and performing many acts of *hesed*, of loving kindness. Now, it’s not as if we’ve never done this before, but this year we will give priority to the many different ways we can reach out beyond the walls of our shul. We will try to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. We will try to help innocent victims of abuse or violence or tyranny. We may also try to prevent suffering from occurring in the first place. There are many things we can and will do. I’m not going to detail the many

opportunities we'll have during the year to explore this: our program book and our weekly emails and our website will have lots and lots of information about it. Please consult them. Know, though, that every organ of our shul will have a role to play: our Social Action and Hesed Committees, of course, but also our religious school and the Sisterhood and the Men's Club, our youth groups—the goal is to give everyone in the community multiple opportunities to pursue this worthy goal, multiple opportunities to be happy.

When we engage in this kind of work—whether it is *tikkun olam* or acts of *tzedek* or acts of *hesed*—this is living out a dream, a Jewish dream. “What the *tzaddik* dreams of,” writes Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, “what he hopes for, [what he] is committed to, is the triumph of Divine goodness.” (Rosh Hashanah Mahzor With Commentary Adapted from the Teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, p. 66)

The lyrics of that song that my fish sings, “Don't Worry, Be Happy”—they make sense when it comes to our day-to-day lives. As the saying goes, we shouldn't sweat the small stuff. We shouldn't worry about the little things that may preoccupy us, and get under our skin.

But when it comes to the suffering of other people, different rules apply. The Jewish response to my fish is that **it is good** to do a little worrying about other people. Maybe we *should* worry about whether they have enough food, clothing, shelter, and—yes—medical care. Maybe we *should* be worrying about whether they, too, are free. Think about it for a minute: if that worrying were to lead us to do something to alleviate their suffering—**what better happiness is there?**

If I can give a midrashic reading to that song, it would go like this:

DON'T: As it says in the Bible, “Don't stand idly by.” (Lev. 19:16) “Don't remain indifferent.” (Deut. 22:3)

WORRY! Yes, worry. Let your soul be bound up with the souls of others. Let what happens to them have an impact on you, and inspire you to, go out and help them. Go ahead, and you'll:

BE HAPPY!

Let's not hesitate to say “Happy New Year!” to one another on this day. Let's dip our *hallah* and our apples in honey. Let that be an expression of our desire to sweeten the world around us. Let that gesture reflect our commitment to sweeten the lives of those who are enduring oppression and injustice, pain and suffering.

“Go ahead and worry!”—and be happy.

Shanah Tovah u'm'tukah u's'meichah: May all of us be blessed with a good and a sweet- and a happy- new year. Amen.