

Rosh HaShanah 5775 (2014)- Day 2 Sermon-Temple Beth Ahm
On Happiness & Striving
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In my lifetime, I've lived in each of these 8 different towns & cities. And, over the past few decades, I have visited dozens of additional towns & cities in the United States, in Israel, and around the world. Now, with all of the places I've traveled, you might wonder: **What's my favorite place? Where do I keep returning?** Well, Jerusalem & San Francisco certainly rate very high on my list; I've been to these 2 cities over a dozen times. However, there is one destination that I have visited more often than I can count. Most of you have probably visited this destination as well. It's a crowded little island, **an island by the name of "Someday I'll"**. You know:

- Someday I'll get married ... and then I'll be happy..
 - Someday I'll get divorced..... and then I'll be happy..
 - Someday I'll have a baby (or another baby)... and then I'll be happy.
 - Someday I'll get more recognition or appreciation in my job and in my synagogue.... and then I'll be happy.
 - Someday I'll get my dream job.... and then I'll be happy.
 - Someday I'll retire...and then I'll be happy.
- and the ever-so-popular:
- Someday I'll lose 10 (or 15 or 20 or 30) pounds.... and then I'll be happy....

Life on the island of "Someday I'll" can be peaceful and stress-free. There's usually something "just around the corner" to look forward to; and every tomorrow always promises to be better than today.

The problem, of course, is that tomorrow is promised to no one, and today is the only day we have.

When we spend too much time on the island of "Someday I'll", when we make our happiness contingent on some "tomorrow" that may never come, **when we cease to be content with "today", we can end up living in a perpetual state of unhappiness and discontent.**

This type of mentality is **the very antithesis of a Jewish value known as "sameach b'chelko", being happy/satisfied/content with one's lot.**

In the 6th chapter of Pirkei Avot (6:6, a.k.a. Baraita of Rabbi Meir/*Kinyan Torah*), Rabbi Meir taught that Torah is acquired through 48 virtues, and one of those virtues is "*Sameach B'Chelko.*"

A second excerpt from Pirkei Avot that refers to the value of "*sameach b'chelko*" is a teaching by Ben Zoma:

"*Eyzehu ashir? Ha-sameach b'chelko*" (4:1)

"Who is truly rich? A person who is happy with his lot."

This comes to teach us that you don't have to be rich in monetary terms in order to be happy.

Perhaps the most inspiring role model in this category is the Holocaust survivor, **Viktor Frankl**. In his book, **Man's Search for Meaning**, Frankl wrote with incredible eloquence about how he and others rose above despair while enduring the daily atrocities of a Nazi concentration camp. Listen to this passage from his book: "We, who lived in concentration camps, can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms: to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

If Viktor Frankl could find meaning, and even experience happiness, in the worst circumstances imaginable, then I have to believe that we can all find the courage each day to change how we respond to whatever happens in our lives.

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There is a self-help that has sold more than 14 million copies worldwide called **Happy For No Reason: 7 Steps To Being Happy From The Inside Out** (2009). According to the author, **Marci Shimoff**, one of the key factors in being content and happy is the way we choose to respond to situations. When people who are "Happy for No Reason" confront negative events in their lives and realize they can't change those events, they change their responses to these events... just as Viktor Frankl did.

Consider an everyday example of how the same situation can affect two people in two very different ways... and only because their responses to the same situation are different:

Consider two people in two separate cars sitting in a traffic jam. You might have seen this before. One person is clutching the steering wheel in a death grip, scowling, yelling at the other cars, and probably cursing. //The other person in a car right alongside the first car is listening to the radio, singing at the top of her lungs, and having a grand ol' time.

### **Same event. Different response.**

**Jack Canfield**, one of the authors of the Chicken Soup for the Soul series, conceived of this concept in semi-mathematical terms, in the equation:

O=E+R

**Outcome=Events + Response**

Now, getting back to Ben Zoma quote from Pirkei Avot: *Eyzehu ashir? Ha-sameach b'chelko*. Not only does Ben Zoma teach us that you can be happy even when you aren't wealthy in a financial sense terms, but it also comes to teach us that: not all people who are wealthy in a material sense are rich in the spiritual sense; **not all financially wealthy people are content with their lots.**

The happiest people aren't the ones with all of the goodies. If this were so, there would be many more happy people in Hollywood and on the Forbes' list of wealthy Americans. But, one study indicates that nearly 40% of the people on the Forbes list of wealthiest Americans are less happy than the average American. A reporter once asked John Paul Getty, the founder of Getty Oil and the world's first billionaire, "You're the richest man in the world. When do you know you have enough?" He considered the question for a moment and then responded, "Not quite yet." Getty's response indicates that our **"desire to acquire" won't necessarily bring us true joy.**

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We can find examples of wealthy people being dissatisfied with what they have in the ***Tanach*** as well. Perhaps the most famous biblical example is the royal couple, **Jezebel & Ahab**.

Queen Jezebel was married to Ahab (*Achav*), the King of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Samaria) during the time when Elijah (*Eliyahu*) was the prophet. Jezebel & Ahab were known to be extremely wicked and evil. They were both idol-worshippers who supported the prophets of Baal and viewed *Eliyahu HaNavi* as an enemy. A quintessential story of the couple's wickedness is told in the Book of 1 Kings, Chapter 21:

There was a wealthy man named *Navot Ha-Yizr'eli* who owned a vineyard. Ahab wanted to buy this vineyard because it was located close to the palace. But Navot didn't want to sell his vineyard because it was part of the inheritance he had received from his father & he wanted his children to inherit it from him. But Ahab didn't want to take "no" for an answer. After Navot refused him, King Ahab came home looking sullen and displeased. Jezebel noticed how unhappy her husband looked and so she asked him,

"Mah zeh ruche-cha sarah v'eyncah ochel lechem?"

"Why is your spirit so sad, that you eat no bread?"

When Ahab told Jezebel what had happened, the evil queen assured her husband, "Don't worry. Get up and eat some bread. I will give you the vineyard of Navot of Jezreel."

And Queen Jezebel sure was true to her word. She wrote letters in Ahab's name, sealed them with his seal, and sent the letters to the elders and to the nobles of the Jezreel Valley, where Navot lived. In the letter, she asked the people of Jezreel to gather together with Navot. She then sent two men to bear false witness against Navot. Navot was falsely accused and convicted of blasphemy against the king and against God. And he was punished with the death penalty.

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The murder of Navot Ha-Yizr'elli came about **as a result of Ahab's & Jezebel's discontent with their lot.** They didn't live by the Jewish principle of "*Sameach B'Chelko.*" One of the values that guided the royal couple's life was the very antithesis of *Sameach B'Chelko*, what Marci Shimoff would refer to as "**The Myth of I'll Be Happy When**". This myth is also part of the mindset of those people who like to visit **the island of "Someday I'll."**

Another value that is the antithesis of *Sameach B'Chelko* that seemed to guide Ahab's and Jezebel's lives is "**The Myth of More**": **the more I have, the better I'll feel.** "Yes, we're the king and queen. Yes, we are already rich and powerful. Yes, we already own many vineyards. But we want this vineyard, the one that belongs to Navot Ha-Yizraeli." ("I want an Oompa Loompah, Daddy. And I want it NOW."- Veruca in Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory.)

Rather than being content with all that that they had (and boy did they have a lot!), Queen Jezebel and King Ahab were dissatisfied with their lot and the queen acted unethically in order to acquire more and more and more. Rather than embodying the Jewish virtue of "*Sameach B'chelko*", Ahab & Jezebel embraced the **Jewish vice of "Lo Tachmod" " Do Not Covet".... the 10th commandment.**

Now, generally speaking, our Jewish tradition finds *Sameach B'Chelko* to be a praiseworthy attribute and it frowns upon *Lo Tachmod*. Being happy and content with one's lot is considered to be a virtue. Coveting is generally considered to be a vice.

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But, **is "coveting" always considered to be a vice?**

Is it always bad to covet?

Not according to a **midrash in Braisheet Rabbah** (9:7, commentary on Genesis 1:31), which teaches,
"If not for the *Yetzer HaRa*, no one would ever build a house, get married, or have children!"

In addition to this Midrash, there are other Jewish sources that seem to indicate that there are **exceptions to the general prohibition against coveting.**

1) For example, the Talmud teaches (in Bava Batra 21a) that it is good to covet another person's wisdom. As it is written, "*kinat sofrim tarbeh chochmah*",
"The envy of the scribes increases wisdom"

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2) And the same can be said for the observance of mitzvot. It is good to be envious of those who do *maasim tovim* (good deeds) and other *mitzvot* if this envy inspires you to improve yourself. If you don't keep a kosher home but you are inspired to consider it by the stories of those members of Temple Beth Ahm who recently kashered their homes, that's fantastic! If you admire the way someone sitting next to you in shul seems so much more comfortable in services than you do & that inspires you to take a Hebrew class or come to Learners' Minyan so that you can navigate your way around a Siddur the way she does, that's also terrific!

There is a teaching in *Orchot Tzadikim*: "A person who sees another person learning would generate envy in the heart and say, "That person learns all day; I will do likewise". The same applies to all *mitzvot* and good traits: Everyone should envy their neighbors who observe the mitzvot and should try to emulate them."

And consider what it says in Emet V'Emunah: The Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism. Some of you have heard me quote this before:

"The ideal Conservative Jew is one who is **willing, learning, and striving.**"

"No matter the level at which one starts, no matter the heights of piety and knowledge one attains, no one can perform all 613 mitzvot or acquire all Jewish knowledge. What is needed is **an openness to those observances one has yet to perform** and the desire to grapple with those issues and texts one has yet to confront. **Complacency is the mother of stagnation** and the antithesis of Conservative Judaism."

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If one never covets others' positive attributes and one is "*Sameach B'chelko*" ("satisfied with one's lot" the way one is now), then why would one ever be motivated to change? to improve oneself in the future?

to grow as a Jew? as a human being?

Shouldn't we desire to improve our Jewish lives, our knowledge base, our living conditions, our health, our relationships with God and with other people? Shouldn't we strive to improve ourselves? Isn't that what *teshuvah* is all about?

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Well, obviously we need to distinguish between "good" coveting and "bad" coveting.

The violation of the 10th commandment, "*Lo Tachmod*", refers to a profound envy that can become destructive- both to others and to oneself. (as in the case of Queen Jezebel and King Ahab). The bad kind of coveting entails not only wanting what another person has, but also resenting others for continuing to have what you don't have and acting in unethical ways to get what you want.

It is difficult to define precisely when acceptable ambition becomes a violation of the 10th commandment. Yet, consider this: **Striving for improvement and being “content with your lot” are not mutually exclusive concepts.** Part of “your lot” can be striving.

Part of knowing who you are is knowing who and what you want to become. You need to strive in order to become the person you envision. That is part of the process of “*teshuvah*” that we engage in during the High Holidays.

As long as your striving is not mean-spirited,  
As long as your motivation is not greed,  
As long as your dissatisfaction with the status quo is healthy & productive,  
As long as, in your striving, you don’t hurt others and destroy relationships,  
As long as your efforts are *l’shem Shamayim* & are directed towards acquiring virtues and living a life of Torah and *mitzvot*,  
then your ambitions and intentions may be considered acceptable....even praiseworthy.

In the upcoming year **5775**,  
may we all **strive to be the best that we can be....**  
but **without living in a constant state of discontent**  
**on the island of “Someday I’ll.”**

***L’Shanah Tovah Tikateyvu***