

One of my favorite things to do is to get someone talking about the generations that have come after their own. You know what sort of comments are likely to be made...you might hear them say that they don't have any work ethic or any patience. They might point to their sense of entitlement or their over-inflated sense of self-worth. There has been a lot of research done on the trends that show up differently in the Greatest Generation, the Boomers, Gen X, Gen Z, the Millennials but recently, Betsy Stone was teaching a group of rabbis of whom I was a member. She shared research on the ways that each generation reported their hopes and dreams for their children, and I thought this was really interesting. The greatest Generation wanted their children to be seen and not heard – become dutiful contributing members of the family and the community. The Boomers wanted their kids to be safe and have more than they had themselves. Gen Xers, that's my cohort, just want our kids to be happy. We'll have to wait to see what trend the upcoming generations will emphasize but I'm going to keep our eyes on this last message since it is the predominant theme you see emphasized all over our society today.

Think for a moment about the implications of communicating to our children that they can be anything they want to be and that we only want them to be happy. It's a lovely message but we also know it is not true. There are sundry factors that will get in the way of those messages and may leave the child feeling like they were either lied to or are somehow a failure. After all, taken to its extreme, if you're told that your parents just want you to be happy – and you have a bad day, or a bad year or were born with a brain chemistry that does not lend itself to light-heartedness, then you could easily feel as though you've let them down and failed to achieve their dreams for you.

Viktor Frankl teaches that, "It is a characteristic of the American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to 'be happy.' But happiness cannot be pursued; it must

ensue. One must have a reason to 'be happy,'" <sup>1</sup> he said. I assume I'm not alone in feeling the occasional twinge of guilt about feeling happy when I know there is so much suffering in the world and such great tasks that need to be tackled. But why should I feel guilty? After all, I am an American...does that not mean that Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness are self-evident truths? Did you know that this timeless, famous sentence in the Declaration of Independence was changed at the last minute? Originally, Thomas Jefferson had penned it to read, "life, liberty and the "Possession of Property."<sup>2</sup> The Pursuit of Happiness is a very different idea - and one that Judaism has emphasized as important from our earliest moments.

The month of Adar with the holiday of Purim is a time of happiness. The morning service points our attention to our presence in God's House at all times and tells us that Happiness is the reward for that awareness. Maimonides goes on to make it even more clear writing: "The joy which a person derives from doing good deeds...is a supreme form of divine worship."<sup>3</sup> To be happy, according to Rambam, is prayer itself. Rabbi Heschel famously made this manifest when he explained that marching next to Martin Luther King left him feeling like he was praying with his feet. He wrote, "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy."<sup>4</sup>

All these examples are time-bound and take a little effort as Frankl described. They are all wonderful while we're in the moment, but they all come to an end. Nobody stays joyful, happy or in that transcendent state all the time. Remember, Heschel told us that "just to live is a blessing," but then he writes: " yet being alive is no answer to the problems of living. To be or not to be is not the question. The vital question is: how to be and how not to be?"

And let's be honest, there are an awful lot of factors these days working against the general happiness of those of us in the world, aren't there? Climate Change, threats to democracy, the debate over a woman's right to choose and the rights of minorities, immigration, gun control, Israeli occupation of the Palestinians, the war in Ukraine, the impacts of Covid on our children and our parents – shall I go on, because I can. What ought to be the

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<sup>1</sup> Viktor Frankl: Man's search for meaning

<sup>2</sup> Townsend, Kathleen Kennedy. The Pursuit of Happiness. Atlantic Magazine, June 2011

<sup>3</sup> Mishneh Torah, Shofar, Sukkah and Lulav 8:15

<sup>4</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "No Religion is an Island", p. 264. - Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays (1997).

individual's proper response to these types of globally significant challenges? They are overwhelming and leave me feeling paralyzed.

Of course, I can go to a rally, and I try to do so. I can encourage others and then participate myself in voting, and I do that, too. I can recycle and compost and try to bring the bees back with my garden - check. I can strive to raise up a generation that behaves better than we have behaved and I'm doing my best...but none of it seems like enough. Let's be honest – a great many of the things I worry about - I have no control over.

So here is my secret, a three-step program to preserve one's own sanity in the midst of a world that too often feels insane.

The first step is *Teshuva* – “repentance” by the traditional teaching but here we require a recontextualized understanding of the word and its implications. Rabbi Rami Shapiro suggests that we make too big a deal of the word and that it is way more simple than you've always been taught. Better that we think of the word *teshuva*, based on the word *shuv* – or return, in other words, a return to proper perspective. Rabbi Shapiro turns our attention back to that list of calamities mentioned above and reminds us that everything on that list that I created is small potatoes. Even all together - they don't add up to a hill of beans... not when you think about it from the POV of the Universe - nothing that matters to us, on this little rock in the corner of a middle-aged solar system in the middle of an unremarkable, middle-sized galaxy - none of it matters. Nothing, not great nor small, that any human being has ever done matters at all to the Universe. The Universe isn't paying attention and it doesn't care. On the one hand, that can sound pretty lonely and depressing but I assure you, that is not the only way to interpret these truths.

When we name exactly how this makes us feel – we open ourselves to the possibility that everything else we usually think about ourselves and our own importance is an expression of the survival-focused brain – our ego, our *yetzer harah* – to that sense of self, nothing matters more than ME! But our spiritual mind has a quick, honest answer: it is not that we don't matter...rather, we don't matter any *more* than anybody or anything else in the universe. We are forced to admit that we are just marvelously configured lumps of star dust with the miraculous ability to be self-aware and ask big questions. We can often reclaim this healthy,

proper perspective in the midst of quiet moments of thought, prayer or meditation. Rabbi Shapiro explains this as the meaning of *t'shuva*<sup>5</sup> – to return to our awareness of how small and insignificant we are. And in doing so, to destroy the ego's control over us for short amounts of time.

Most of you know what I'm describing, and you value it, cultivate it and seek to increase it. In those moments, we find our inner calm – we sit and watch puppies play and find that we are overwhelmed with love. We appreciate the beauty of the natural world around us and the emotional resources within us. It certainly feels like we are experiencing a great tranquility in these precious moments *because* we have turned our attention away from the plight of the world. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes it this way:

“Joy lives not in thoughts of tomorrow, but in the grateful acceptance and celebration of today. We are here; we are alive; we are among others who share our sense of jubilation... And yes, we do not know what tomorrow may bring; and yes, we are surrounded by enemies; and yes, it was never the safe or easy option to be a Jew. But when we focus on the moment, allowing ourselves to dance, sing and give thanks, when we do things for their own sake not for any other reward, when we let go of our separateness and become a voice in the holy...choir, then there is joy.”<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes the Jewish mystics call this “being present” or “seeing expansively” in Hebrew, “מובין דגדלות.” Living in the moment is pretty good. None of the past trauma and baggage of my life matters and none of the future anxiety or drive has a hold on me. When we allow it to fully surround us – we find that we have plenty of oxygen to breathe and we occupy miraculous bodies to hold our thoughts while doing the breathing...and that is enough. *Teshuva*. It might be an overly simplified choice of words but, in these moments, I feel really happy. But we also know that we will inevitably be yanked out of that reverie and back into the “real world”.

Now this is important: As we return to the material world around us, and the crises, challenges and problems are right where we left them, we realize that the trip into a Divine

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<sup>5</sup> Open Secrets

<sup>6</sup> Sacks, Rabbi Lord Jonathan. [The Pursuit of Joy](#) (Ki Tavo 5775)

Awareness wasn't just a pleasant detour or distraction because we have returned with a slightly altered perspective – we see the world anew and with a twinge of appreciation that we had forgotten before that wonderful, quiet moment.

Now, we are ready to turn to the second part of the process called: Tikkun. Most of you are thinking “I know that word” and you're right – you have heard of *tikkun olam* – repairing the world – a euphemism for social action and good deeds. But we've already addressed how overwhelming this goal can feel so I'll return again to Rabbi Shapiro and his teachings here. He suggests a somewhat more modest version of that.

The word “tikkun” can be better translated into English as “realignment” or setting things right. In our day-to-day, we forget those truths we've been covering the last several minutes. When we remember who we are and what we are, then we realign ourselves with the Universe. As parts of this Divine Universe, equal in importance to absolutely everything else, then we have to admit that we are also capable of Divine things. This remembering is a spiritual Tikkun. And it will naturally lead us to *G'milut Chasadim* - Loving one another, lifting one another. We deserve kindness and love as Divine Beings and so, therefore, does every other person walking the planet. And contributing to that global balance sheet of mitzvahs, will leave us feeling happy having embodied our own Divinity.

Rabbi Isaac Luria was one of our earliest Mystics living in S'fat in the late 1500s. He used the imagery displayed on the tapestry behind me as a representation of his creation myth. In a nutshell: at the beginning of time, God created vessels to store all the divine energy of the universe, but they shattered in a Big Bang. The shards of the vessels fell to earth and are still all around us to this day. He taught us that our job is to lift them back up through our acts of holiness and, in so doing, realigning them with their spot – he said this would bring the Messiah to our world. I always misunderstood the point of the myth: I thought it was encouraging me to do my part to bring about the messiah. I now think the real message is summarized in title of Rabbi Robert Levine's book, “[There is no Messiah and you're it.](#)”<sup>7</sup> The idea of the Messiah may not speak to you – it certainly does not speak to me. I do not believe that my actions will be

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<sup>7</sup> Levine, Robert. [There Is No Messiah—and You're It: The Stunning Transformation of Judaism's Most Provocative Idea](#). Jewish Lights, NY: 2005.

tipping the Divine scales and convincing God that we finally merit the time to send the messiah. I don't believe that I am adding credit to my personal account of mitzvahs so that God will let me in to Heaven when I die. But I do, powerfully, believe that I am simply contributing to the amount of love and compassion that exists in the universe and that is more than good enough.

Teshuva suggests sitting down for a minute and seeing the big picture. Tikkun suggests standing up and getting to work bringing more love and alignment into the world. And this is step number three: deciding what is the right balance.

Are you going to get angry and let your frustration overtake you and poison your one and only chance at living this life? There are a few of you in this room who are consumed by your righteous rage. You're out there fighting the good fight. I'm so grateful for you, your leadership and your inspiration. But, I'm also concerned about the trauma to your soul caused by such tireless upset. For example, think of a famous fighter whose name you know, Greta Thunberg. She demonstrates a legendary and unyielding defense of the climate. But we also know that it almost tore her family apart. She spent Friday nights protesting instead of being with friends and she ruined her mother's career as a result of her extremism. What we see looks like she is chipping away at an iceberg of a problem. The immense scale means her progress is too small to be measured.

Like her, some of you are fighting a revolution against the wave of darkness you see expanding across the world. We need you and are inspired by you and we will help you. But remember that many revolutionaries find that they cannot live in the societies that they want to change due to their holy anger. Remember the story of Rabbi Shimon who was banished by God to a cave because he could not live in this world without his righteous anger consuming in fire everything upsetting that he saw. Only once he learned to calm down, was he permitted to return to the world of the living.<sup>8</sup> Dr. King famously wrote: "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."<sup>9</sup> You warriors for good, need to take an occasional Shabbat from doing battle to remember why you're doing so, in the first place.

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<sup>8</sup> b. Shabbat 33b.

<sup>9</sup> King, Dr. Martin Luther. "[Strength to Love](#)" 1963.

And there are many of you in this room who are not disturbed enough. You turn your attention away from the issues in order to live your lives. You turn off the news because you're so tired of hearing the same upsetting stories and you focus on the need to drive your kids around and to achieve your personal and professional goals. You too, must take a shabbat from those important tasks and get to know your anger more personally. And by that, I mean your upset at the world has not translated into acts of love and kindness. I will speak more about this tomorrow morning, but this is a central principle in the role we are able to play in the world.

Instead of chipping away at the proverbial iceberg, we should be building the proverbial hill of beans. There are an awful lot of little, yet holy, elements upon which we do have influence – but they require an intentional decision. Questions we have to ask ourselves and whose answers will make all the difference:

- Do I have the strength and will to smile at people when I'm upset.
- Can I find the good in people with whom I struggle?
- Can I step beyond my own needs and pick up the phone to call people who have no reason to expect it and tell them I was just thinking about them?
- Can I turn my attention from how much I do for others and how ungrateful they are and instead, look someone in the eye and tell them just how much I appreciate *them*?
- Do I have the self-confidence to listen deeply and respectfully to another and to genuinely feel appreciation and thank them for sharing their perspective?

We know that these things are not going to save the world, but they may save our place in it. We admit that they are not going to bring the messiah, but they might bring people together. There is no way that they will end global crises, but they may temper a personal crisis. And that may be enough.

I opened with the question: Is happiness the highest blessing we can offer our children? We all know that there will times when we are going to feel happy and at peace and other times when we will feel sad and upset. What's more, we now see that, not only is feeling sad,

scared, upset or overwhelmed not a failure, it can also be a blessing when it encourages toward holy acts of love and kindness bringing happiness to us and the world.

These days of Awe, we are encouraged to engage in *t'shuva*, a return. And *tikkun*, a repair. The *t'shuva* is internal and the *tikkun* is external. The first leads to the second and when we're lucky, engaging in *tikkun* can also lead to the inner peace and yes, happiness, of performing *t'shuva*. Striking the healthy balance of these two is what will leave us feeling satisfied and full of morally responsible, existential joy.

*Good Yontiv*