

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Mikeitz

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Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

30 Kislev, 5783

The Fax of Life

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December 24, 2022

GOOD MORNING! As we mentioned in last week's column, Hanukah celebrates one of the major philosophical differences between Judaism and the ancient Greek culture; while Greek culture promoted competition and a zero-sum gain life philosophy, Judaism promotes a culture of self-actualization and personal accomplishment, irrespective of others' achievements or failures.

One of the most disastrous aspects of social media is the constant value judgements that we make on our own lives based on how we perceive everyone else is living. This obsession with absorbing every minute detail in the lives of others and the addiction to "following" or commenting is a devastating statement on the vapidness and vacuousness of society.

We tend to forget that social media is almost all smoke and mirrors, and that often it's simply an outright lie. For the most part, we are all dealing with the same challenges – and those who put their lives on display frequently struggle even more with achieving true happiness, confidence, and self-worth. We should never assess our lives in comparison to the lives of others. The only looking glass in which we should judge ourselves is a mirror.

No one has a patent on happiness – it's simply part of the journey of our lives and we generally find it when we begin to appreciate our achievements and accomplishments. Happiness should not be a sought after destination, but rather it's a byproduct of an accomplished life. This reminds me of a story from a few years ago.

Toward the end of 2020, when concern over COVID began to wane but people were still reluctant to fly, a friend from the northeast drove down to visit me in South Florida. After a nice week together he drove back to his home in New York. When he got back he called to tell me that he had achieved something unique. Most people driving from Florida to New York see 10 different states (FL, GA, SC, NC, VA, MD, DE, PA, NJ, and NY), but he actually experienced 11 different states. When I asked him how he managed that, he told me that he was in a "state" of crippling depression.

I told him you can't count New York twice.

It is no accident that this week's Torah reading almost always falls out on Hanukah. In it we find a remarkable insight into life and a failsafe tool for knowing if you are a happy person. Perhaps even more importantly, this tool easily allows you to identify others who are happy as well. First a little background on the Torah portion:

Joseph, having been sold into slavery by his older brothers, suffers even further when he is falsely accused of attacking the wife of his master, which leads to an extended jail sentence.

During his incarceration he comes across two of Pharaoh's officers: the wine steward and the baker. Both the baker and the wine steward have enigmatic dreams. Joseph interprets both of their dreams as predictors of future events and, sure enough, events unfold exactly in the manner that Joseph predicted.

This week's Torah portion opens with Pharaoh himself experiencing two very vivid dreams. In the first, he is standing near the Nile when he sees seven nice looking, healthy cows emerge from the Nile and graze in the marsh grass. Suddenly, another seven cows, ugly and gaunt, emerge from the Nile and eat the healthy, nice looking cows.

He falls asleep again and has a second dream. In this dream he sees seven fat ears of grain growing from a single stalk. Suddenly, another seven ears, these being thin and emaciated, grow behind them and swallows up the seven fat ears of grain. He wakes with a start and is very troubled by these dreams.

Joseph is summoned to interpret the dreams and he tells Pharaoh that his country is about to experience seven good years followed by seven years of famine. Just as in the dream, the seven years of famine are going to totally obliterate the seven "good" years.

The great medieval commentator known as Rashi makes an extraordinary comment on this verse; "these (the seven nice looking cows) represent the seven years of satiety whereupon all creations look kindly at one another, no one begrudging anyone else."

Rashi seems to be changing the very meaning of the verse. Instead of translating "nice looking cows" as handsome cows, which is the literal translation, Rashi explains that it means they look kindly at one another.

Equally perplexing, it is commonly understood that Pharaoh's dreams represented that there were going to be seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine. Yet Rashi translates the "good years" as years of satiety not years of plenty or years of abundance. In interpreting the Torah, Rashi always strives for the simplest and most direct approach, why does he translate these words in such a novel way?

Rashi characterizes the “good” years as years of satiety and not years of abundance for a very simple reason: having an abundance doesn’t mean that one is happy or even satisfied. In other words, abundance and famine aren’t really antonyms; having a lot doesn’t necessarily mean you have enough. Having enough is usually a matter of perspective as we see in *Ethics of our Fathers* (4:1), “Ben Zoma says – who is a wealthy man? He who is happy with his lot.”

Unfortunately, today many people suffer from an insidious disease known as “affluenza” – the endless drive to acquire more; it is extremely contagious, infecting everyone around them. This disease is spread by our culture and social media. Regrettably, without the recognition that having more will do very little to make them happier, many people, sadly, sacrifice their lives to this empty pursuit.

Real happiness is achieved by obtaining personal satisfaction within oneself. For this reason, the message sent by the Almighty to Pharaoh is that the seven “good” years will be years of satiation; everyone will appreciate what they have and it will therefore be enough.

But this is a difficult standard to achieve. In fact, many people don’t even know if they are satisfied let alone happy with what they have. Therefore, Rashi imparts a brilliant insight and a lasting life lesson for knowing if you’re a happy person.

As we have said, the years of abundance weren’t measured in quantity but rather in perspective. If you want to know if you’re really happy, closely examine your reaction when you see other people obtain successes. Are you happy for them or are you a little bitter?

When your neighbor gets a new car and you need one as well, are you happy for him or do you begrudge him a little? If your childhood friend suddenly becomes wealthy and buys a beautiful home and takes stunning vacations, are you genuinely happy for her or are you a little jealous and resentful? How about if your cousin’s child gets accepted to Harvard while your child is struggling to gain entrance to a local university? Are you happy for them or are you a little bitter?

If the latter, then you aren’t happy or satisfied with your own life. This is why Rashi translates the verse not as “handsome” cows, but rather that they looked kindly at one another. They represented years of satiety because they looked at each other in a kindly manner. That happiness for another’s success is the key indicator that you are satisfied with yourself.

This is particularly important when looking for a meaningful relationship, regardless of whether it’s a romantic relationship, a business relationship, or a friendship. If the person is genuinely happy for others’ successes and achievements, then they have a healthy self-image. This means that the relationship will not be burdened by their insecurities or narcissistic needs. Therefore, it is possible – even likely – to establish a deep connection with that person based on mutual support and generosity of spirit.

This is the critical life lesson learned from this week’s Torah portion – and the overarching theme of Hanukah. As mentioned last week, Hanukah is the one occasion when we are able to make a blessing on the accomplishment of others (when someone else lights the menorah). So pay attention to your loved ones’ achievements and you will find an innate sense of your own level of happiness. I wish you a very HAPPY Hanukah!

TORAH PORTION: Mikeitz, Genesis 41:1 - 44:17

Pharaoh dreams of cows and sheaves and demands for someone to interpret his dreams. The wine butler remembers Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams. They bring Joseph from the jail. Pharaoh acknowledges the truth of Joseph’s interpretation (that there would be seven good years followed by seven years of famine) and raises Joseph to second-in-command of the whole country with the mandate to prepare for the famine.

Ten of Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt to buy food; Joseph recognizes them, but they don’t recognize him. Joseph accuses them of being spies and puts them through a series of machinations in order to get them to bring his brother Benjamin to Egypt. Then Joseph frames Benjamin for stealing his special wine goblet.

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 4:05 Miami 5:17 Cape Town 7:39 Guatemala 5:21 Hong Kong 5:28 Honolulu 5:37

🕯️ Jo’Burg 6:42 LA 4:30 London 3:39 Melbourne 8:24 Mexico 5:46 Moscow 3:40 New York 4:14 Singapore 6:46 Toronto 4:26

“QUOTE OF THE WEEK”: Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city.
– George Burns

Dedicated with Deep Appreciation to
Elaine Grover



Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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