

"WHAT HAPPINESS IS NOT"

Ever since the modern era began and the Founding Fathers of this nation proclaimed man's natural rights to the "pursuit of happiness," we have been doing just that -- pursuing happiness breathlessly, relentlessly, almost fanatically.

But happiness has proved to be quite an elusive prize. We have discovered an amazing paradox: the more ^{the} pursuit, the less ^{the} happiness! We have begun to wonder if, when we finally attain our goal, we will not be too spent and tired to enjoy it. Even more, we have been wondering whether or not it is at all attainable!

Therefore, more recently, thoughtful people have ^{undertaken} ~~begun on~~ a process of introspection: what is that happiness that we try so hard to get for ourselves?

A whole range of answers have ^s ~~be~~ been suggested: from housing and full employment and anti-poverty to more use of leisure; from the unspoken but very real motive of status to such charming irrelevancies as, "happiness is a warm puppy."

This week, which is our zeman simhatenu, our season of happiness, let us discuss not what happiness is -- that might take too long -- but rather what happiness is not. Perhaps that way we will at least be spared blundering on the wrong roads in pursuit of a phantom.

Let us begin with a halakhah codified by Maimonides in his Mishneh Torah: ~~Code of Jewish Law~~:

כשאדם אוכל ושותה ושמה ברגל לא ימשך בין ובשחוק ובקלות ראש

ויאמר שכל מי שיוסיף בזה ירבה במצוה שמחה, שהשכרות והשחוק

הרבה וקלות ראש אינה שמחה אלא הוללות וסכלות (פ"ו מהל' יו"ט ה"כ)

"When a man eats and drinks and is happy on the festival, let him not over-indulge in wine, and in jesting, and in levity, saying to himself that whoever does this thereby observes more fully the commandment to be happy; for drunkenness and jesting and levity are not at all simhah or happiness; they

are merely madness and folly."

These, then, are three things that happiness is not: shikrut, drunkenness; sehok, jesting; and kalut rosh, light-headedness or levity.

But perhaps someone may argue: how does Maimonides know all this? Can we really trust his observations and accept them as valid? The Rambam was, after all, a sober philosopher, a Talmudic scholar, and something of an ascetic, who ate no more than two meals a day and even then made sure always to leave the table hungry!

So, then, let a man of much greater experience speak: ~~I have in mind, of course,~~ Koheleth, whose words we read earlier today, and who by his own testimony had devoted himself whole-heartedly to the pursuit of happiness. I believe his words in Chapter II of the Book of Koheleth are the source of the law codified by the Rambam.

At the end of Chapter I, Koheleth concludes on a sad and pessimistic note: Life, he says, is full of kaas and makhov, full of pain and bitter frustration. The question then is: how do we overcome this vexatiousness, this bitterness and frustration in life? How do we attain simhah? How can we be successful in the pursuit of happiness?

To this question Koheleth dedicates his second chapter.

He begins by announcing that he is going to try to experience, by himself, the various solutions that have been suggested. Thus he says: אמרהי אני

בלבי לכה-נא אנסכה בשמחה וראא בטוב

(2:1), I said to myself: I shall try my hand at simhah, I will have a "good time." How does one do that? Here Koheleth mentions the three methods discussed by Maimonides.

The first of them is clear enough: תרתי בלבי למשך בין אה בשרי

(2:3). I decided to pamper myself with wine. If life seems painful, if existence is filled with sharp agonies, then perhaps it is best to take to drink and drown one's sorrows. This is the answer of shikrut -- it means overwhelming the senses either by pleasure or immorality or narcotics or liquor, or any other excess.

Solomon tries this technique, but he is not happy with it. It simply does not work. For after the spirits are spent, the spirit remains just as low. Sooner or later you must wake up, rise out of the drunken stupor, and face the sober facts of makhov and kaas. The facts of life, the frustration and pain, remain unchanged even when covered with the haze of drunkenness.

There was a time when shikrut was practiced by the extremes of our society -- by the lowest class which used it as a means to shield itself against the unbearable misery of harsh poverty, and also by members of the very highest, and often corrupt, class of society. They indulged in intoxication because *they*, *they* very rich, had learned something that the poor never believe: that there is a privation even worse than the poverty of material means, that there is a misery that no amount of wealth can *mitigate* ~~make disappear~~. They took to drink in order to get rid of the boredom that afflicted them; ~~for boredom was for them~~ the dim and painful consciousness of the howling emptiness of life.

Today, however, the situation seems far worⁿse. No doubt all of us were shocked beyond belief by the dreadful news of shikrut in the highest of our social classes, in Darien, Connecticut, *but* this time not by adults, but by teen-agers! Those who have not yet had the opportunity to savor the bitter cup of life, those who are well protected and pampered and have never tasted kaas or makhov, they too have taken to drunkenness in their "pursuit of happiness." Even more dreadful was the fact that they were aided and abetted by their parents and teachers and psychiatrists! Perhaps most shocking of all was the fact that after the judge sentenced these adults to prison terms, they responded with righteous indignation at the fact that the judge dared to *send* ~~sentence~~ them to jail, forgetting

that their criminal stupidity and own vulgar standards had caused the death of a young girl in an accident. Woe to us if our addiction to the wrong kind of pursuit of the wrong kind of happiness has led to such a situation!

Koheleth then proceeds to the second definition of happiness. He discovers that sehok is indeed what happiness is not. Having "fun," buying all that your heart desires, attempting to distract yourself from the harsh realities of life by multiplying possessions, simply will not work. For Koheleth knows: he is a man who has hurled himself into unprecedented opulence. Listen to his own vivid description, a catalogue of the various forms of sehok of a man of fantastic wealth:

(2:4-10) *Handwritten circled reference*

וַיְהִי כִּי בָנִיתִי לִי בָתִּים נִטְעָהִי לִי כַרְמִים

I went on a splurge, I got myself as many possessions as I could, I built myself mansions and planted vinyards.

עָשִׂיתִי לִי גִנוּחַ וּפְרָדְסִים... עָשִׂיתִי לִי

I purchased gardens and orchards, outdoor

~~I purchased gardens and orchards,~~ outdoor brooks and indoor swimming pools, I

hired for myself maids and servants and butlers and chauffeurs. בָּנִיתִי לִי גַם

I made a lot of money, possessed gold and silver, purchased the most precious antiques of royalty, and indulged in all the pleasures of man. And I did so with splendid

abandon: -- I had more

וְגִדְלִיתִי וְהוֹסַפְתִּי מְכַל שֶׁהִיא לִפְנֵי כִירוֹשָׁלַיִם

than any man before me in the history of this city!

I did not deny myself anything that my eyes saw, I did not refuse my heart any form of simhah or happiness that it desired. For, כִּי לְבַי שִׂמְחָה מְכַל עִמָּלִי

my heart was happy and joyous in all this that I had ~~had~~ earned. After all,

-- I deserve this; you live only once, and you

might as well enjoy it. And so, thousands of years ago, Koheleth tried out the

technique of sehok, and almost as if he were a modern, hypnotized himself with

that most contemporary of all mitzvot, "enjoy, enjoy!"

But did this proliferation of objects, of things, of possessions, help him to

attain the happiness he sought? Of course not! וְהִנֵּה הַכֹּל הַבֵּל וְרֵעוּת רוּחַ וְאִין יִתְרוֹן חַחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ

No 47

it is all foolishness, a striving after wind, the pursuit of a phantom! The frustration and the pain and the bitterness all remain. The distractions of sehok are ineffective; you fool only yourself -- and even then you must sooner or later come to your senses. The agonizing reality protrudes behind the mask of "fun." As any mother can tell you, no matter how many toys you give to the child when you take him to the dentist, the drilling still hurts! No, possessions and wealth do not necessarily bring happiness. It is even possible that one becomes more miserable in all this opulence, ^{even as one becomes more lonely in a large crowd,} for his very possessions mock him, as if saying, "now that you have us -- you still have nothing!" Sehok is not the answer to the ^{quest for} ~~meaning of~~ happiness.

But Koheleth is no ordinary man. He is a philosopher; and therefore, if shikrut or sehok do not work, he has his last and perhaps his **saving** grace: he will try to banish pain and frustration from life with philosophy. He will adopt ^{for} himself the third technique, that of kalut rosh: light-headedness. He will tell himself that nothing can hurt him and that nothing can help him, that it makes no difference whether life deals him pain or pleasure. He simply does not care.

Listen to Koheleth: וְשָׂנֵאתִי אֲנִי אֶת הַחַיִּים... וְשָׂנֵאתִי אֲנִי אֶת כָּל עֲמָלִי שָׂאֲנִי

עַמַל תְּהֵה הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ (2:17,18,20). I despise life, I have contempt

for all man's meaningless and senseless striving, I ~~adopt for myself~~ ^(like a true modern!) the philosophy of despair. Here, Koheleth ^{raises} hevel to the level of a philosophy. It will shield him against life's difficulties. All is vanity, nothing counts.

A thousand years ago the philosopher Saadia, in the introduction to his major work, the Emunot Ve'Deot, ^{told} ~~tells~~ us that this is indeed one of the major reasons why people leave Judaism: they say, ein davar -- "it does not matter." They adopt a philosophic unconcern with life, hoping that perhaps that will help. Anyone who has taught college students will recognize this nihilism. You try with all your power to engage their minds and their hearts, their whole being, and all you get is: "so what?" They live at dead center, and seemingly nothing can shift them from it. This is the real, literal meaning of the word ^S kalut rosh -- "lightness of the head," the espousal of a mental attitude of nothingness, not

caring one way or the ^{an} other.

But then Koheleth discovers that this too is of no avail. **כי מה הוה לאדם**

בכל עמלו ורעיון לבו (2:22). It does no good to adopt an attitude of this sort. It is of no ~~real~~ help to me in real life. I have merely tried to escape from reality with rayon libi, with a manufactured, artificial philosophy. It does not help: **כי כל ימיו מכאו בים וכעס ענינו גם בלי לה**

לא שכב לבו (2:23), For the harsh realities remain: kaas and makhov, bitterness and pain, are still there; for all my philosophy, I still can not sleep at night. And therefore the stoicism, the indifferentism, the apathy, the "detachment" of a philosophy of hevel, is in itself haval havalim! The idea that nothing matters -- itself does not matter! **גם זה הבל הוא** (2:23) -- this too is vanity. It does not work. It still hurts. Behind all the sophisticated words of the philosopher, there stand the immoveable, painful realities which simply will not go away. Solomon still has not attained happiness or simhah.

So, then, none of these is the answer to what happiness is: neither shikrut, overwhelming the senses with drink; not sehok, distracting the heart with possessions; nor kalut rosh, lightening the ^{by busying it up} mind ~~is~~ burdened with artificial ideas. All of these are what happiness is not.

What, then, is happiness or simhah? The answer is not within the purview of this talk. To give even half of a proper answer would simply take too long. But in order not to end on a negative note, let us merely sketch in the outline of a hint that the Torah gives us.

Simhah or happiness is reserved by the Torah especially for the festivals, and most especially for the three "pilgrim" festivals, those holidays when the Jew in the Holy Land was commanded to make a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem.

-- שלש פעמים בשנה יראה כל זכורך את פני ה' אלקיך

on these three holidays we were commanded to visit the House of God and there to be happy. This, then, is the way to happiness; here is the road for the proper

pursuit of simḥah. It means that, wherever you are geographically, you must be aware spiritually of the fact that you are lifnei ha-Shem, before God, that you live in the face of God.

To be happy, in the Jewish sense, does not mean to ignore life's hardships and pain. Instead, simḥah means the knowledge that I am not alone in my difficulties, that God sympathizes with me, that my pain is not senseless. Simḥah means that there is hope; or better -- that there is meaning in life. For, better pain that is purposeful than pleasure that is pointless. Better a hard life hallowed by a touch of holiness, than a soft life in which man sinks into swamps of sensuality and which ultimately drives him insane from solitude.

In the words of Maimonides, at the end of the halakhah we quoted, ולא נצטוינו

-- על ההוללות והסכלות אלא על השמחה שיש בה עבודה יוצר הכל

we were commanded to be happy, not to be mad or foolish; and that means the kind of happiness which entails the service of the Creator of all. Happiness, then, is the hope that the יוצר הכל, the Creator of disease will also create for us healing; that He who created pain will create ^{the} balm; that He who created failure will give us triumph; that He who made frustration will grant us fulfillment; that He who gave us loneliness will bless us with fellowship.

Or, in the concluding words of Koheleth himself, he who knew so well what happiness is not: סוף דבר הכל נשמע, the sum and substance of everything, after all has been said and done, is: אה האלקים ירא ואה מצותיו שמר: "Fear God and observe His commandments." Place yourself lifnei ha-Shem, constantly and ceaselessly in the presence of God, align yourself with His will, כי זה כל האדם, for this is the totality of man in his genuine and blessed pursuit of authentic simḥah.