

WHERE CAN WE FIND HAPPINESS? A sermon by Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard, DHL, DD
Temple Beth Am, August 1978

When the United States of America was first founded, our Declaration of Independence stated that every citizen of our democracy was entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I am certain that if we had the chance to get Thomas Jefferson and the other authors of the Declaration to tell us what they meant by the phrase "the pursuit of happiness" that we would get not one but several definitions. Since I know something about Mr. Jefferson and his philosophy, I believe that he would define "happiness" much the same as the authors of the Hebrew Bible. The latter, like Mr. Jefferson, were farmers who, nonetheless, had a high literary education. The Bible tells us that the greatest happiness is for a person to see the reward of his hard labor. The Bible uses this imagery; the great reward is to eat the fruit from a tree that one has himself planted. I think that Jefferson would have a similar idea of the meaning of happiness.

Modern Americans, however, seem to interpret the pursuit of happiness differently. Our emphasis is on the word pursuit. For us, happiness is a condition or goal that must be searched after, often frantically, before it miraculously or accidentally comes into being. It seldom occurs to modern Americans that happiness is the end result of our honest labors. If we believed that, we wouldn't be travelling so far or so rapidly, hoping desperately to find that mysterious something called happiness.

It would be fair to say that only in modern times has happiness been thought of as something detached from very elementary things. In times past, happiness was associated with earning a living, sharing a modest home, getting married and having children. Since goals were small in former days, people were easily satisfied. It was the rare person who had more than a minimum success, so most people never dreamed of being a millionaire or travelling around the world or having a variety of love affairs. Because one's neighbors were not people of means, it was possible for individuals to be satisfied with relatively little. Because life had so little adventure, and because the possibilities for variation were limited, people grew accustomed to imperfections. They made the best of things. It is amazing how much unhappiness can result from the fact that one has great ambition or because one magnifies imperfections. I must say to you that the most unhappy people I have ever known are those who were impelled to search the most frantically for happiness. On the other hand, the happiest people I have known are those who seem to find great meaning in little things and who are able to gloss over the difficult conditions in which they might live. It is for this reason that the Rabbi quoted in the Talmud said, "Who is happy? He who is able to rejoice in his lot. Mi sahmayach, ha-sahmayach b'chelko". Who is happy? He who is able to rejoice in what he has.

If there is one quality we rich Americans do not have, it is the ability to rejoice in what we have.

Now you may say, Rabbi, you aren't asking us not be ambitious or adventurous, are you? You aren't asking us not to try to better ourselves? Of course not, but I tell you that if you cannot be happy with what you

have now, you will never be happy. The deepest happiness is not a distant station you arrive at, it is a manner of travelling. That is to say, the most profound kind of happiness is not a prize you win, it is the attitude of mind and spirit with which you go through life. Happiness is really an inner matter. Many a person who is not rich and who is not a success in his vocation is, nonetheless, happy, and many a person overwhelmed with riches is bitter and miserable. Happiness is not dependent on one's outer condition but on one's inner condition.

If this is true, then we Americans have been deluded. The very phrase in our Declaration of Independence leads us astray, for it speaks of the pursuit of happiness, as if happiness were something we would have to go in search of. The great minds, however, tell us that most of us do not undertake in the pursuit of happiness with the purpose of improving upon ourselves. We search instead for excitement, for sensual pleasure, for thrills. We may find some of these on occasion, but we will also find, to use the prophet's image, that when we attempt to store these experiences so that they can support us in some future need, we find that we have placed them in a bag full of holes. The American writer Emerson has said, "each person is a collecting principle, gathering more of himself to himself". This is a way of saying that in our pursuit and searching what we manage to find is only an expression, an image of what we already are. Emerson would have us believe that there is nothing really new out there for us; there is only more of the same, so what we have to do if we really want to be happy is to try to remake our inner selves on the very spot where we stand.

This wisdom has been expressed by different wise men in different ways. Philo, the great Jewish philosopher of 2,000 years ago said, "The greatest knowledge is the knowledge of God". If you really try to know God, taught Philo, you will find such peace of mind and spirit that it will saturate everything you say and do. Mahatma Ghandi did not speak of God, but he said much of the same thing. He said, "Each one has to find his peace from within, and peace to be real must be unaffected by outside circumstances". James Allen wrote "people are anxious to improve their circumstances but are unwilling to improve themselves; they therefore remain bound".

All of these great thinkers are telling us the same thing. You can thrash around becoming rich or wear yourself out trying to experience all kinds of physical pleasures, but in the end, you will be happy only when you have become a person who does not have to rely on material wealth or constant entertainment. William Saroyan put it this way, "The greatest happiness you can have is knowing that you do not necessarily require happiness"! This was his way of saying that what we moderns call happiness is not what we require. Deep down, we all need something else.

There seem to be two parts to this deeper happiness of which the wise men speak. The first part teaches us to limit our wants, much as the person who wants to lose weight to become healthier, limits his intake of food. The second step to the deeper happiness is to develop a real perspective and inner frame of mind which guides us in everything we do.

People often ask me, "Rabbi, do you pray regularly, and if so, how do you pray?" To this question I answer, "Each morning when I awaken, I say a brief prayer from the Psalms. It goes this way; This is the day

which the Lord hath made, let me be glad and rejoice in it. Zeh ha-yom shaher ah-sah Ahdonai, na-gilah v'nism'cha bo".

The Psalm teaches that this day with its good and bad happenings, this day with its small successes and large disappointments, is after all, God's creation, and, as such, it is blessed and is to be revered. I recite these words to help orient myself to appreciate the little things that this day will bring to me. You see, the secret is in appreciating the little things.

If you come to my office, and you are all invited, you will see some ancient and some modern books with the teachings of famous men, but you will also see a paper flower cut out by a small child and give to me by that child. I treasure the paper flower as if it were a Rembrant or a work by Michaelangelo. You see a gift from a child's hand, imperfect as it may be, but given in free and joyous spirit is a gift to be treasured. When I am most overcome with troubles of my profession, I look at that crude flower and smile, and the load slips over my shoulders.

I am blessed now with a grandson who is six months old. He has discovered his voice, so he yells out his nonsense syllables in stentorian tones. How much more pleaseing is this than the cultured orations of a learned adult! As Kahlil Gibran has said, "Who can tell if the crystal is but the mist in decay". Who can tell if the imagined glorious end product of all human searching is but a pittance compared to the importance of our first infantile efforts?

Now, of course, I am not telling you not to strive for greater knowledge and skills, but I am saying, be sure to enjoy every step along the way, as if it were the greatest achievement. As someone has said, be sure to enjoy the flowers when you walk down the path of life. If you are only interested in what lies at the end of the path, you will miss life's greatest meaning.

Just before World War II, while I was waiting to be inducted, I took a temporary job with a naval supply unit in my home town of Norfolk, Virginia. I will never forget the man who was the supervisor of our office. He was a man with little education. I don't think he even was graduated from High School, but this was a very unusual man. Each day when we sat down to eat our paper bag lunches, he would take out his sweet potato or his pear of his banana, and recite an impassioned tribute to the article of food. I especially remember his impromptu ode to the sweet potato. "Man", he declared as he held the potato up, "have you ever seen such a magnificent specimen in your life?" Then he would gobble up the potato as if it were the most precious gourmet food. This man knew how to be happy. He knew how to glorify the everyday thing.

This man, whose name was Pines, did not have to travel around the world to find happiness. He found it every day at lunch time eating a sweet potato. "Who is happy," the Rabbi asks in the Talmud, and answers, "he who is able to rejoice in what he has."

Pines was a man who felt at home in the world. He felt the world was a friendly place which every day yielded its charms and goodies to him. More sophisticated people usually have a more difficult time feeling at home in the world. We began to ask all sorts of questions, like, what is

the purpose of life, and does God care about me? Pines didn't have to ask these questions. Being content, he didn't worry about life's purpose. Having the talent for enjoying things, he didn't have to ask if God loved him. He knew that God loved him.

In this sense, Pines was a blessed and fortunate person, but many of us are not able to feel as he did. We seem to have grown up with some abiding anxiety and feeling of inadequacy. Our hunger is never satiated. We work and run feverishly to satisfy our hunger, but, we are never able to sing the ode to the sweet potato or to anything else. How so we solve this kind of problem?

Sigmund Freud and others in the field of psychology tell us that much of the unhappiness in adult life is due to the events of our life when we were young. An over-demanding father, a cold mother, siblings who were more successful than we--any of these conditions could scar our psyche and make it difficult for us to be happy in later life. Psychologists would recommend that for such a person, professional counselling can be helpful. I personally believe very much in the effectiveness of psychological counselling, and I commend it to all of you. It is one of the tools, within easy reach, that we would be wise to use, if needed.

Religion has its own approach to healing the unhappy soul. Judaism teaches that each of us is created in the image of the divine; each of us is loved by God, and each of us, in spite of his ongoing inadequacies, is considered by God worthy. Judaism teaches that God does not measure us in terms of grades or percentage points. In God's eyes, there is no higher and no lower, there are only human beings in need and worthy of His help and love. We of religious faith believe that through prayer we can relate to God and be assured of our belongingness in the universal family.

Judaism is a humanistically oriented religion. It channels our thoughts and attention not only to God but to other human beings. It teaches that happiness can be found in helping other people. Einstein, the great Jewish scientist, wrote that for him there could be no personal happiness that was not joined to his effort to help others. Thomas Mann has placed this thought in beautiful imagery. He wrote, "Happiness is a perfume. You can't pour it on others without getting some on yourself!" So we would say that it is fitting to help others, not only as a matter of righteousness, but also because in helping others we release that kind of inner balm which heals our own melancholy and depression.

There is such a thing, of course, as being so concerned about others, that you mar your own happiness. Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, said, "I desire not happiness, if it be an island, in a sea of misery". Franz Rosensweig, who was so filled with a sense of the suffering of mankind declared, "Happiness and life are two different things". We might call this mood of Herzl and Rosensweig, the saintly or prophetic mood. If it moves us to social action and to help others, then it has its great purpose. If it moves us only to despair, then it is destructive and not, in my opinion, what God seeks from us.

I am convinced that God wants us to be happy. He wants us to sing an ode

to the sweet potato and to rejoice in the gurglings of tiny infants. But he wants us also to know how to suffer with others; he wants us to know how to cry about human misery. The psalms tell us that "the sacrifices of God are a broken heart". This is true. God wants these sacrifices from us if they are rooted in compassion and concern, but He wants not only this. He wants us to dance before the holy ark as King David did, and he wants us to pray as the psalmist did when he said, "THIS IS THE DAY WHICH THE LORD HATH MADE; LET ME BE GLAD AND REJOICE IN IT".