

“Happy” New Year
Rosh Hashanah 2023/5784
Rabbi Allison Lee Poirier

Shanah Tovah, welcome to the year 5784! As we spend this day wishing each other a Shanah Tovah, I thought it would be important to investigate what this greeting really means. In Hebrew, we wish people a “shanah tovah u’metukah,” a good and sweet new year. This is quite different from the English greeting “happy new year,” although we often use the two greetings interchangeably. Regardless of which language we use, what exactly are we wishing for one another when we wish a shanah tovah, and what can we do to make those wishes come to fruition?

In our tradition and liturgy the word most often used to mean “happiness” is *sameach*, like when we wish each other a “*chag sameach*, happy holiday” on most of our other holidays. When we extend this greeting on the other *yontheiven* we are in fact encouraging each other to not just have a good time, but also to fulfill a very important mitzvah! In the book of Dvarim, we are commanded “*v’samachta v’hagecha, v’hayita ach sameach*, you shall rejoice on your festivals and you shall be happy.”¹ This verse is particularly interesting, because it presents happiness as a commandment. You must be happy, or at least behave happily, on the

¹ Dvarim 16:14

festival days. Talmud and tradition suggest this includes saying a festival kiddush blessing over wine and a special meal, perhaps also engaging in song and dance, and dressing up in nice clothes. In this sense, “sameach” appears to be a verb related to the way we behave, and the sequence of verbs in this verse - you shall rejoice and then you shall BE happy - implies that we hope that our behavior will impact the way we feel.

The eighteenth century Hasidic rabbi, Nachman of Breslov, also considered simcha to be a mitzvah, in fact he is famously quoted in verse and song as saying “mitzvah gdola lhiyot basimcha tamid, it is a great Mitzvah to be happy all the time.”² This is quite a serious statement coming from Rebbe Nachman, who famously struggled with depression and whose writing reflects on his personal inclination toward negativity and despair. In addition to his personal struggles, he also wrote and preached primarily for Jews living in the Pale of Russia, a marginalized audience that was accustomed to poverty and oppression. Yet he encouraged people to shake off their despair and strive for happiness as the remedy to complacency. In his view, happiness is neither trite nor simple nor easy to achieve, rather it is a lofty goal to work towards for oneself and for all of humanity.

² Likkutei Maharash 2:24

Why? What is so important about simcha that sages throughout the ages have asserted that happiness is a commanded necessity? They understand that behaving in a happy way can have a serious material effect on oneself and on the entire community. This assertion is shared by author and activist adrienne maree brown who writes that “work and life lived in the realms of satisfaction, joy, and aliveness bring about social and political change.”³ By demanding joy, happiness, and satisfaction from our lives, we set a standard for the way we expect to be treated and the way we treat others, thereby refusing to accept oppression or mistreatment. We must live our lives joyfully in order to recognize, desire, and seek this experience for ourselves and others. Our tradition suggests that we “samachta, behave joyously” even when we don’t feel like it, because it knows that once we get a taste of happiness, we will continue to pursue it. As adrienne maree brown further writes, “Once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of.”⁴ On the flip side, this explains why suppressing joy is disempowering, because it lowers our standards and accustoms us to mistreatment.

³ adrienne maree brown. *Pleasure Activism*, 13

⁴ adrienne maree brown. *Pleasure Activism*, 31

Embracing moments of joy, even and perhaps especially when it is difficult, is a mode of combatting the evil forces that surround us. By lifting up moments of joy, we shine an example on how life **can** be. This is why writers, illustrators, and media producers know it is so important to depict marginalized communities in moments and settings of joy. It's not good for children - of any color - to only learn about Black communities in the context of slavery and oppression. They must also learn about the joys of Black culture, hair, music, family, etc. Kleaver Cruz, founder of The Black Joy Project, explains, "Black Joy is about using that joy as an entry into understanding the oppressive forces we navigate through as a means to imagine and create a world free of them."⁵

Similarly, It's not good for children of any faith to learn about Jews exclusively through the lens of the Holocaust. As author Jaime Herndon explains, "there is so much more to Jews and Judaism. We are not the worst thing that has happened to us. It is important for children, teens, and adults — both Jewish and not - to know this."⁶ In addition to serious understanding of the Shoah, they must also learn that Jews are alive and thriving and celebrating holidays today. Showing children and adults about the ways marginalized or oppressed communities continue to experience

⁵ [Elaine Nichols. "Black Joy: Resistance, Resilience, Reclamation."](#)

⁶ [Jaime Herndon: Jewish YA Books: More than the Holocaust. Book Riot. October 27th 2021.](#)

joy in the face of oppression teaches them that all communities deserve to live and thrive, and teaches them to strive for a world in which this is even more true.

Viewed in this light, happiness becomes a value and an activist stance. A popular Israeli nightclub song by Omer Adam declares a “mahapecha shel simcha, a revolution of happiness.” The revolution of happiness mandates a world of true happiness - safety, joy, contentment, satisfaction - for all of humanity because “*kulanu mishpacha*, we are all family.” In the context of an Israeli dance club there is certainly a little lightheartedness involved, but this is more substantive than a call for a hedonistic free-for-all. It is a call “*l’hafuch*, to overturn” the world so that happiness is accessible for all. As adrienne maree brown writes, “we all need and deserve pleasure, and our social structures must reflect this...by tapping into the potential goodness in each of us, we can generate Justice and liberation, growing a healing abundance where we have been socialized to believe only scarcity exists.”⁷

Let us be careful not to mistake happiness with carelessness or complacency. These commandments to “Samachta v’hagecha” or “lhiyot bsimcha tamid” **ought not be misconstrued as directives to make do with what we have or to take for ourselves to the exclusion of**

⁷ adrienne maree brown. *Pleasure Activism*, 13

others. Rather, they are commandments to pursue that which makes us happy and to demand that standard of contentment for ourselves and those around us. In this morning's Haftarah reading, we see a very important example of someone who continues to pursue what she deserves. Year after year, Hannah goes to the temple in Shiloh and prays for a child. Her husband Elkanah asks her, "why do you cry? Aren't I enough for you?"⁸ but she persists. She is relentless in pursuit of the joy she knows she is capable of and deserves, and eventually she is rewarded with the birth of her son, the prophet Samuel.

In her persistence, Hannah understood something that Rabbi Nachman also writes about. He asserts, "asur l'hitya'esh. It is forbidden to despair." Many contemporary psychologists have suggested that Rabbi Nachman was chronically and clinically depressed, and we can understand that he did not declare this prohibition lightly. This directive is not happy go lucky or pollyannaish, he is not suggesting that people can simply change their minds to "don't worry, be happy." Rather, this is a directive to seek happiness **in spite of** or perhaps even **to combat your worries**. A true "mahapecha shel simcha," a true "revolution of happiness," would require us take Rabbi Nachman's assertion that it is "Asur l'hityaesh,

⁸ 1 Samuel 1:10

forbidden to despair” as seriously as we take the prohibition against mixing milk and meat. It would require that even in our dark moments, or our everyday dull moments, we **refuse** to despair.

This is no small or simple feat and there are times when we cannot combat despair or find happiness on our own. The prohibition against despair holds true even, and perhaps especially, in those moments. One might reasonably argue that serious consideration of the prohibition against despair would require that we seek support, treatment, and, when necessary, medication to combat the darkness we cannot shake off on our own. Mental healthcare in this country can be expensive and difficult to access, requiring people to employ skills that, by definition of their illness, they have trouble using. It might be quite a long journey to get from a place of darkness to a place of light. But the command “asur l’hityaesh” is commanding us to go on that long and arduous journey. And just as we are compelled to support fellow Jews in their pursuit of mitzvot, we are all, everyone in this room, obligated to love and support our friends and neighbors on their quest to access the mental health support they need to fulfill the mitzvah “asur l’hityaesh.”

In addition to medical and professional support, how can we take steps in our everyday lives to reject despair and instead seek happiness?

Aristotle defined happiness as *eudaemonia*, literally a “good spirit” or “divine state” that would come in and out of our lives only if and when we invite it. He suggests that although we cannot control all the physical attributes of our environment that contribute to happiness, we have a perpetual responsibility to open the door for *eudaemonia* by pursuing happiness in the ways we can control, and opening our hearts to happiness in the realms that are beyond our power.

One critical step in opening our hearts to happiness is taking care of ourselves. The term “self care” has become so trendy it is almost meaningless, but let’s put some meaning back into the phrase. Let’s stop saying “self care” in air quotes, or apologizing for the time we spend taking care of ourselves. Let us please try to stop feeling guilty about it, because the emotional energy we spend feeling guilty gets in the way of feeling the happiness the self care was supposed to bring, and makes the whole endeavor a sad waste of time. As Audre Lorde famously wrote, “Caring for ourselves is not self indulgence, it is self preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”⁹ **Self care is important, not indulgent!**

Seen another way, indulgence is a critical act of care! Take a luxurious bath. Treat yourself to a special meal. Wear clothes that make you **feel**

⁹ Audre Lorde quoted in adrienne maree brown. *Pleasure Activism*, 59

good. Blast a silly song and jump around, or stand still to bask in a silent moment. Whatever you enjoy, really lean into the meaning of that word: IN JOY, as in, take joy IN that moment knowing that you deserve the joy you are experiencing.

Caring for ourselves demonstrates how much we value ourselves, and shows other people they should value us, too. I am sure that everyone in this room is familiar with the Jewish principle that each human is created b'tzelem elohim, in the image of God. Since we are created in God's Image, caring for our hearts and minds and bodies is akin to caring for the Divine. This principle affirms that pursuit of sincere happiness is neither trivial nor selfish, because by taking care of ourselves, we are in fact taking care of a very important divine piece of the world.

As we open the door for our own happiness, we might also hold it open for others to pass through with us, and find that we quite enjoy the company. Sharing joy with others is another important way of pursuing and promoting happiness that has tremendous ramifications beyond just ourselves. For example, yesterday evening I saw our high holiday Sound & Video Producer, Donnamarie, for the first time since the last high holiday season. She proudly showed me her new Tshirt which declares that she has successfully summited all 48 mountains over 4,000 feet in the state of NH,

an accomplishment my parents completed last year and a goal I someday aspire to. We all derive deep spiritual nourishment and personal satisfaction from our hiking experiences, and we love to share our wisdom and our successes with each other. In fact, I introduced my mother to Donnamarie so they could discuss the ins and outs of one of the most challenging hikes. This is what hikers do: we learn from others and we are glad to pay it forward when someone asks our advice. Donnamarie sent us the most exuberant photos at the end of her trip, and hearing about her success in person yesterday made me so excited that I literally jumped up and down and clapped my hands here in our lobby. I looked very silly, but this was an outpouring of genuine joy at a friend's accomplishment. In the hiking community, sharing our joy truly multiplies it, and I am sure the same is true for people who are passionate about many other sports, hobbies, and interests.

Whether it is sharing excitement over a similar interest, laughing together at a great joke, or simply being proud and happy for a friend, shared joy creates deep and meaningful bonds. "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not

shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.”¹⁰ This joy inevitably reverberates around the world while bringing its echo back to the original sharer. And, as so many authors cited already today agree, “The best way of trying to change the world is the one that will offer you happiness too.”¹¹

As I mentioned Friday evening, all of my sermons this season are about the mitzvot and middot, the commandments and values, that can lead us to more satisfaction and fulfillment in the coming year. Ramban believes in the cause and effect relationship between observing the mitzzvot and living a good life, one that fulfills us and benefits those around us. The verse from Dvarim agrees - if you behave joyously on your holidays, you will eventually come to feel sincere joy in your celebrations. Let us begin this year with hearts that are open to happiness. Let us seriously endeavor to fulfill the mitzvot “vsamachta vchagecha” and “asur lhitya’esh.” Each day this year, let us seek and find ways to care for ourselves, to enjoy something in the world around us, and to share that joy with people we love. Let us also seek to ensure those privileges for every human being with whom we share this planet. When I wish you a Shanah Tovah, I wish for you liberation from that which oppresses you, satisfaction in your work, wild

¹⁰ adrienne maree brown. *Pleasure Activism*, 31

¹¹ Arthur Brooks. “Choose the Activism that Won’t Make you Miserable. [The Atlantic](#) May 11, 2023.

joy, and the great honor of sharing those experiences with loved ones.

Shanah Tovah!!