

Recently a man chartered a flight on a small aircraft from Lopez Island in Washington State to Seattle. The flight started off well enough, but as the passenger and the pilot were approaching Sea-Tac airport, a wave of fog rolled in. Pretty soon, the pilot was circling and circling. The passenger was getting more and more nervous watching as the fuel gauge got lower and lower.

Finally in desperation the pilot said to the passenger, “look over there. You see those tall buildings? I’m going to fly by, roll down the window, and see if we can get some directions.”

And true to his word, as they passed by a very tall building there was a man staring out of an open window. The pilot shouted out, “Where are we?”

The man shouted back, “You’re in the air.”

Five minutes later, the pilot landed the plane.

Amazed the passenger asked, “How on earth did you know where we were.”

The pilot responded, “ We were flying by Microsoft headquarters.”

“But how did you know it was Microsoft headquarters?”

“Well,” the pilot went on to say, “I knew it was their headquarters because that man in the window must work for customer support. See he told me information that was technically correct, but completely useless.”

Speaking of computers, recently IBM announced they have created a computer chip that mimics the human brain.¹ This chip, whose processing power is similar to that of Watson, of supercomputer and Jeopardy fame, now has the ability to learn.

Through a project called SyNAPSE, which means Systems of Neuromorphic

¹ www.cnn.com/2011/TECH/innovation/08/18/ibm.brain.chip/index.html?hpt=hp_bn7

Adaptive Plastic Scalable Electronics, in case you were wondering, means these new chips are able to help computers ‘reason’ rather than just process pre-programmed information.

The developers are hoping that one day these computers might be useful for providing warnings for such cataclysmic events as tsunamis. Or to be used in a slightly more mundane fashion in places such as supermarkets by being able to “read sights, smells, and temperatures and give an alert that produce may have gone bad.”² Something many of us could probably use in our kitchens as well.

Science Fiction has for decades regaled us with countless thrilling and engaging stories based on the idea of computers becoming self-aware. For example, there are the wildly optimistic versions like those found in in the various Star Trek television and movies series. Star Trek Next Generation in particular explored this idea in great depth with one of its central characters Lt. Commander Data who also happened to be an android. Data was constantly striving to better himself to become more human. Yet the one piece that kept alluding him was humor. Laughter, wit, and sarcasm were just beyond his comprehension. Without them, we as an audience could speculate as to whether Data was, though a sentient being was a happy one. As an aside, Data was portrayed by the very capable and talented Brent Spiner. Brent Spiner happens to be one of my favorite actors and not just because he grew up in Houston and is Jewish.

On the flip side there are also the doomsday versions of such self-aware computers that can be found in the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger’s portrayal of the Terminator. This merciless killing machine was brought into existence by a self-aware

² Ibid.

computer system called SkyNet whose goal was to eradicate all of humanity. Clearly the Terminator was not a happy creation. Thankfully his ability to kill all of humanity has been to limited success in four movies so far.

Then there is Marvin the paranoid android of Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Fame. Marvin was a prototype created by Sirius Cybernetics Corporation and incorporated with a Genuine People Personality. This of course led Marvin to be both routinely bored and depressed. Or as the late great author Douglas Adams referred to his creation, 'perpetually morose.'

So if computers develop the ability to think independently, science fiction would have us believe, they will benefit society, destroy society, or sit around and sulk. Yet happiness is not something any of them seem destined for.

In actuality our relationship to computers often says more about ourselves than our machines. Speaking of machines, in a recent survey one in thirteen Americans admitted to pretending to talk on their cellphone in order to avoid talking to or acknowledging a person nearby.³ In the same study "35% of all adult U.S. cellphone users own smartphones," and of these 92% send and receive text messages as well as use their phones for taking pictures. And "40% of all cell owners entertain themselves with their phone when bored." And if you are between the ages of 18-29, that number jumps to 70%. And if you are sitting in Rosh Hashanah evening services during the rabbi's sermon with a smart-phone that number jumps to a whopping 90%.

Of course with the good comes the bad, at least 20% of all owners have experienced a variety of frustrations with their phones as well. So what is the point of all

³ cnn.com – How Americans really use cell phones

this you might be asking?

Clearly we have a very complicated relationship both with technology of the present as well as with the technology of the future. And yet we tend to tie so much of our happiness, our sense of wellbeing to our gadgets. Just ask anyone who has an iphone or ipad.

Yet the truth is, happiness is much more complicated than simply how many gadgets we have or how much stuff we possess. In the book The Happiness Equation by Nick Powdthavee, the author attempts to evaluate the ‘determinants of happiness’ through an economic lens. In his treatise, Mr. Powdthavee comes to some very interesting conclusions.

For example he argues that money has an effect on happiness, but it is not as significant as the “great effect of marriage and friends” as well as the “massive effect of personality.” He goes on to argue that “even extremely good news (such as winning the lottery) and extremely bad news (such as losing a spouse) rarely changes an individual’s happiness for more than a couple of years.” And perhaps most importantly, happiness has a significant and profound effect on job performance, relationships, and even our health.⁴

Work of course can very much play a role in a person’s happiness. In a recent article in Forbes, contributor Steve Denning lists the Ten Happiest Jobs.⁵ In reverse order, number 10 is operating engineers, followed by financial services sales agents, psychologists, artists, teachers. Number five are special education teachers, then authors

⁴ Wall Street Journey, August 16, 2011, “Lessons From Cloud Nine” by Bryan Caplan – a review of The Happiness Equation by Nick Powdthavee.

⁵ Forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2011/09/12/the-ten-happiest-jobs/

(probably not counting the Irish ones), physical therapists, firefighters, and number one are (drum roll please)... clergy.

Though this shouldn't be surprising, at least for me, for as you know, I became a rabbi mostly to be able to tell jokes in front of a captive audience.

This principle, by the way, goes all the way back to Talmudic times. In the Talmud there is a midrash,⁶ a story where Rabbi Beroka Hozaah asked Elijah the Prophet: Is there any person in this marketplace who is destined for the world to come? Elijah replied, no.

While they were conversing, two people passed by. Elijah said: These two are also destined for the world to come. Rabbi Beroka quickly approached the two people and asked them what they did. They replied: We are jesters, and we cheer up people who are depressed. Also, when we see two people who are quarrelling, we work hard to make peace between them.” So see all my bad puns are really for the sake of heaven.

Steve Denning also lists in contrast the 10 most hated jobs which are “marketing manager, CNC Machinist, Technical Support Analyst, Law Clerk, Electronics Technician, Technical Specialist, Senior Web Developer, Product Manager, Director of Sales and Marketing, and Director of Information Technology.” Denning’s conclusion is that “what’s striking about this list is that these relatively high level people are imprisoned in hierarchical bureaucracies ... The organizations they work for don’t know where they are going, and as a result, neither do these people.”⁷

But the truth is, though people may find more or less happiness in a given profession, the better question is why are so many in positions of higher status and pay

⁶ Babylonian Talmud Tanaait 22a

⁷ Forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2011/09/12/the-ten-happiest-jobs/

relatively less happy? Or as Todd May in writing for the New York Times argues, “A meaningful life must, in some sense then, feel worthwhile.”⁸ Clearly it’s not just about the money.

Economists agree that wealth alone has a limiting effect on happiness. Mr. Powdthavee describes the role of ‘focusing illusions.’ What this means is thinking about something’s expected effect on our happiness makes us overrate it. If you specifically ask people whether more money would make their life happier, he explains, most would say yes, on the assumption that they would spend the money doing such things they like, “driving nice cars, watching a big screen TV, or playing golf.” But in fact, richer people don’t change their activities very much and even tend to be slightly more stressed. Of course most of us would love to have this problem, but wealth perhaps only has a limited influence on how happy we are. So what then does our tradition have to say, if anything about happiness?

One would think Judaism, a religion mostly centered on worship and observance would have little to say about the pursuit of happiness. And yet it does, though it tends to take a very practical approach. For example Ecclesiastes asserts: “One who loves money will never be satisfied with money.”⁹ And Pirkei Avot, the ethics of the fathers expands upon this point, “Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot.”¹⁰

Our sages take these teachings from the Tanaach, the Hebrew Bible and run with them. In his writing Daas Chochmah U’Mussar, Rav Yerucham Levovitz, one of the great Polish Rabbis of the late 19th Century, referred to by his students as Mashgiach,

⁸ <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/the-meaningfulness-of-lives/?hp>

⁹ 5:10

¹⁰ Pirkei Avot 4:1

said, “A truly happy person does not allow his happiness to be dependent on any external factor over which he may not have control.”¹¹

According to this interpretation, only we should be the ones to determine whether or not we are happy. As is illustrated as well by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, the Baal Shem Tov who takes this idea one step further by stating ‘*mitzvah gedolah le’hiyot besimcha tamid*,’ or it is a great mitzvah to always be in a state of happiness. Which would mean, we are in a sense obligated by our tradition to strive for a sense of personal and spiritual happiness.

But this then begs the question, what is the meaning of happiness in Jewish tradition? Apparently happiness is very important to the Jewish soul. According to the Talmud in Avot D’Rabbi Natan¹², a minor aggadic work of early rabbinic literature, there are 10 words in Hebrew to describe simcha, to describe happiness. Even in Yiddish, a language known for its rich sorrowful expressions has plenty of words and phrases for happiness too: kvell, shepp naches, zi gezunt, shaineleh, simcha. Yes a tradition with so much history of suffering, has always strived to find things to be joyful about as well. Or as the old saying goes, “they tried to kill us. We won. Let’s eat.”

There is also a lot of emphasis in our tradition about work and productivity being the key to happiness. “When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy and it will be well with you.”¹³

But given the current economic climate, this simply is not always the reality nor is it necessarily obtainable. Sometimes we have to look to other sources for happiness

¹¹ Daas Chochmah Umussar, vol.2, pp.331-2

¹² BT, Avot D’Rabbi Natan 34:10

¹³ Psalm 182:2

rather than through economic rewards or through our own productivity

This is probably why our tradition also emphasizes the importance of social relationships as well. Most significantly, it espouses the importance of marriage. As a matter of fact there are 10 expressions of happiness and joy in the sixth blessing of the 7 wedding blessings, the *sheva berachot*. And there is even a midrash that teaches how God ever since the end of creation has been working to bring couples together.¹⁴

But as we know, love doesn't always last. So what can? What does? Perhaps these questions brings us full circle to our, to your presence here tonight. The other source of happiness as espoused by our tradition is community. In the Babylonian Talmud it teaches, "either companionship or death."¹⁵ I believe what the rabbis mean by this is the idea that none of us should ever live in isolation. Above all, our tradition emphasizes the importance of community be it at times of celebration and rejoicing or times of sorrow, or any moment in between.

It isn't just because we are judged as a community on these Yamim Noraim, these High Holy Days, but it is also because community is also the greatest resource we have. To whom do we look to share our joys: to kvell, to kevitch, if not those around us?

But the community cannot hope to last if we are not actively engaged in it. There is a legend of a congregation that was without electricity. The board went to the rabbi one day and asked him why they could not put power in the building. The rabbi replied that he liked to do Shabbat by candlelight. The board responded that they could now easily light up the sanctuary with a flick of the switch. To which the rabbi replied, this would give them a false sense of illumination. How? The board wondered. The rabbi

¹⁴ Midrash Genesis Rabbah 68:4

¹⁵ BT, Tanaait 23a

went on to say, true if one person comes with just one candle, they can only light up so much. But imagine if all the congregation came, each with their one candle, our sacred space would be radiant. But if we instead just lit up our space with the flick of a switch, it is possible no one would feel responsible. They would see the lights and assume it was already full, and they were not needed. If our space was radiant without the members, how would we know to appreciate their presence or acknowledge their absence.

If we truly want happiness in our lives, personality is important. If we truly want happiness in our lives, success is important. If we truly want happiness in our lives, family is important. But as we have learned this evening, if we truly want happiness in our lives community is just as important. But we can only find happiness in this community if we choose to actively participate. If we actively choose to help light up the building with our very presence, be it gathering together to worship, to study, to love, to mourn, to laugh, to cry, to rejoice, to live ... then our tradition and our congregation can truly be a wellspring for happiness in our own lives. And we don't even need a computer or gadget from the past, present, or future, to tell us that.

Our community, our tradition, and our relationships can all be our guides. But only if we look to them and to each other for the help and support in our journeys. Being a member here at Har Sinai Congregation has many benefits, including the very real possibility that it can help you, if not have to a better life, at least it could help you to quite possibly have a happier one. So if you are not a member, join us on this journey. And if you are a member, keep coming. There are many joys that await you. For as we have learned this evening, happiness truly is one of the keys to heaven.

May it be a healthy and happy New Year for us all L'shana Tova