



Temple Rodef Shalom

**Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe**

**Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5771/2010**

**“Being Happy with What you Have”**

One of the many things I’ve learned over this past year is that if you’re looking to become instantly popular, a magnet for both friends and strangers, all you need to do is walk around with a baby. Last month a total stranger came over to Jaimee and me in a restaurant and offered to hold Shoshana at her table next to us while we ate our meal. In addition to giving us a lot of pleasure and even a little bit of help here and there, people’s fascination with babies has given me food for thought. What is it about babies, and particularly a smiling baby, that is so compelling? Is it our wonder at creation and at life itself? Is it the optimism and possibility of youth and a person whose whole life is still to come? Is it the complete emotional availability of a baby’s face? It is probably all of these things, but as I have gazed into my six-month-old daughter’s eyes, the thing I wonder at the most is the look of total happiness, the ability to live entirely in the moment, without a hint of ambivalence or a care in the world, unburdened by worry or discontentment. It strikes me that babies are the embodiment of the Jewish proverb, *eizehu ashir?* *Hasameach b’chelko* – Who is rich: the one who is happy with his portion.

As long as a baby has a loving caretaker, a full stomach and a good nap, it’s easy for them to be happy with what they have – they don’t know the difference! They have no idea about “coulds”, or “shoulds”, or just about anything else. For the rest of us, who have been around a little longer, it’s not so easy. And this is why the Jewish teaching that calls on us to be happy with our portion, which comes from *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers, is not as useful as it could be. Like the song, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy”, or someone telling you patronizingly to “relax”, it expresses an ideal, but it doesn’t offer us much help in getting there. Being happy with your portion brings to my mind a picture of a person who has removed him- or herself from normal life, either because they’ve risen above it or because they are oblivious. Either way, they don’t care what’s happening around them.

But that is not what Judaism teaches us. There is nothing in the Torah that suggests that we should remove ourselves from the kinds of communal and personal involvements and regular struggles that leave us vulnerable to discontent. We may wish we had more money to buy and do the things we want. We might wish we had more time, more fun, more fulfillment, more love – there are so many competing needs and desires in our lives that it is difficult even to be aware of each one and how it pulls at us. And, for so many of us, there also seems to be an eternal image of how our lives are “supposed to be”.

Let’s face it: all of us at times find ourselves striving, hoping, and yearning for something – this yearning lies at the very core of Jewish tradition: the exodus from Egypt is a story of striving to reach a

Promised Land. As I speak to you tonight about the what it means to be Sameach B'chelko, happy with what we have, I ask you to join me in taking a closer look at all of our striving.

You already know the story of the Israelites' journey to the Land of Israel: that twelve tribes wander together for forty years in the wilderness, and finally they conquer and settle in the land that was promised them. But did you know that two of the tribes end up deciding *not* to settle in the land? At the very end of the wanderings, the leaders of these two tribes, Reuben and Gad, come to Moses and make their unthinkable request. They want to build their homes, and stay where they are, on the East side of the river, in what is now known as Jordan. They ask Moses to allot them a portion of land right then and there, outside of the Holy Land. Moses is shocked and, not knowing how to interpret their intentions, he berates them as cowards. How can they give up after all this time? But as Moses listens further to these tribal chiefs, he begins to understand. They speak to him two simple truths: "This land is cattle country, and your servants have cattle." Further, they assure Moses that after leaving their livestock and families here, the soldiers will still go into the land with the others and fight on the front lines. In the end, Moses accepts their proposal. They have not settled for anything less; rather, they have demonstrated that they know what they want and have found it.

I like to think that the leaders of Reuben and Gad are realists – while the others have their hearts set on a mythical land that flows with milk and honey, Reuben and Gad are focused on what is actually before them. They see open space and plenty of grass, and they picture their livestock grazing in the hills. They see enough room for them and their families to build their community. Their children are tired of traveling, and they are ready to start the next phase of their lives. While the other tribes remain fixed on a promise of things to come, these men and women have figured out what portion it is that will make them happy, and they have set their sights on that. I believe these two tribes of Israel and their choice come to teach us about being sameach b'chelko.

Last month, the New York Times ran a feature article about a married couple in their 30's named Tammy Strobel and Logan Smith, who went through a process of redefining their life goals. Tammy also has a blog, on which she tells what she calls their "downsizing story": The couple lived in Davis, California. She says, "We were newlyweds with flashy rings, living in a two-bedroom apartment, driving two cars, commuting long distances to work and living well beyond our means." They felt caught up in what she calls a work-spend treadmill. The couple decided to simplify their lives. In gradual steps, they downsized apartments, moved downtown, and sold both cars. They gave away many of their belongings, including their TV. Now, they live very simply: several outfits in the closet – the ones they actually wear – four sets of dishes in the cupboard, PAUSE and two bicycles. Logan is almost finished with his PhD, and Tammy works shorter hours and volunteers in the community. They have paid off their 30 thousand dollar debt and have money to spend on vacations, their biking hobby and even contributing to their niece and nephew's college funds.

Ok - most of us are not going to do this. We might have families, children who depend on us to schlep them around town, jobs that require a full wardrobe, and so on. Still, it does bring up for us some important questions: first, what are the things we spend our money and our time on that are not essential to us or that don't really make us happy? But second, on a deeper level, are we happy with the

goals we are pushing for in our lives? Are our priorities where we want them to be? Tammy and Logan realized that they felt they were on a treadmill, chasing after the image of a certain kind of life that they assumed would make them happy. Before they decided to downsize apartments, they were, Tammy writes, “more concerned about appearances and space for guests than for our financial well-being.” They decided that their life would be closer to what they wanted if they stepped out of what they had assumed their life would be like, and concentrated on what their real needs and desires were. Now, in their own way, they have plenty. Who is rich: the one who is happy with his portion, Sameach b’chelko.

The truth is that we don’t have to look in the New York Times to find stories of people asking themselves these important questions. One member of our congregation – I’ll call him Joe – changed his life several years ago, when his son was 18 months old. Joe was heading for senior management in a federal agency. After his father died, he spent a month reflecting on his own life as well as his relationship with his father. They hadn’t been close until soon before he died. During that month, Joe began to notice what he was missing in his life. He wanted a close relationship with his own son – working 12-hour days or more, away from his family, this wasn’t going to happen. He questioned whether his career goal was really the Promised Land he had thought it was. With his wife’s support, Joe left his job and started a small tech business. Now, he works 30 percent time, does a lot of volunteer work, and considers himself primarily a stay-at-home father. To help him get to where he is now, Joe had a supportive wife whose own career enabled him to make these changes. Still, when I spoke with him about his experience, he told me how hard it was. It took years to get used to explaining his decision to others, and to adjust to the change in his sense of identity that he had previously built around his career. As he did, the other parts of his life for which he had made this sacrifice filled that void... to overflowing. When he looks back now on the change he made, it is one of the greatest things he ever did.

These days of awe give us the opportunity to examine not only our actions towards others, but our own sense of contentment in our lives. We have the chance to be honest with ourselves about our pursuits: how are they going for us? Are they fulfilling, or are we fixated on outdated or unrealistic hopes? Are we really giving first priority to the goals, responsibilities, and passions that are most essential to our lives?

This reexamination can result in a sweeping change, or it can help us to approach our daily lives with a new sense of awareness of what will make us happy and of what we want. Perhaps we will make different choices when it comes to how we spend our leisure time by understanding what we really enjoy. In our lives we are so worried about getting from place to place that we forget to enjoy the journey. My four-year-old nephew just went to his first baseball game, and, not surprisingly, the train ride was more interesting to him than the game. This can be true for us, but we don’t always recognize it. The metro might not be as exciting for us as it is for a child, but what do we love? Is it sports, cooking, being outside? Are we doing those things?

One way we can become more aware of how we are prioritizing our lives is through thinking more actively about the way we spend money. Maybe we’ll think longer about the purchases we make, asking ourselves whether they will in fact make us happier. I learned this from Tracey Smith, founder of

International Downshifting Week, based in the UK. She suggests eliminating three discretionary purchases we would otherwise make each week to see how it affects our enjoyment of life and our sense of well being. I'll be thinking about this every time I step into Starbucks. While it may feel like more stuff will make us happy, sometimes what really make us happier are more space and less clutter. We can even express this idea in the gifts we give, having open discussions with our families and friends about how we handle gift exchanges for holidays and birthdays.

Many members of Temple Rodef Shalom are on the cutting edge of this kind of thinking and have been breaking out of what they could feel expected to do to celebrate life cycle events: One couple, when they got married, decided that when they imagined their wedding reception, they didn't envision a dance party. What they wanted was to visit with their loved ones. So they hired a harpist and had their kind of party, while saving thousands of dollars on space and musicians. Other families are making their own decisions about B'nai Mitzvah receptions. The Talmud doesn't specify the details of your party or the way you invite your guests, and there's no reason it has to be like everyone else's.

All of these choices, of what to do with our time, and how to choose the goals that will be the most fulfilling for us, are the difficult stuff of real life as a fully developed, functioning person. A baby doesn't have to make these decisions, and hence the feeling, when we look into their eyes, of limitless possibility and the promise of everything to come. But we are no longer blank slates. Each of us has our limitations. None of us is perfect, and neither are any of our lives. The dreams we have in childhood turn into realities, and they bring us both happiness and disappointment. The ways we envisioned our relationships with our children, our parents, our spouses, our friends require adjustment when the vision becomes reality. There are friendships we thought would stay closer through the years. Part of the process of reexamining our sense of contentment in life consists of accepting what lies before us, rather than clinging to ancient dreams. Only then can we do as did the tribes of Reuben and Gad, to see before us what we want, take it, and rejoice in it. We can appreciate our blessings and notice anew how much love we have in our lives and how much enjoyment is there for the taking. This appreciation is what enables us to bring ourselves completely to the people around us.

So as we begin these days of awe, our tradition invites us not only to ask ourselves, how have our actions and our words this year affected other people. It calls on us to us to examine how we feel about our lives. In the next year, how could we be happier than we are now?"And we imagine what we would have to do to get us there. As we enter this new year, 5771, I wish us all a year of more reflection, more clarity and more sweetness, a year in which each of us can be happy with everything we have, Sameach B'chelko.