

### **Climbing the Second Mountain: Finding Meaning In Our Lives**

Are Americans happy? If I were to ask this question of you, sitting here in this room today. What would you answer? Are we, as Americans, happy? Yes? No?

As many of you predicted, overall, Americans are generally fairly unhappy or at least feel as if our levels of happiness are decreasing. And there are measured findings to support this inclination. Each year the Sustainable Development Solutions Networks releases their World Happiness Report, which “ranks countries on six key variables that support well-being... Since its first appearance in 2012, the world happiness report has shown a decline for the United States. In 2012, the US ranked 13<sup>th</sup> in the world, now it is down to 19<sup>th</sup>.

Why is it that so many Americans are feeling unhappy these days? Is it political polarization being at an all-time high, addictions on the rise, economic concerns, environmental worries? Yes. All of these pieces are certainly contributing factors.

But Americans may be asking the wrong question. What if inherently being most concerned with our happiness provides us with a feeling that we are never truly satisfied in life? If our focus is on our happiness, is the result always that we are falling short of that goal? According to Clay Routledge, professor of psychology from North Dakota State University, the answer is yes. When we mainly seek happiness in our lives, we regularly find the opposite. He believes the question we should be asking is not, am I happy. He has a different suggestion: how do I find meaning in my life? And the findings supporting his theory are rich. When we only search for happiness without a search for meaning, our lives suffer. “According to Routledge, if we feel that there is a lack of purpose in our lives, then we are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs, become depressed, and anxious... Further (he finds) that it is those that feel their lives

have meaning who are best able to cope with” the challenges that come along (<https://www.intellectualltakeout.org/article/psychologist-americas-suicide-crisis-linked-lack-meaning>). There is a direct connection with finding meaning in our lives and how we thrive in the world around us.

And, thus, we arrive at the crux of this whole issue: happiness and meaning are different and searching for the former over the latter, can consistently leave us wanting more, “Being happy is about feeling good. Meaning is derived from contributing to others or to society in a bigger way.” (<https://www.google.com/amp/s/buffer.com/resources/happiness-is-not-enough-why-a-life-without-meaning-will-make-you-sick/amp>). “Happiness is largely a matter of satisfying needs and wants. Meaning, by contrast, is about a sense of purpose in life, especially by making positive contributions to the lives of others. Happiness is largely about how you feel in the present. Meaning is about how you judge your life as a whole: past, present and future (<http://rabbisacks.org/vayikra5779/>).

In a fascinating article in *The Atlantic*, ‘There’s More to Life Than Being Happy’<sup>[2]</sup>, Emily Smith argues that the pursuit of happiness can result in a relatively shallow, self-absorbed, even selfish life. What makes the pursuit of meaning different is that it is about the search for something larger than the self.” (<http://rabbisacks.org/vayikra5779/>).

In his most recent book, The Second Mountain: The Quest for A Moral Life, David Brooks, op-ed columnist for the NY Times, addresses the very same issue. He frames the happiness/meaning conversation in relation to our lives focusing on climbing a first and then, possibly, a second mountain. He writes the following: the first mountain is “the mountain (we) thought (we) were meant to climb.” On this mountain, we decide what profession we want to

enter, we “establish an identity, we separate from our parents, cultivate our talents...try to make our mark in the world...the goals on that first mountain are the normal goals that our culture endorses—to be a success, to be well thought of, to get invited into the right social circles, and to experience personal happiness. It’s all the (so-called) normal stuff: nice home, nice family, nice vacations, good food, good friends and so on” (Introduction xi-xii).

But, what Brooks points out is that we often miss entirely the potential for a whole other existence. That is the second mountain which comes after a realization that maybe the first mountain was not our mountain afterall- possibly because of a failure, a lack of achieving something we had hoped, or maybe because of a realization that we keep falling short of the happiness we aim for. Despite our best intentions, are we still just unhappy? The second mountain beckons us not to ask this question, but instead to wonder, “How do I bring meaning to my life?” Brooks describes it as: a desire to live in intimate relations with others, to make a difference in the world, to feel right with oneself” (pg 67-68). Importantly, the second mountain is not a flat out rejection of everything that has come before. To approach the second mountain, we do not need to leave behind everything we achieved on the first mountain. No one has to go and quit their jobs today. However, what the second mountain does do is provide us with an opportunity to reframe the larger goals of our life, to find new meaning at a point where our lives, our very being, can, at times, feel insignificant or inconsequential. The essence of the 10 Days of Repentance, this period of personal reflection which we find ourselves, is about the same. How do we bring new meaning into our lives? As we are reminded, through our fast, of the physical limitations of our bodies, how do we embrace our life in a way that we are living lives of purpose? As we hear the ominous words of Unetaneh tokef, “who will live and who will die? Who will see ripe age and who will not?” our tradition calls us to wonder now, in this

moment, not waiting until tomorrow or the next day or next month or next year, how do I make sure I am living my life in the most meaningful way possible because my tomorrow is not promised? And our tradition is ripe with these moments of journeying up a second mountain, of pivoting, of shifting the focus of what our lives are about. Picture Moses, having lived his childhood convinced of his royalty, ready to serve as a member of the ruling family and having been trained in this very position. Then suddenly, a discovery: he is not who he thought he was; no longer an elevated member of the elite, and instead no different than the lowly Jewish slave. His first mountain was his role as prince, his second, something quite different.

There is a rabbinic midrash told of Moses standing before the unconsumed burning bush. Remember, he has fled Egypt after discovering his true identity and defending a Jewish slave. He now lives, fairly contentedly, it seems, in the wilderness as a shepherd. His inclination is to remain there. Why, after all return to a place of such pain? Why put himself in the midst of a truly problematic situation? Moses must be gently persuaded to climb that second mountain. We read of a midrash that describes that very process. When God speaks to Moses through the bush, God cries out “Moses Moses.” The rabbis of the Mishnaic period question why the Hebrew text does not provide the equivalent of a comma in between the two utterances of Moses’ name. The exclamation is not “Moses, Moses.” Instead, it is “Moses Moses!” The rabbis infer “This question may be answered by the parable of a man overloaded by an excessively heavy burden, who cries out all in one breath, “Somebody somebody, come quickly, take this load off me!”” (Exodus Rabbah 2:6). **Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld** beautifully expounds on this explanation. “The claim of the *midrash* is astonishing. God’s emphatic double call to Moses is a cry for help, a cry that echoes the cry of the Israelite people just a few verses earlier...In this *midrash* God—as it were—takes the risk of acknowledging a lack, a need for

help.” ([https://www.huffpost.com/entry/with-strong-hands-and-outstretched-arms\\_b\\_5a4bf950e4b0df0de8b06dab](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/with-strong-hands-and-outstretched-arms_b_5a4bf950e4b0df0de8b06dab)).

Moses’ moral path forward, his second mountain, is not inspired by the goal of personal notoriety or attainment, but instead, by the dire need of a people and their God. The urge that surfaces within him to help human beings who are bereft. In that moment, Moses finishes his first climb and begins his second, as a leader of a people in quest of freedom and justice.

And Rabbi Jonathan Saks, highlights the very moment of Moses’ moral pivot and the significance of what occurred in that time and every time going forward that God and Moses have these interactions. We read in the Torah, “*And God called to Moses*”: (Whenever) God communicated with Moses, whether signaled by the expression] “And God spoke”, or “and God said”, or “and God commanded”, it was always preceded by [God] calling [to Moses by name].<sup>[4]</sup> “Calling” is an expression of endearment...” God calls to Moses. There is a familiarity, a personal component of using the word “Vayikra” “and “God called” instead of only saying and God said or and God commanded. God is reaching out to Moses with respect, with affection. God is calling him to a task for which Moses is needed. And Moses must listen to this calling.

A calling, literally. I think we are often limited in our understanding of this word. If someone is religiously called to do something, the assumption is often that a voice from the heavens has come down and spoken out loud. But, I do not think we need to have such a narrow focus. We each have a calling in this world: “work to perform, a kindness to show, a gift to give, love to share, loneliness to ease, pain to heal, or broken lives to help mend.” But, as Rabbi Saks so beautifully articulates “Discerning that task, hearing *Vayikra*, God’s call, is one of the great spiritual challenges for each of us.” He rightly asks the question, “How do we know what “our

calling” is?” And his answer is profound. He gets us to that second mountain. “Where what we want to do meets what needs to be done, that is where God wants us to be”

<http://rabbisacks.org/vayikra5779/>).

What needs to be done in the world? And what can I offer? When the two come together, we are making our way up that second mountain. And this is key: We do not need to wait for a voice from the heavens. We just need to listen to our own voice. And the results can be profound. “...powerful moments of moral elevation seem to push a mental reset button,” as Brooks writes, “wiping out feelings of cynicism and replacing them with feelings of hope, love and moral inspiration. These moments of elevation are energizing” (Introduction xxx-xxxii).

When we stop asking, “How do I find happiness?” and begin questioning, “Where do I find meaning in my life?” we live in a way that we never imagined, revitalized, invigorated, filled with hope at what is ahead. Rabbi Noah Weinberg, a leader of the Orthodox Jewish Movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, would say, in fact, that then and only then is when we begin living at all. As he articulated, “If you don't know what you're living for, you haven't yet lived.”

Happiness often feels like the goal of our lives. But, what happens when we constantly fall short of that lofty dream? When a quest for happiness does not fill us up or help us to feel our lives have a greater significance? Then, and only then, maybe we will begin asking a different question: how do I find meaning in my life?

Are we ready to climb that second mountain? Are we ready to heed the call? Are we willing to search to find the place “Where what we want to do meets what needs to be done”? On this Yom Kippur, may it be so.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah.