

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Ki Tavo

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Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

20 Elul, 5781

The Fax of Life

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August 28, 2021

GOOD MORNING! One of the remarkable features of living in the time known as the "Information Age" is the amount of data we have quite literally at our fingertips. Mankind has a powerful drive to acquire knowledge, and this is one of the characteristics that distinguishes humanity from all other living creatures. We are uniquely privileged to live in a time when, with very little effort, we can easily realize this lofty objective.

Mankind gathers information on just about everything. This past week I was looking at a fascinating ranking known as World Happiness Report. This study is, in part, a collaboration between Oxford University and the London School of Economics. It focuses on the "happiness" of residents in 186 cities around the world and relies on those residents answering a series of questions to determine their overall "life satisfaction."

The top ten are dominated by Scandinavian cities: Helsinki (Finland) and Aarhus (Denmark) are ranked first and second, Copenhagen (Denmark), Bergen (Norway), and Oslo (Norway) are fifth, sixth, and seventh. Stockholm (Sweden) comes out ninth. Thus, more than half of the top ten cities worldwide – according to how positively their inhabitants currently evaluate their lives – are located in Scandinavia.

Two of the top ten cities are in Australia and New Zealand. In fact, together they account for seven cities in the top 20. Of the top ten, the only two cities not located in Scandinavia or "Down Under" are Zurich and – drum roll please – TEL AVIV! (The fact that Tel Aviv landed at number eight will probably come as a shock to anyone who has ever driven there.)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many North American cities rank fairly high – Toronto ranks 13, Dallas 19, Houston 21, Boston 23, Chicago 25, Atlanta 26, Miami 27, Philadelphia 28, New York 30, Los Angeles 31. Interestingly enough, Jerusalem only comes in at 33, but still higher than London at 36 and Paris at 43. The bottom of the list would probably not surprise anyone – Kabul ranks at dead last at 186, Gaza 184, Port-au-Prince 183. Cairo (177), Baghdad (163), Beirut (161), and Tehran (151) didn't fare much better.

Author Bronnie Ware drew upon her many decades as an end-of-life nurse to write *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*. One of the top regrets was, "I wish I had let myself be happier." Indeed, we all know people who work pretty hard at being unhappy. Many people constantly mull over their life's deficiencies: their relationships, their jobs, their luck, their bodies, etc. – which reminds of a piece in this month's Reader's Digest.

A good friend of mine, Professor David Barman, submitted the following story. The university he works for here in South Florida has a policy that grades ending in 8 or 9 receives a "+" (78 is a C+, 89 is a B+, etc.). One of his students received his final grade and was upset that he didn't receive his "+".

Professor Barman looked up his grade and saw that he had only managed a 58 and that the student had failed the course. "I know," he said, "but I earned an F+ not an F." "You want me to change this to an F+?" Asked a rather nonplussed Professor Barman. The student answered yes and left happy when Mr. Barman agreed.

How did the student leave happy? Undoubtedly, the student didn't register for the course expecting that he would be happy with an F+. So what changed? This week's Torah portion delivers an important lesson in perspective and how we achieve happiness.

All these curses will come upon you and overtake you [...] because you did not serve Hashem, your God, with happiness and a good heart, even though you had an abundance of everything (28:45-47).

This week's Torah reading contains explicit details of both the rewards for following the Almighty's word and the calamitous repercussions for going against it. The Torah commits over fifty verses to detailing the depths to which we will fall and the nearly unimaginable suffering we will endure as a result of this (e.g. financial and societal ruin, horrible diseases, starvation to the point of cannibalism of one's own children – need I go into further detail?).

The Torah then makes a remarkable statement – why did all these horrible things befall the Jewish people? "Because you did not serve Hashem, your God, with *simcha* – joy" (28:45). This is actually quite astounding. Nowhere in the Torah are we commanded to serve Hashem with joy! There is no positive commandment to be happy. So what exactly is this failure – of not serving with happiness – that it would lead to such horrific consequences?

We have discussed in prior columns that it is a basic tenet of Jewish philosophy that God created the world in order to bestow good upon mankind. But in order for man to be able to accept this good and appreciate it, the Almighty instituted a system for earning His good instead of Him just gifting the good. Why?

Because receiving good without earning it is like receiving charity and being on the receiving end of someone else's largess is emotionally debilitating. When the good isn't earned it creates a debt to the giver and the resulting indebtedness is very hard to deal with. Thus, the net effect of the good is severely diminished. This is why God

created a system in which we can earn the good He intended for mankind.

In other words, no one likes the feeling of owing. King Solomon, known as “the wisest of all men,” wrote: “A borrower is a servant to the lender” (*Proverbs 22:7*). The feeling of being in debt to someone is painful to the point of almost feeling that your very identity is lost. A common reaction to receiving a kindness from someone is analyzing what the benefactor has to gain by his action. This is done in order to lessen the feeling of obligation to them.

This is also why most people will respond “okay” or “could be worse” when asked how they’re doing. You will very seldom hear someone answer “GREAT!” or “never better!” People respond as such because it is instinctively understood that if everything is great then we must owe someone a deep debt of gratitude and appreciation.

Nobody likes the feeling of owing; therefore, people will focus on what’s negative instead of the overabundance of good in their lives. If one’s life is miserable or subpar then he doesn’t owe anything to anyone. This is why many people dwell on being unhappy.

Being happy comes with responsibilities that many of us don’t want to own up to. First of all, if we internalize how lucky we are then it leaves us with very few excuses for not achieving and growing. With no one on whom to blame our failings, we have to admit that we CAN do better and we DO deserve better. This type of personal responsibility can be frightening, which is why people often consciously or subconsciously do their best to fail. If we set the bar low enough then we are relieved of the responsibility of success and the disappointment of true failure.

Second of all, if we are happy and satisfied with life then we need to be filled with appreciation – this equates to a debt of gratitude towards whomever helped us achieve that state of joy; a parent, spouse, teacher, mentor, kind stranger, or any combination thereof. It’s easier to justify a lack of obligation to others if one is simply unhappy.

This is why not serving Hashem from “a place of joy” is such a critical failing. In fact, the verse says this explicitly: “*you had an abundance of everything*” – and yet we weren’t happy. This describes a lack of appreciation for everything God created; that the very foundation of the world – the bestowal of good – was being rejected in order to avoid a feeling of obligation to God.

We seldom focus on everything that is amazing in our lives – and thus we only appreciate things once they’re gone. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the fact that most people do not really appreciate a lifetime of good health until they experience a medical crisis. The same can be said for many other special elements in our lives such as relationships, security, finances, etc.


Almost paradoxically, the only way for God to correct this issue is by going to the opposite extreme; by causing such pain that we begin to recognize our lack of appreciation for how amazing our lives truly were before all the calamities befell us. This invaluable lesson is then burned into our psyche allowing us to appreciate all that we have for the rest of our lives.

Thus, quite incredibly, the Almighty in his infinite kindness gives mankind suffering in order to give us the perspective on how to internalize all the good in our lives. The key is for us to stay focused on all that is positive in our lives and to be appreciative. In this way we will “own up” to being happy and truly enjoy all the wonderful gifts in our lives.

TORAH PORTION: Ki Tavo, Deuteronomy 26:1 – 29:8

This week’s portion includes: Bringing to the Temple as an offering the first fruits of the seven species special to the Land of Israel, declaration of tithes, the Almighty designating the Jewish people as His treasured people (*Deuteronomy 26:16 - 19*), the command to set up in the Jordan River and then on Mount Ebal large stones that had the Torah written upon them in 70 languages, the command to have a public ratification of the acceptance of the law from Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal; the Torah then sets forth the blessings for following the law and the curses for not following it, and concludes with Moses’ final discourse. Verse 28:46 tells us the importance of serving the Almighty with “joy and a good heart.” The last verse of the portion instructs us, “You shall fulfill the words of this covenant and do them so that you will succeed in all that you do!”

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem 6:33* Miami 7:26 Cape Town 6:07 Guatemala 5:59 Hong Kong 6:27 Honolulu 6:33

 Jo'Burg 5:35 LA 7:06 London 7:42 Melbourne 5:36 Mexico 7:37 Moscow 7:17 New York 7:17 Singapore 6:52 Toronto 7:43

“QUOTE OF THE WEEK”: Success is getting what you want. Happiness is wanting what you get.

— Dale Carnegie

Dedicated with Deep Appreciation to

Dr. Alan Altschuler



Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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