

שמחה בחלקו -YK 10 Tishrei 5779, Sept. 19, 2018

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Our world is increasingly, ravaged with violence; the slow and systemic violence of poverty, inequality and injustice; of xenophobia, anti-semitism, racism and misogyny. *Plus* there is a different, more dramatic, shockingly visible and apparently inevitable, violence, consistently unfolding in our world. Manifestations of violence in the Middle East; dictators in many countries killing their own people; senseless gun violence in schools and workplaces, and daily, in our streets. Not to mention what seems to be extreme patterns in the weather, worldwide, for which I'm quite sure, we bear some responsibility. There is so much tragedy-and I feel impotent; lacking in courage and outspokenness that, in my younger years, defined me. Perhaps because it feels overwhelming, I too often and too easily give in to a "been there done that; it's your turn now", attitude. I'm not proud of that. This apparent lack of personal courage literally keeps me up at night and torments me during the day.

So, there you have it. I've admitted that I've let myself off the hook with my public response to these issues. And that, personally, my explanations feel like excuses; cop-outs, if you will. Having made that confession, since I don't imagine I'm alone with some of these feelings, let's explore together, where we can go from here.

In *Pirke Avot*, the sayings of the fathers, Ben Zoma Says: אזהו עשיר? השמחה בחלקו "Who is rich? The one who is happy with his lot." (Pirke Avot 4:1) Many of us have heard that wisdom. Often, when I recall it, it makes me feel ungrateful and selfish. As simple as it *sounds*, wanting to be happy is complicated. The following is attributed to 17th century philosopher, Montesquieu: "If we want to be happy it would be easy; but we want to be happier than other people, which is almost always difficult, since we think them happier than they are."

Yiddish, our mother tongue supports that statement. In his book, Born to Kvetch, Michael Wex writes: "Yiddish is *not* a 'have-a-nice-day' language. 'How are you?'-a perfectly innocent question in English-is a provocation in Yiddish. 'Nu, How should I be?' is a fairly neutral answer to the question."

What makes us happy, has little, if anything, to do with what *we have*.

There is a story about Reb **Zusha** of Hanipoli, a great Hasidic rebbe of the mid-18th century:

A man once came to the holy Maggid of Mezeritch and said he had difficulty applying the Talmudic saying that "A person is supposed to bless God for the bad, just as he blesses God for the good"¹. The holy Maggid told him to go find Reb Zusha and ask for advice.

The man found Reb Zusha. The Tzaddik (righteous man) received him and invited him to his home. When the guest came in, he was astonished by how poor the family was. There was almost nothing to eat and they were beset with afflictions and illnesses. Nevertheless, Reb Zusha was *happy and cheerful*. The guest explained: "I went to the Holy Maggid to ask him how it is possible to bless God for the bad, the same way we bless God for the good. The Maggid told me *you* can help me in this matter." "This is indeed an interesting question." Rabbi Zusha said: "But why did our holy Rebbe send you to me? How would I know? He should have sent you to someone who has experienced suffering."

You might be thinking: OK. So here's a story about a Rabbi who lived in the mid-18th century. He seems to have *nothing* but exceptional *tsuris*! And yet, when asked basically: "How are you?" he responds in a rather saintly way, that he has no complaints and is happy with his lot! *How is that story relevant to my life?*

I have a thought:

The concept "שמחה בחלקו", can mean something very different than "happy with what we have." **בחלקו** comes from the root word **חלק** meaning "part". "Who is rich? She who is happy *with her part, with her place; with her role or with the many different parts she plays in a variety of "wholes"*. Each of us is (only) one part of what might be, many different wholes: of this congregation; of our extended family, of our workplace. *And*, perhaps a better word than "happiness" for what we seek, is **fulfillment**; to know that what we do with our lives has meaning.

The days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, provide an opportunity to find peace within ourselves, while at the same time, agitating ourselves enough to motivate constructive introspection and even change. We have not always been our "better selves." Can we forgive ourselves, though we err again and again? Can we begin the

¹ Maimonides, Laws of Blessing based on *Mishna Berachot* 9:5

process of releasing ourselves from the prisons of our own habits and embrace the spark of the Divine within? Like Reb Zusha, can we learn to be שמח בחלקו; to find fulfillment in our unique role and rejoice knowing that we are *only one part of a whole*?

I love to garden; both vegetables and flowers. I love to hike and canoe; to observe and be one small part of a sumptuous natural world- one in which everything just “*is*”. The natural world does not worry about being happy. When we take time to appreciate the gifts freely given by the natural world, can we feel comforted in the knowledge that we are “only one thing among many”?² **Parker Palmer**, educator and author found relief in the realization that ...”all he needs to do is keep living as one among many *as well as he can*, hoping to help himself and others, grow ripe with life and love as [they] stand under the sun.”³

In closing, I want to share with you a story about a conversation overheard between a father and his daughter. **Bob Perks**, a storyteller and motivational speaker, witnessed them at the airport in their last moments together. Her departure had been announced and they were standing near the security gate. They hugged, and he said, "I love you. I wish you enough." She in turn said, "Daddy, our life together has been more than enough. Your love is all I ever needed. I wish you enough, too, Daddy."

They kissed. And she left. He walked toward the window where I was seated. Standing there I could see he wanted and needed to cry. I tried not to intrude on his privacy, but he welcomed me in by asking, "Did you ever say goodbye to someone knowing it would be forever?"

"Yes, I have," I replied. Saying that brought back memories I had of expressing my love and appreciation for my Dad. Recognizing that his days were limited, I took the time to tell him face to face how much he meant to me. So, I knew what this man was experiencing.

"Forgive me for asking, but why is this a forever goodbye?"

"I am old and she lives much too far away. I have challenges ahead and the reality is, her next trip back would be for my funeral," he responded.

² Parker Palmer, extracted from his new book: *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity and Getting old*

³ "Does my life have meaning?" in a short article about Parker Palmer's book (I think I found the piece on line)

"When you were saying goodbye I heard you say, 'I wish you enough.' May I ask what that means?"

He began to smile. "That's a wish that has been handed down from other generations. My parents used to say it to everyone." He paused for a moment and looking up as if trying to remember it in detail, he smiled even more. "When we said, 'I wish you enough,' we were wanting the other person to have a life filled with just enough good things to sustain them," he continued and then turning toward me, he shared the following, looking up, reciting it from memory.

"I wish you enough sun to keep your attitude bright.
I wish you enough rain to appreciate the sun more.
I wish you enough happiness to keep your spirit alive.
I wish you enough pain so that the smallest joys in life appear much bigger.
I wish you enough gain to satisfy your wanting.
I wish you enough loss to appreciate all that you possess.
I wish enough "Hellos" to get you through the final "Goodbye.""

He began to sob and walked away.

My friends, for the coming year, and always, I wish you enough!