

Last year, we faced Rosh Hashanah in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11. One year later, as we face Rosh Hashanah again, we are keenly aware of the first anniversary of 9-11. The coincidence of this anniversary with the week of *עשרת ימי תשובה*, the 10 days of repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is opportune. It is, for us, already a time of introspection, a time to ask and answer the question: One year later, what has changed in our lives as Americans, and as Jews?

9-11 was an attack on the basic values of our free American society. The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the loss of the fourth plane dealt a major blow to our security and morale. In the uncertain times that followed, it has been difficult for many people to maintain an optimistic, positive outlook on life.

As Americans, the rights of liberty or freedom are central to the way we think, and almost inextricably linked with our own sense of happiness. This connection between happiness and freedom is found in one of our most fundamental sacred civic texts, the Declaration of Independence.

“We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their **CREATOR**, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

In the wake of 9-11, a series of events happened that exposed financial weakness and scandal, and led to layoffs, higher unemployment, and recession. Our fears and worries over our physical security led to greater concern over the state of our jobs, our financial security, and the stability or instability of our retirement funds. At the same time our civil liberties and ease of free movement by air were restricted. It was only after 9-11 that many of us fully realized how free and open our society had been. Diminished freedom; diminished happiness; such was the legacy of 9-11.

Consider now what it really mean to be fully free and to be totally happy. When you think about it, it is difficult to point to places in our lives in which we are truly free in the sense of being totally unencumbered and independent. We have responsibilities -- children to raise, jobs to work, volunteer commitments to fulfil, parents to care for, pets to feed, houses to look after, gardens and yards to tend. The course of our lives runs a meandering path based not only on decisions we have made, but also on the random circumstances that surround us, pull us in ways not of our own choosing.

Losing a spouse, being diagnosed with a serious illness, losing a job, recovering from divorce, losing a parent at a young age, becoming the primary caregiver for an aging parent, losing a child -- these are all circumstances which may happen to us, dramatically affecting the course of our lives, which we could not have anticipated and planned for, and which may limit the range of our choices in life.

I know people who feel trapped in their lives; working jobs they do not like, living in cities away from where they would prefer, not being able to travel or acquire the possessions that they would like. They feel trapped and unhappy, less than fully free, because they see a narrower range of choices in their life than they used to have, or than other people around them seem to have.

Since 9/11 and the subsequent decline in the markets, since the high profile corporate blunders, bankruptcies, and fraud investigations further depressed the market, there is a greater degree of insecurity and unhappiness in our society. One of the primary means of expressing our freedom

and happiness comes from our financial ability to “get away,” to do and buy whatever we want. This is what Southwest Airlines had in mind when they designed their ad campaign with the tag line, “You are now free to move about the country,” explicitly connecting wealth with independence, saying that even those of more modest financial means can still be free.

Have we internalized the notion of “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” to mean that in order to be fully free and fully happy we must spend our lives in pursuit of things, material and otherwise?

I suggest that most of those who feel trapped in unhappy lives have in fact fully joined the two concepts of freedom and happiness, and feel that their lives are the exact opposite -- unfree and unhappy. How can we break out of this cycle? If we cannot be completely happy unless we are totally free to do and acquire everything that we wish, then happiness may indeed be an impossible dream.

An answer may lie in what Jewish tradition says about attaining happiness. One classic model appears in the last of the seven “sheva berakhot” wedding blessings:

The Source of Blessing are You, Adonai our God, [eternal] Sovereign of the Universe, who created joy and happiness, groom and bride, pleasure and song, delight and gladness, love and harmony, peace and friendship.

... אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא שְׂשׂוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה, חֶתֶן וְכֵלָה, גִּילָה רַנָּה, דִּיצָה וְחֻדְוָה, אֶהְבָּה וְאַחֲוָה, וְשָׁלוֹם וְרַעוּת.

This model of happiness is notable because there are 10 different words for being happy in the blessing. There is something inherently joyful about being in a formal relationship, even though such a relationship certainly involves a significant loss of freedom. When your life is joined to someone else’s life, as a spouse, child, or parent, you certainly do give up some of your freedom to do whatever you want, whenever you want. Being in such a relationship, however, may in fact be the basic Biblical or Jewish model of happiness.

Another source supporting this is the passage from D’varim speaking about the observance of the coming festival of Sukkot:

You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter ... You shall hold a festival for Adonai your God seven days, ... and you shall have nothing but joy.

דְּבָרִים טז:יד, וְהֵייתְ אַךְ שִׂמְחָה

This source seems to be proposing that the result of fulfilling the obligation of celebrating the festival will be happiness. In other words, if you act happy, you will be happy. It posits that feelings flow from actions, not the other way around as we so often think. If we behave in a joyful manner then we will find our emotions matching our behavior.

There is more to this principle of happiness, however, than simply becoming happy by behaving happy. This, too, is a happiness principle based on a relationship. Above, the quintessential happy relationship was the marital bond; here, it is the bond between the human and the divine. When we are fully in service to God, such as celebrating a thanksgiving festival like Sukkot, that relationship will make us happy.

These Jewish texts teach us that happiness comes from being in relationships with other people and with God. If happiness based on acquisition is inherently transitory, then happiness based on the relationship of marriage, committed friendships, close siblings, parent-child, or God is potentially more fulfilling, lasting, and meaningful.

In the months following 9-11, I found myself getting back in touch with old friends from Camp Ramah and High School. Around the same time, I found an article which stated that the tragedy of 9-11 motivated many people to seek out friends and family with whom they had lost touch. People all over the country were seeking to remedy their existential anxiety and unhappiness by renewing or repairing old relationships.

One year after September 11, 2001, it is an understatement to say that the events of that day changed our world. 50 years from now, we might even be able to say that it was a pivotal turning point in our country's history. I suggest that if there is to be any lasting lesson to be carried with us, it should be this idea that each day of our lives with the people we love is precious. Rather than focusing on aspects of our lives in which we have limited freedom, let us resolve to focus on how we can use that freedom to create stronger relationships with our spouse, children, parents, siblings, and friends. Rather than being consumed with our own personal burdens, let us resolve to act in a way which lightens the burdens of those around us. And let us all pray that in the coming year:

עוֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמְרוֹמָיו - The One who makes peace in the heavens above;

הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם - will share that peace down on earth;

עֲלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי תֵבֵל - with us, with all Israel, and with all the inhabitants of the world;

וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן - and let us say, Amen.