

L'shanah Tovah. But Will It Be Happy?

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Rabbi Barry Block

I had the most embarrassing father who ever lived. That was, of course, until Robert and Daniel came along. Now, they are the accursed ones. Little causes my sons more chagrin than their father's breaking out into song. My favorite is when they want something that Toni and I are just not going to provide. If you've sung it to your children, please join me:

You can't always get what you want.
No, you can't always get what you want.
But if you try some time,
You just might find
You get what you need.

As we prepare for the New Year, the song may be a prayer. We may not get what we want in 5775. Let us pray that we get what we need.

On this Rosh Hashanah, we will wish each other a *shannah tovah*. Literally, those words mean, "a good year;" but most of us simply say, "happy new year."

As we offer our High Holy Day prayers, though, we will not find words asking for a happy new year anywhere in *Gates of Repentance*. "Good," yes; even "sweet;" but not "happy."

For some of us, the reality is that the new year will not bring much happiness or joy. The troubles and the sadness of the year now ending will follow us into 5775.

The pangs of loss will continue for those most recently grief-stricken. We need time to grieve, and to make sense of our loss, before we can focus on fun again. We pray that the bereaved will find comfort. We hope that they will discover new purpose as a result of their loss. We know people who have emerged from tragedy to create new successes, for themselves and for humanity. If our prayers are answered, our friends in mourning may experience a good new year. We can wish them a *shannah tovah* in good conscience, even if we would rightly feel awkward wishing them a "happy new year."

The indignities of unemployment and under-employment will continue for too many in our midst. Decreased income is distressing and anxiety-producing. Not being able to work at our chosen task can leave us without a sense of mission, feeling aimless. Wallowing in our misery will not help, and any resulting depression must be treated aggressively; but the fact remains: Happiness cannot be our first priority for those struggling for meaningful employment this Rosh Hashanah.

Perhaps our real Rosh Hashanah prayer will be that people living employment nightmares may awaken to a new year of enhanced self-awareness, of new ideas about how to make a difference and a living. If our prayers are answered, they may have little fun in the process, yet they will surely experience a good new year. We may wish them a *shanah tovah* in good conscience, even if cannot look them in the eye this week and say, "happy new year."

And what of the family struggling with a cruel illness, threatening to take the life of a loved one, far too soon? Barring a miracle, that family will not, on the whole, enjoy happiness in 5775. Perhaps they will be surrounded by a magnificent community of caring. Some will derive meaning from being at the stricken loved one's side, day in and day out, or just by fetching the groceries or driving the carpool for the family in crisis. Others will lose faith in a God whom they hoped would protect them from suffering. Let them pray for new faith that transcends loss, forging a fresh relationship with a God who carries us through life's darkest days. In the hope that their prayers may be answered, we may offer them a *shanah tovah*, when we would not dare say, "happy new year."

A cynic might ask, "Who told you that life would be happy, anyway?" Some view our years on Earth as a series of responsibilities, of obligations to be met joylessly. Judaism does not look at the world that way. Instead, we are taught that, on our proverbial "judgment day," one of the questions we will be asked is whether we sufficiently enjoyed the legitimate pleasures of this world. God does want us to be happy.

Indeed, if we look at the Bible, happiness does not seem to be the priority.

In the latter portion of the Book of Isaiah, we read the words of an anonymous prophet. He speaks to the Children of Israel, living in exile in Babylon. Their Temple has been destroyed. Their homeland is occupied. The banished Israelites have been invited into the Babylonian good life. How seductive the offer must have been: if these Israelites will merely become Babylonians; then they could be happy and prosper.

The prophet urges the people instead to choose a path of goodness, even if happiness must be delayed. As we are taught, the Israelites "sit by the waters of Babylon and weep for Zion." They remain faithful to God. Ultimately, the Persians conquer the Babylonians, and the Israelites are permitted to return to their land and rebuild their Temple.

Because our ancestors chose goodness over joy, because they followed the prophet's urgings, our God is worshiped today by billions of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, around the globe. Those civilizations that chose the happier option, assimilating into the cultures of their conquerors,

disappeared along with their forgotten gods. We may read about the gods of ancient Egypt or Greece; but nobody worships them.

The lesson is as true for us today as it was in the sixth century, B.C.E.

Most of us want happiness for our children. Of course, we do. Little brings us greater pleasure than to see our children both happy and behaving at the same time.

But let me tell you about a third grader I once knew. On one mid-term progress report, she got a D minus in Math. Now, this particular girl was accustomed to good grades; at the end of the prior grading period, she had an A in Math and every other subject. The day she brought that report card home was not a happy one, not for the third grader and not for her parents.

The parents knew what had gone wrong: Their child had declared that she already understood the math perfectly, and did not need to do the homework. She was not entirely wrong. She did just fine on the tests. She lost points, all the way to a D-minus, because of failure to submit homework.

The child was not happy. Her parents were not happy. The teacher was not happy. The parents told the girl that she could not enjoy her recreational activities until the several weeks' of homework were complete. You know what happened: Within days, the work was submitted, and the student had an A in Math again by semester's end. The teacher had made her point. The girl continued to earn A's the following year.

I tell this simple story to illustrate a lesson we all know, at least about children. Good outcomes most often come from difficulty, rather than from joy. Yes, Toni and I hope that Robert and Daniel will know much happiness in the year ahead. So much more, though, we want them to experience a good year, a year of growth and learning, of successes on the one hand and learning from their mistakes on the other.

Isn't that what we all want, for ourselves and for one another? Our society teaches us to pop the champagne cork; without thinking, we frivolously wish one another a "happy new year." Perhaps that's a problem with our society. If each of us would seek goodness, rather than wishing only for happiness, we might all live better lives. We might even be happier.

The psalmist wrote, *Hazor'im b'dim'ah, b'rinah yiktzoru*. "Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy." This year, our fondest prayers may not be answered. Our ailments may not be cured. Our fortunes

may not improve. We may know our share of troubles. Others among us, thank God, will experience joy in 5775. We will know new love. We will delight in discoveries, about ourselves and others. A healthy baby will be born.

Whether we know pain or joy in the new year, let us pray that 5775 may be a good year, a year of peace and blessing; for all, a *shanah tovah*.

Amen.