

**Rabbi David M. Frank, Temple Solel, Cardiff, CA Rosh Hashanah 5777**

**“No Day But Today”**

There's a famous Zen story of two monks who were travelling down the road. Suddenly, they came upon a shallow river and noticed a woman who was reluctant to cross for fear of spoiling her silk garments. As she saw the monks approach, she demanded that they take her across. So, the senior monk put the woman on his shoulders and carried her on his back to dry ground on the other side. Then, without a word, the woman went on her way.

As the two monks continued on, it was clear that his younger colleague was upset – he was quiet and brooding. Finally, he couldn't contain himself any longer. He turned to his mentor and exclaimed, “Why did you carry that woman across? She was spoiled and rude.” The older monk looked at him intently and replied, “Brother, I set the woman down hours ago. Why are you still carrying her?”

Wouldn't it be great if we could all be Zen masters and set down those unnecessary burdens that weigh us down? Our resentments and old baggage to be sure. But, also all the distractions, the pressure, the expectations we feel compelled to fulfill.

Most of us are on overload – we're tethered to our multiple devices, we're stretched between too many obligations, we're pushing our career boulders up the hill of increasing demand and availability, and trying still to be engaged with our spouses, parents, and kids. In the end, we're feeling like whatever we do, it's never enough.

It's no wonder that one of the most popular movements today is the “Decluttering Movement.” People have finally hit the wall. So they're scaling back, simplifying, getting rid of that unnecessary stuff, even moving into “tiny houses,” the newest fad, so they can lower their overhead, work less, and free up time for more meaningful pursuits.

The Decluttering Movement must have studied some Talmud, and that Tevye-like answer of our rabbis to the question: Who is rich? It is not necessarily the one who has much, but the one who rejoices in his or her portion!

Tonight, as we enter the New Year, maybe we could also be thinking about “less” – and by that I mean, about how to declutter and put down the unnecessary burdens we carry. And we can start by asking not only what to let go, but by considering, as well, what is most important to keep. If we could really simplify

our life, what would be the basic, most precious elements of a meaningful and happy life?

Well, one way to answer that question, might be to ask people who are toward the end of their lives. We'd ask them, "As you look back on your life's journey, what mattered most to you and what turned out to be least important?"

Bronnie Ware, as an Australian hospice nurse, who shared intimate moments with patients in their final weeks and days of life, learned a great deal about this very question. And, in a powerful article called, "Regrets of the Dying," she describes the top five regrets of her patients.

At the top of the list is, "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me." So many of her patients made choices to appease the expectations of others, and ended up letting their personal goals go unfulfilled. They died with the sadness that it's too late.

Another regret, is one I hear from a lot of men and women who are burning the candle at both ends and feeling the life get sucked out of them – "I wish I didn't work so hard." The demands of work are so high today – it's 24/7 and if there were more hours in the day the demands would be higher. Welcome to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The third regret is a very challenging one for most of us: "I wish I had the courage to express my feelings." So many of Ware's patients looked back and realized they had kept quiet when they wanted to speak up, and eventually grew more and more resentful, and even developed chronic illnesses. This was actually a top regret for many, and clearly goes right along with not having the courage to live true to oneself.

The fourth regret, is one I wouldn't have expected to see on the list: "I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends." But, as we know, even with Facebook, email, and texting, it's still easy to let friendships slide. And this seems to be a tremendous regret at the end of life.

Finally, the last regret wraps all of them together, and cuts deeply as we hear it: "I wish that I had let myself be happier." Ware says: "This is a surprisingly common one. Many did not realize until the end, that happiness is a choice."

I wonder, how many of us have even thought of it this way – that "happiness is a choice?" Speaking for myself, this was something I hadn't considered! And it obviously takes us to a bigger question, which is, if happiness *is* a choice, how do we choose it? I started researching this and, as it turns out, there are lots of theories about happiness.

Neuroscientists have identified a variation in a gene that, in their words (as only scientists could express it), causes some people to experience “global relationship satisfaction, perceived partner responsiveness, and positive emotions.” That gene, by the way, is CD38, in case you were curious.

Experimental psychologists, on the other hand, have suggested another approach. Just *act happy* more often and you’ll *become* happier. Apparently, smiling for 20 seconds makes you happier. Regardless of your mood, smiling makes your brain process positive emotions.

These are interesting theories, but what I really wanted to know is, when we declutter and reduce life down to basics, what are the most important factors that tend to make people happy? Here’s where something called, “The World Happiness Report” comes in. Yes, there is such a thing, and it ranks countries by happiness.

In case you’re wondering which is the happiest country on earth, the answer is Denmark. The United States ranks thirteen, and Israel is actually ahead of the U.S. at number eleven, which is rather surprising considering their high tax rate, mandatory military service for boys and girls, and the continual threat of terrorism and war.

So, what *are* the factors that make people more happy in some countries and less happy in others? There are the baseline things we’d expect, like longer life-expectancy, a strong economy and government. But other more personal factors really stood out to me because they so strongly mirror the findings of Bronnie Ware in her hospice work.

For example, there’s maintaining friendships, measured by the question: “If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them?”

Another is about being able to make life choices: “Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?”

And still another is measured by generosity, “Have you donated money to a charity in the past month?” Because people who are happy, are more engaged and give more to others.

What I take away from this report, is that happiness difference makers have to do with being able to live out our dreams, having a network of friends and family we can count on, and being part of a communal culture where, instead of working

tireless just to get ourselves ahead or accumulate wealth, we value sharing what we have with others.

This brings me to a piece David Brooks wrote in the New York Times about a new book called, Tribe. Tribe describes a fascinating phenomenon in Colonial America, when the early settlers were living side by side with Native Americans. Apparently, when settlers were captured and taken prisoners, they very often ended up defecting, choosing to stay with the tribe and refusing to go back to settler civilization. Even if they were rescued, they would frequently run away and hide so they could get back to the tribe.

So, what did these tribes offer that appealed to some of our early settlers? It's hard to say, but the book suggests that it was mainly the close, interdependent communal living. After reading the book, David Brooks writes: "It has haunted me since. It raises the possibility that our culture is built on some fundamental error about what makes people happy and fulfilled."

And this may be why Israel is ahead of America on the Happiness Index, despite its challenges – because a culture of shared obligation is inculcated at every level of society, especially in the military. It's what allows teens to feel safe on the streets at 2 am. It's what gives entrepreneurs and startups the support to courageously pursue their dreams. And it's what held together families confined for weeks to bomb shelters during the Lebanon and Gaza Wars, as caring strangers poured into the active warzone from all corners of the country with books, games, and home cooked food.

I thought this used to also be our American culture, but I wonder whether in these anxious times, it is fading in our country and in our lives.

Our rabbis once made an audacious statement. They said, "Repent one day before your death. But, since, obviously, none of us knows the day of our death, we should instead repent today."

Before it's too late, before we're stuck with our regret, we have this opportunity to refocus and get back to the essentials, which is, of course, our task over these High Holidays. From those who've lived and died before us, the main thing we can learn is that it's better not wait.

This year, my college roommate was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. Ira is a psychologist who founded a large child development center and produced an award winning documentary on Autism. He's also an avid pilot, who was even willing to brave the LA airspace to fly down for a visit. Ira's treatments have been quite difficult and he has been grounded for the time being. But, he still writes a great blog to which I subscribe, combining his interests in

psychology, aviation, and life. This is what he recently wrote in a piece called, “Borrowed Time”:

The notion of living on borrowed time becomes a silent, gnawing guest that accompanies you everywhere. The things that one momentarily feels must be done today, take on both an added urgency and a subtracted urgency; does it really matter if we make the appointment with the dog groomer today or tomorrow?

But then there are the things that one momentarily feels are unnecessary but upon another moment’s reflection do matter in the light of shrinking tomorrows. Saying “I love you” to someone in a way that is brimming with meaning and not a stale throwaway jumps to the top of the to-do list. Apologizing for past hurts, expressing gratitude to those who are fortunate to be alive and capable of deriving meaning from our words; these acts become the new markers for borrowed time well spent.

Certainly, time will be spent whether it is borrowed or owned. Most of us live as if we owned it.

... But there can be no dispute about the ultimate end of our lives and the ultimate limit on the time that beats through them. ... So we are all on borrowed time, like it or not. Whether you manage to measure that time in dollars, days, months, years or minutes, it is not ours to keep. Spend it well.

Tonight, as we enter this New Year, we face what is always in the back of our minds. The Book of Life and Death is open – we are on borrowed time. So, how will we use this lifetime and make it count?

Our great teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, once taught that, to understand time, is to understand that no moment is similar to another moment – each moment is radically unique. This means that each moment, including this one, is a chance that will never occur again.

This is our chance to gaze deeply into our Book of Life and resolve to live out our dreams to the fullest, to express feelings and speak up courageously, to place our friends and family above endless work, to be a generous, engaged member of our tribal community, and to smile for at least 20 seconds to feel happy.

As the words from Broadway’s Rent remind us:

There's only us  
There's only this

Forget regret-- or life is yours to miss.  
No other road  
No other way  
No day but today.