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## “A Jewish View of Happiness”

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Today I'm going to tell you the secret of happiness. After all, that's what people are looking for, the secret of happiness. The problem with that is that they assume that it's a secret, that happiness is a commodity that is precious and rare. Well, here's the secret of happiness: the secret of happiness is that it's not a secret. It can be stated quite plainly, clearly, and has been by the great religions of the world who agree among themselves, at least in general terms, about the secret of happiness. So, it's no secret. The problem is that we don't want to hear the secret of happiness. If we did hear it, then we wouldn't want to believe it. And even if we believed it, some of us, and all of us some of the time, would rather just forget it. Because even if it is easily stated, the secret of happiness is difficult to live. See, it's a big paradox. The smaller and greedier, childish part of ourselves that all of us have wants happiness and it wants it without delay and with no pain attached, but it takes the development of a more mature, higher, broader self to bring happiness about. There's the paradox, the part that wants it now and the developing and growing part that knows that it takes some effort and discipline to bring it about. Ready? I'm going to tell it to you. The secret of happiness: Happiness comes by giving oneself to a higher meaning than one's own life and the greatest barrier to happiness is the selfish pursuit of happiness. So, to say it even more simply: The secret of happiness is selflessness. All of the great religions of the world agree. That's kind of hard to hear.

I've long admired the writings of Rabbi Harold Kushner, whose bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* has changed people's lives for the better, many millions of people around the world. It's the best book I think I've ever read about why people suffer. He didn't speak from a high theological plain because he knew suffering. His son died of old age at the age of fifteen. He had that rare aging disease. This book was a cry and an explanation of what got him through. Several years later, he wrote another book that I like a lot and it's called *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*. It's about the pursuit of happiness. It's based on the biblical book of Ecclesiastes. What Rabbi Kushner noticed is that a lot of people in his congregation and a lot of other people that he knew had gotten everything that they ever wanted in life, lots of money, lots of material goods, high status, a good job, a family, and yet, they weren't happy. He wrote, “You don't become happy by pursuing happiness. You become happy by living a life that means something. The happiest people you know are probably not the richest or most famous, probably not the ones who work the hardest at being happy by reading the articles and buying the books and latching on to the latest fads. I suspect that the happiest people you know are the ones who work at being kind, helpful, and reliable and happiness sneaks into their lives when they are doing these things. You don't become happy by pursuing happiness; it is always a byproduct, never a primary goal.”

So what is this book of the Hebrew Bible that Rabbi Kushner talks about? It's kind of a book that doesn't seem to fit with the rest of the bible because the writer of Ecclesiastes

is a thorough skeptic. He really looks at life with an unblemished eye, no wishful thinking here, straight on. He sees the impermanence of everything and he has proved the secrets of life and happiness the hard way by his own experience and reason. Most of us are familiar with a quotation from that book: "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven, a time to be born and a time to die." Pete Seger wrote a wonderful song with those as the words that was recorded by the Byrds. Some of us remember that. It appears that the writer of Ecclesiastes was a wealthy, well-connected, high status individual in Jerusalem at the height of Jerusalem's wealth and power. He tried it all. He tried living with wealth and gaining more wealth and more possessions. He tried by hedonism by avoiding pain and piling on the pleasures. He tried even in his middle years the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom and the pleasures to be found in that. He learned that happiness was not found by pursuing riches.

Regardless of what most people say, most of us in our culture don't believe that happiness is not to be found by pursuing possessions, because look what we're doing. Look what we're buying. We spend so many hours pursuing money to buy toys, so many hours that we don't have time to play with or maintain the toys we have because we are too busy working to have money to buy more toys. This is not the way to happiness. Most of us, while we may pay lip service that happiness is not in the pursuit of possessions, believe that while money can't buy happiness, it does make misery more enjoyable. The pursuit of wealth, however, can cut us off from other people. If we see life as winning and losing then other people are not potential friends, members of our community, members of our family, they become threats to our goals in a highly competitive world. We can't be truly human unless we are a part of a community of mutuality. The great zoologist Jane Goodall who spent many years living among and studying the chimpanzees of Africa said that, "One chimpanzee is no chimpanzee." These higher primates depend on each other and the intricate bonds of connection to live out their true nature. You know, we too are higher primates. We could say that one human being is not a whole human being.

Ecclesiastes then tried another of today's popular pursuits, hedonism. He pursued all the pleasures he could afford, which were many, and tried to avoid pain. He found what many people who pursue pleasure as their main goal in life today are finding: boredom, boredom and more boredom. Pleasure for the sake of pleasure alone requires greater and more intense pleasure and it's more addictive as we go along. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't enjoy life's pleasure. We should savor the gifts of life as they come along. We should indeed take those gifts for what they are, grace. In fact, there is a saying in rabbinic Judaism that when we die, God will demand of us an accounting of all of the legitimate pleasures that we chose not to pursue. But that is very different from sinfully living to pursue pleasure. It's not enough by itself. We need a happy medium because meaning is not found purely in pleasure.

Ecclesiastes also looked for happiness in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom and learning. This is a hard one for many Unitarian Universalists who like to live in their head. The world of ideas is so pure and so unblemished the world that we can create in our heads with ideas, but unless those ideas can be tied to life which is often ambiguous,

messy and to relationships which are often difficult, the pursuit of knowledge is also a dead end. What Rabbi Kushner suggests is that mature religion can get us on the road to happiness. He makes it clear that it is not the religion in the time of Ecclesiastes which was bound by rules and fears, by primitive rituals. Kushner says, "Authentic religion does not want obedient people. It wants authentic people, people of integrity. What is integrity? The word integrity means whole, undivided, all of a piece. Living with integrity means finding out who you are and being that person all the time. Religion does not expect us to be perfect, but religion can expect us to be whole in another sense, not flawless but constant. The young have a word for it. They speak of a person being together in the sense of knowing who one is and what one stands for. The challenge of authentic religion is not to be perfect but for us to get ourselves together and to be at all times who we are at our best."

Ecclesiastes, that Old Testament sage, in one paragraph sums up what he has learned. Here's his formula for happiness: "Go eat your bread in gladness and drink your wine in joy for your action was long ago approved by God. Let your clothes always be freshly washed and your head never lacked for ointment. Enjoy happiness with the women you love all the fleeting days that have been granted to you under the sun. Whatever is in your power to do, do it with you might for there is no doing, no learning, no wisdom in the grave where you are going."

The book is full of the awareness of mortality. How can that be part of the formula for happiness? Well, if we realize that our moments, our pleasures, our loves, are impermanent, that nothing does last, we realize how precious they are and that means that we will truly enjoy the gifts of creation food and drink and clothing and most importantly love and friendship and meaningful work which allows us to sense that we are a valuable and competent person and that we are giving back to the generations to come. In pursuing happiness it is important to remember that life is a gift and not a project and that means we can take it a little easier, that we don't have to try so hard, that we can take the enjoyments that life brings to us and truly savor them without worrying about moving into the next moment before this one is even acknowledged. As Kushner said, "In the same way that a half hour of exercise everyday does more to keep us fit than six hours of exertion once a month, a few small experiences of the meaningfulness of life everyday will do more for our souls than a single overwhelming religious experience." Maybe we're like the literary character Colette who said, "What a wonderful I've had, I only wish I would have realized it sooner." We can realize it now. Could it be that the secret of happiness is a cliché? Faith, hope, and charity. Love is all you need. Stop and smell the flowers. Be all that you can be. Things haven't changed that much since the days of Ecclesiastes. Happiness is still not a destination. It's a means of travel.

Blessed be.