

**1<sup>ST</sup> DAY OF SUKKOT**  
**OCTOBER 3, 2009**  
**RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

In the recent edition of *Newsweek*, one of the regular columnists, Julia Baird, writes about happiness: “Is this endless pursuit of happiness just making us all miserable? We’ve said our affirmations, drunk coffee out of cheesy mugs with nonsensical, motivational quotes, and bought millions of tomes on getting rich quick while thinking positive thoughts. According to *Psychology Today*, last year 4,000 books were published on happiness, up from 50 in 2000.”

She claims that Americans outwardly say they are happy, even when they are really not. In fact, she writes: “The more overtly we have studied and pursued it, the less happy we have become and the more confusing it gets.” She quotes a study by economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers of Wharton who state that despite two decades of economic growth in America, men and women are no happier than they had been.

If that is the case, then we must examine what being happy is all about. We have now begun the holiday on which we are asked to be joyous. The Torah tells us: “You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless and the widow in your communities... and you shall have nothing but joy.”

This is the only festival on which there is an actual commandment to be happy. The Torah does not actually define what happiness is or how we are to be joyful. In fact, if we look at the rituals of the holiday of Sukkot, we might be somewhat puzzled. We leave the security, safety and comfort of our homes and go outside into a flimsy hut which is susceptible to wind, rain, bees and insects. We use the lulav and etrog to symbolize the bounties of nature even though most of us have very little clue how to work the fields and reap the harvest. And yet, it is on this holiday that we are asked to rejoice in our festival. Perhaps we need to examine what happiness is all about.

In the last week, I had the opportunity to read two very new works that are written by significant authors. They come from totally different contexts but I think they can teach us a great deal about happiness. The first is entitled “*Letters to the Next Generation – Reflections for Yom Kippur*.” It was authored in honor on this Yom Kippur by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of England.

In honor of the holiday he composed a series of ten letters which are written by a fictional father to his children. He writes: “I’ve done so because it’s a way of discussing the big decisions that shape the rest of our life for us and those close to us. They are fictional letters, but the issues they raise are real.” He writes to a fictional Sara and David about love, faith, living Jewishly, being a Jewish parent and making a blessing over life. His final chapter is finding happiness.

Since the letters are written for Yom Kippur he tells his children that Yom Kippur teaches us that we can't control everything, however, what matters will be under our control. How we will act and react? Will we behave honorably, graciously, generously? Will we love and thank G-d? Will we enhance other people's lives?

He tells his children that these are the questions we should ask ourselves on Yom Kippur. For it is not what happens to us on which our happiness depends. It depends on how we respond to what happens to us. He then shares with his children ten secrets which he has learned from Judaism. This top ten, he suggests, will "bring you happiness whatever fate has in store for you in the coming year." I think his top ten will not bring as many laughs as those on the David Letterman Show. However, they are a good prescription for happiness and for making meaning of our lives.

Rabbi Sacks' top ten are: 1. Give thanks; 2. Praise; 3. Spend time with your family; 4. Discover meaning; 5. Live your values; 6. Forgive; 7. Keep growing; 8. Learn to listen; 9. Create moments of silence in the soul; and, 10. Transform suffering.

He elaborates on each of these titles by describing our relationship with G-d and other human beings, the need to praise what another person does, keep Shabbat, continue to learn and grant forgiveness. He also suggests that we learn to listen and to understand the beauty of silence and appreciate the fact that "when bad things happen to you, use them to sensitise yourself to the pain of others."

He concludes his letters with these words: "Life's too full of blessings to waste time and attention on artificial substitutes. Live, give, forgive, celebrate and praise: these are the best ways of making a blessing over life, thereby turning life into a blessing."

Rabbi Sack's prescription for happiness is not sugary promotions. It is not the power of positive thinking. It is not to be beautiful, wealthy and successful. It is to be involved in a life filled with values, meaning and significance. It is to recognize all the gifts that have come your way and appreciate those gifts and those around you. His prescription, therefore, is contrary to much of what the pop psychologists preach. His prescription is a life filled with showing gratitude and living by eternal values.

The other book I read was written by Mitch Albom entitled "*Have a Little Faith*". He is not only a sportswriter in Detroit, but is well-known for his book "*Tuesdays with Morrie*". I received a pre-publication copy of the new book only a few days ago.

Albom's book is about two individuals who taught him a great deal, his family's Rabbi, Rabbi Albert Lewis, and Pastor Henry Covington. It is as much about these two individuals as it is about Mitch Albom. We learn that Albom was a reluctant Hebrew school student at the synagogue of Rabbi Albert Lewis. Though he strayed from Judaism during the course of his lifetime, confesses to marrying a non-Jew and has little religion in his household, he still sees Rabbi Lewis as his rabbi and returns each High Holiday Days to be with his parents in the synagogue. He begins this true story with a meeting that he had with Rabbi Lewis who asked him: "Will you do my eulogy?" Albom is

totally surprised. He is not religious, does not really know Rabbi Lewis as a human being and is not in the business of giving eulogies. When he asked why, Rabbi Lewis responds: "Because I think you would be a good choice. And I think, when the time comes, you will know what to say." Albom then writes: "Picture the most pious man you know. Your Priest. Your Pastor. Your Rabbi. Your Imam. Picture him tapping you on your shoulder to say goodbye to the world on his behalf." Albom agrees to do so, but only on the condition that he gets to know Rabbi Lewis, the man. From that moment onwards Rabbi Lewis meets with Albom on a regular basis over an eight year period of time. The book is about those meetings, the life of Rabbi Albert Lewis, his Congregation, what he has done for them, and his thoughts about the meaning of life. Rabbi Lewis passed away in 2008 and Mitch Albom delivered the major eulogy.

I knew Rabbi Albert Lewis quite well. He was, like me, a President of the Rabbinical Assembly and during his tenure and then mine we always had a warm relationship. His son, Rabbi Shalom Lewis, with whom I went to school at JTS, is a rabbi in Atlanta, Georgia. Al Lewis was a very warm individual, a wonderful teacher and a great rabbi. This comes through in the book. His personality, his wisdom, his insight into human life and his touching relationship with his Congregation is beautifully recounted by Albom and leaves us with many teachable moments.

The other person, Pastor Henry Covington, comes from a totally different background. Albom recounts his life which was filled in the early years with drugs, crime and incarceration. We see his struggles as a human being and wonder whether he is going to make it. Finally, there is a life-changing moment when he swears off his past behavior. When Albom meets him he is the Pastor of a church and the head of "I am my Brother's Keeper" ministries. In a run down church in Detroit he feeds the hungry and shelters the homeless. In contrast to Rabbi Lewis' comfortable surroundings in a suburban New Jersey synagogue, Henry Covington's life is filled with leaky roofs, cold sanctuaries and downtrodden individuals. Albom tells the stories of these two individuals and teaches us about faith and the meaning of life.

In his discussions with Rabbi Lewis, whom he commonly and affectionately refers to as "The Reb", he has a discussion about happiness. Albom writes: "Happiness in a tablet. This is our world. Prozac, Paxil and Xanax. Every year, billions are spent to advertise drugs. And every year billions are spent purchasing them. You don't even need a specific trauma; just "general depression" or just "anxiety", as sadness is as treatable as the common cold."

Albom writes that pills are not going to change the fundamental problem. He had learned from the time he had spent with Morrie, his old Professor, what a life filled with value is all about. He learned from the Reb that happiness was not present in a pill to be popped. Instead, Rabbi Lewis loved to smile, he avoided anger. He was never haunted by "Why am I here?" He knew why he was here. To give to others, to celebrate G-d, and to enjoy and honor the world he was put in. His morning prayers, recited upon wakening, began with "Thank you, Lord, for returning my soul to me." "When you start that way," Albom writes, "the rest of the day is a bonus."

In his discussion with the Reb about happiness during the time of Rabbi Lewis' illness, he learned something new as well. Rabbi Lewis informs him: "The things society tells us we must have to be happy – a new this or that, a bigger house, a better job. I know the falsity of it. I have counseled many people who have all these things, and I can tell you they are not happy because of them. The number of marriages that have disintegrated when they had all the stuff in the world. The families who fought and argued all the time, when they had money and health. Having more does not keep you from wanting more. If you always want more, to be richer, more beautiful, and more well-known, you are missing the bigger picture, and I can tell you from experience, happiness will never come." Albom presses him to find out the secret of happiness. Finally, Rabbi Lewis responds: "Be satisfied. Be grateful for what you have, for the love you receive, and for what G-d has given you. That is what happiness is all about."

Both Rabbi Sacks and Rabbi Lewis, through the words of Mitch Albom, remind us what happiness is really all about. It is not quick fixes, it is not pop psychology and it is not the popping of pills. It is being part of an eternal value system, it is being grateful and satisfied with what one has. It is recognizing the gifts with which one has been presented by G-d and the love that one gains from other human beings. It is the ability to give to others and know that you have lived a meaningful and significant life. This is what happiness is about, both tell us.

It reminds us of the famous phrase in Pirkei Avot, which states: "Who is wealthy? The person who is satisfied with his lot."

So now let us return to Sukkot. Sukkot is the holiday of joy because it is the harvest season. No one knows exactly when planting takes place what will happen when the harvest will come. There is anxiety and trepidation. When the harvest does occur, no matter whether it is good or bad, whether it is plentiful or scarce, it is a time to give thanks. It is a time to recognize the gifts with which we have been presented. As Rabbi Sacks suggests, while everything is not in our control we must learn how to respond to what happens to us and to recognize even then, perhaps even more than any other time, the necessity of giving thanks.

Therefore, when we leave our safe and secure homes and walk out to these flimsy huts, we are to recognize how grateful we should be. When we use the lulav and etrog symbolic of the bounties of nature we should understand how thankful we are for the gifts presented to us. When we recall the Israelites' journey in the desert protected by Sukkot from the harsh heat and cold of the desert's days and night, we are to be appreciative of G-d's gifts on a daily basis.

From the holiday of Sukkot, from Rabbi Sack's letters, and from the new book written by Mitch Albom, we learn the same lesson: Be grateful, be thankful, be satisfied, share your gifts with others and live a meaningful life. That is the secret of happiness. It is not a pill, it is not a book of pop psychology, and it is not the words of a newfound

guru on the Oprah show. It is creating a meaningful and significant life which will serve as a legacy to family, friends and community members alike.

May we be joyous in our festival, may we be pleased and satisfied with our lot. May we make the most of our lives here on earth.