

Perhaps it's a product of my age...
[don't ask, but I haven't been the "you look like a kid rabbi" in years]
Or my line of work...
[the challenge-moments, disappointments and life-changes
I regularly help people confront]
Or simply the underlying metaphor of this Day of Awe,
making us little-lower than the angels...
[read: In a state of semi-death which brings us back to life,
with all the customary costuming and pretense stripped away]
but having a "**Happy** New Year"
seems less than ever like the wish that embodies our innermost hope
as we enter this 24 hours of soul-searching & consciousness
reawakening we call Yom Kippur...

Don't get the wrong impression...
I am a positive-minded person; always have been.
When I run into most folks on the street, I leave them with the classic:
"Enjoy your day."
I go out of my way to say a bright & cheery "Mornin'"
to the crossing guard,
and after picking up my favorite breakfast at the Meateria
on the way to Temple, at 8:06, the exchange with the produce guy
is treasured ritual: "Take Care, my friend."
To which I respond with a wave: "And you my friend, have a great day!"
I draw cutesy cartoons on my letters,
a little Jewish Star guy or animated Kiddush Cup;
I sign off on most all my e-mails: "With Sweetness..."
Why, after all, wish anyone anything less?...
So with all the sunshine and smiles radiating out,
Unquestionably happy in what I do & happy to be here,
How can I actually assert or believe that positive-thinking
has its inherent drawbacks?...
Even more, How can I rightly claim,
flipping Peale's magnum opus upside down,
that for us as a Household of Israel,
the bestseller should be re-titled: The Power of Negative Thinking?

Yes – fundamental to our self-definition as Americans,
We are each endowed with inalienable rights, chief among them
“life, liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”
But the “pursuit,”
far beyond congenial conversation or good-natured exchange,
the hunt for the secret to being happy seems way out of whack...
For four years running, Gallup has conducted a poll
Of 1,000 randomly selected adults nationwide,
The Health-Ways Well-Being Index,
Sorting the data by area and other key demographics...
In essence, creating a composite of all the characteristics,
Gallup was able to draw a portrait of “America’s Happiest Man.”
He’s a tall, Asian-American, observant Jew
At least 65, married with children,
who owns his own business
And has an income of more than \$120,000. annually...
So meet Alvin Wong, a 5’10” 70 year old Chinese American,
An observant Jew living in Honolulu with his wife and kids,
Who runs his own home-based healthcare management business...
When contacted by the N.Y. Times last year by phone,
Mr. Wong admitted he was a very happy person,
And after answering a couple of questions about what it feels like
To be the happiest man in America, he incredulously inquired:
“This is a practical joke, right?” [New York Times, 3.6.11]
A Jew through and through, the very thought
of scientifically standardizing happiness is laughable.
But its no joke...The happiness craze has found its way
into the top-tier of our priority list as American Jews.

Last year’s winter issue of Reform Judaism Magazine
Had as its special focus: *Living a Happier Life*.
With features on everything from
“What Science Says – The Happiness Prescription,” to
“Sonya Lyubomirsky’s 11 Happiness Boosters,”
the assumption is that increasing our happiness quotient
is the key to being human,
and likewise – being a fulfilled Jewish person...
Not that I’m looking for misery, but I’m not so sure...

In part, this is a response to the cultural phenomenon that has totally caught hold, as one feature framed it: The *pursuit of happiness project*...

Yet it is even more.

Swept up in the need as a nation – and individuals representing its ideals – to be the best, and nothing less, to see negative thoughts or pessimism as perverse, we have purchased the bill of goods which is the inestimable power of positive thinking...

A Psychology Today lead article from a few years back [Jan 09] reveals the counterintuitive truth:

“The American infatuation with positive thinking has not made us happier...in fact, according to some measures, as a nation we’ve grown sadder and more anxious during the same years that the happiness movement has flourished. Perhaps that’s why we have so eagerly bought up its offerings.” [Brightsided, B. Ehrenreich, pg 204]

But this did not happen over night...

Though its roots run deep into the early 1800’s reaction to a confining religious Calvinism that gave rise to Phineas Quimby’s “New Thought” movement, and likewise, the Mind over Body Metaphysics of Mary Baker Eddy, the mother of what became Christian Science, [Bright-Sided, B. Ehrenreich, pg 86] most of America came to know its offshoot through the prolific Protestant Minister Norman Vincent Peale’s The Power of Positive Thinking.

Hailed 60 years ago as a beacon of hope,

“a book written with the sole objective of helping the reader achieve a happy, satisfying, and worthwhile life,” [Peale] long before self-help volumes lined the bookstore/best-seller list, this work was the game-changer...

So what was so life-altering as to formally frame America’s psyche, as motherhood, apple pie & happiness ever after...?

Here’s a sample slice, from Peale, Chapter 5:

"Who decides whether you shall be happy or unhappy?"

A TV celebrity had, as a guest, an aged man...Whenever he said anything it was so apt, the audience roared with laughter. They loved him.

Finally the host asked the old man why he was so happy.

"You must have a wonderful secret for happiness?"

"No." replied the old man. " I haven't any great secret at all. Its as plain as the nose on your face. When I get up in the morning, I have two choices – either to be happy or unhappy. And what do you think I do? I just choose to be happy, and that's all there is to it!"

Suddenly – with the right outlook,
we were in control of our own-life-satisfaction...

Forget pursuing--all we need do is picture it. As Peale concludes:

"Just say to yourself: Things are going nicely. Life is good.

Choose happiness, and you can be sure of having your choice."

...Of course, we all want to be happy;

to succeed beyond our wildest dreams; to have it all, and to be our best.

But accelerating down Happiness Highway with smiley-faced-no-speed limit signs, fueled purely by the power of a positive mindset, we will sooner or later run out of gas.

This day, however, is the refueling station for sacred life-direction, and it reveals a very different map/course for us to follow...

Famed author and social critic Barbara Ehrenreich wrote a book a few years back which grew out of her experience at the lowest point in her life. I read it, and though it resonated beyond what I knew, I pooh-poohed it...

How could the relentless pursuit of positive-thinking have undermined America's spirit, maybe even the American dream?

Even more, how might the actual "*pursuit of happiness*"

be sidetracking us from life's actual, central aim?

The presumed goal is to embrace the positive with a can-do spirit.

And whether it is through self-help CD's, positivity visualization techniques or mind-over-matter life-philosophy,

the operative assumption is the same: overcome negativity by transcending your current reality and, seeing a different world, happiness awaits. But that's not the world this sacred day reveals.

In a wonderful joint-interview hosted by Krista Tippett on her radio program "On Being" last year

between The Dalai Lama & Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, Lord Jonathan Sacks,

both world religious leaders responded to the query:

Do you believe the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental right?

The Dalai Lama: I believe that happiness is the very purpose of our existence...It is also a responsibility of each individual; we must make a happy life..."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: If you read Jewish literature and history, happiness is not the first word that comes to mind. We offer degrees in misery, post-graduate angst and advanced guilt, yet, in the end, we get together and celebrate...And finding happiness doesn't necessarily follow from pursuing it..."

In 2006, a pastor in Kansas City, the Rev. Will Bowen, announced a 21-day campaign banning negativity in his church, desiring to re-program his people through the collective power of positive-thinking. Distributing purple bracelets to the membership, the Rev. proclaimed the congregation to be "complaint-free," forbidding "any criticism, sarcasm or gossiping." Earning Rev Bowen an appearance on Oprah and the subsequent PR push that helped the anti-negativity campaign catch-on to the tune of over 4 million bracelets given out internationally, his ultimate call was a positive spirited complaint-free world...

I can just imagine such a purple-bracelet push among our people.

Never mind 21 days--it wouldn't last 21 seconds.

Nor should it! We were covenanted with God through 13 biblical instances of communal complaining, [acc'd to classmate, Rabbi Jordan Goldson's Rabbinic Thesis] earning us the nickname *B'nai Kvetch*.

Our faith foundations rest upon a critical eye;

and an ever-striving, discontented spirit...

Optimistic illusions about the state of our lives run contrary to being who we are...to our people's very purpose!

My opening session every year with Senior Seminar,

the 5th year rabbinical students at HUC, is a spiritual wake-up call.

Tonesetter class for the year and in particular, these HH Days,

it centers on life's ultimate question: So WHAT is it we are pursuing?... Using a 5-page article by the great Talmudist and spiritual giant, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, the presumed life-pursuit, that we are all looking for peace of mind--a life of ease, tranquility, is quickly discarded. [*"The notion of peace-of-mind as a supreme life value, as a standard by which to judge all others, is worse than inadequate."*]

...So what's our wish, the preferred path we should pursue?

[Hold on to your horses folks...]

"The path of inner conflict, an ongoing struggle between the given, present reality and that which has yet to be created....Man's question should not be how to escape the perpetual struggle but rather what form to give it." [*"To Strive Toward Spirit," Steinsaltz, pg 60*]

We are not here to choose happiness, much to the chagrin of father of the modern Positive Psychology movement, Dr Martin Seligman, who links optimism to every desirable life outcome, from career success to long-term health to the ability to fight disease and transcend tragedy. Seligman's "Journal of Happiness Studies" would have us believe its all a matter of adjusting our outlook;- putting on new life-spectacles. Actually, it is...BUT the adjustment in vision is not one of outlook as much as it is of insight. We cannot wish the world we want simply be re-imagining it. Nor dare we deny the hard challenges we face in life's pursuit.

Ehrenreich calls it "Bright-Siding," a world where there's no room for negativity, and being purely positive is not alone our sole path to success, but the unifying force behind our nation's identity. She goes so far as to argue that the positive thinking trend, believing your own hype, the too-big-to-fail [or even consider the risks] mindset, led to the economic crisis we're just now climbing out of... Or take outlandish optimism to its extreme, and be Bright-Sided by blessing... Joel Osteen, mega-church pastor of Lakewood, housed in what used to be the home of the Houston Rockets, preaches the 'prosperity gospel' every Sunday AM to two seatings of 16,000 worshippers each, not to mention

the 7 million who watch the TV broadcast, including me, during my 7AM treadmill run.

Why's it so compelling? Because the pastor's not talking that old-time religion, rather the Divine as optimist extraordinaire.

"Get rid of those old wineskins. Get rid of that small-minded thinking and start thinking like God thinks. Think big. Think increase. Think abundance...God's victory is our victory."

In a 60-Minutes segment responding to Osteen's overwhelming appeal, theology professor Rev Michael Horton dismissed Pastor Joel's worldview as "cotton-candy gospel," suggesting:

"He's reduced God to a servant of man..." [Ehrenreich, pg 132]

This moment should leave little doubt--its the other way around.

So what's the alternative to this preponderance of positive thinking if not a negativity that leads straight to despair;

every new day filled with dark clouds if not impending doom?...

Actually, its a worldview we know well [or should]

because its what it means to be who we are – to be right here.

Like an invisible mirror, its staring us in the face this very moment.

Ehrenreich's Bright-Sided post-script poses the challenge:

"The alternative is to try and get beyond ourselves and see things as they really are; to understand that the world is filled with both danger and opportunity--the chance for great happiness as well as the certainty of death." [Brightsided, Page 196]

What is this Atonement moment if not the stripping away of all life-illusions as we stand at the border of death and life-renewed?

What is the Kol Nidrei if not a call to come out of hiding;

to stand before the Holy One--and finally face ourselves?

And as we do, to respond for real to the all-pervading question:

What is the ultimate life-aim you pursue?

The answer is not happiness, certainly not tranquility.

Being connected to this covenant people, we know,

we can never become complacent--never be quite content with the state of our lives--our world.

Facing this Yom Kippur mirror means seeing with vigilant realism,

where we have faltered...Looking at our reality with the critical eye and questioning mind that confirms: spiritually speaking, we are much smaller than we think...

For its only then that we notice: this moment is a three-way mirror:

- ✧ Helping us to look out...Facing the question by choosing the endless, uplifting, painful, purposeful, arduous, affirming struggle that is life...
- ✧ Helping us to look in...Facing ourselves by acknowledging, life *is* good, but we haven't quite lived it as a sacred reflection of God's Image...
So we can make it better – more blessed.
- ✧ Helping us to look up... Facing the Holy One by admitting, we've been less-than fully committed partners in mending the brokenness of this world.

The Hebrew word "*Simcha*" has two primary meanings:

Happiness, or simply – a Simcha – a celebration for some special occasion, a coming together to mark the joyous passage of time.

[Rabbi Alan Morinis, RJ Magazinew, winter 2011, page 63]

Simcha is not happiness, but the realization that, no matter the nature of our personal tsores – regardless of the suffering we face, as we link to a purpose larger than ourselves, seeing beyond our own reflection – we choose life.

When my Dad passed away 9 days after I returned from my first year in rabbinical school in Israel, a year filled with wonderful correspondence from him and me in the dark about the cancer from which he was dying,

Rabbi Korinow, from our hometown Haverhill, Mass., asked in meeting with us before the funeral:

"So what will you remember most?..."

My first response was...

How great it was to be on his bowling team...

But after my sister Rhonda said something,

I recall coming back with: "He was always happy..."

Its only in retrospect, at a moment of awe--looking in life's mirror, as we stand at this border-crossing,

that I begin to understand what I meant...
Dad/Herman Sirkman had every reason to be miserable...
Yet, despite burdensome responsibilities,
of tending daily to his aging parents, living right downstairs,
providing for a family of 4 on a limited income,
working long hours to advance
though he had only a trade school diploma...
Dad never missed a chance to say "Mornin" to the crossing guard
or make the rounds at the Diner, every booth...
or to tell a downtrodden friend an upbeat joke,
or to wave "Hey there" to the produce guy,
or to bring pastries when visiting anyone--because
you can never go wrong with hermit cookies...
Or to make sure his kids knew:
life was good, even if it was never easy...

These are the words I read at graveside
at Dad's burial 30 years ago...
from the pen of the great Yiddishist Leo Rosten;
our honest life-wish as we enter this New Year...
our true hope as we choose the sacred struggle that is life.
*"The purpose of life is not to be happy,
the purpose of life is to matter, to be productive,
to have it make some difference that you have lived at all.
Happiness, then, in the ancient, noble sense means self-fulfillment,
and is given to those who use to the fullest
whatever talents God or luck or fate has bestowed...
Happiness lies in stretching to the farthest boundaries
of that which we are capable, the resources of
the mind, the heart, and the spirit..."*

SO with hearts ever open & spirits never quite satisfied,
May the Holy One bestow upon each one of us
a year filled with such happiness,
not because we pursue it, but because we deserve it...
AMEN.

