

Kol Nidrei 5784

Sermon Transcript: *Elusiveness of Happiness, in an Era of Advancement* - Rabbi Idan Irelander

An intriguing paradox of our modern age is that while our overall physical health and longevity has significantly improved, our levels of satisfaction and happiness have declined.

If I were to present the following rhetorical questions, I am confident that most of us would choose the same answers: Would you rather have good health or illness? Wealth or poverty? Abundant human rights or their absence?

This generation enjoys progress in all of those criteria. Currently, individuals in Western societies are healthier, have longer lifespans, and possess greater wealth than our predecessors. We now benefit from a broader scope of human rights than ever before. And we currently have access to more resources.

Considering the advancements and improvements in life, such as enhanced health, increased wealth, and broader human rights, one might anticipate an overall sense of prosperity, or at least improvement. But, there are reports that suggest that more people today are less happy than their historical counterparts were. Depression, anxiety and loneliness are too prevalent, resulting in an overall sense of dissatisfaction with life, or diminished wellbeing.

In summation, while our objective quality of life has significantly improved, our subjective experience—measured by satisfaction and happiness—appears to have regressed. We live in a day and age in which so much is

attainable. Though computers and smartphones can connect us to other people, globally, and make acquiring otherwise hard-to-get-items easy, we are often left feeling increasingly isolated and wanting more. Technology has amplified our access to often unrealistic social comparisons.

When we might have already been pushed to ask questions like: How much is my neighbor earning? Is my colleague more attractive, successful, or wealthier than I am? We are now often bombarded with advertisements and social media posts that can leave us feeling unsatisfied, when we really likely have enough, or close to it. And, technology has made it so easy to detach from our own neighbors and families—yet keep a pulse on people from our past who are not regulars in our lives, or on anonymous people in our Facebook or Twitter orbits. We too often pay attention to people in pixels at the expense of those right in front of us. One cannot easily emerge feeling whole in this new reality.

The World Health Organization projects that by 2030, depression will be a leading cause of global disease and death.

The problems created by technology are compounded by an unyielding emphasis on individualism. Johann Hari, a British-Swiss writer and journalist, has authored several books on depression, a condition he himself grapples with. During his youth, his psychiatrist prescribed medications to rectify what was diagnosed as a chemical imbalance in his brain. This led him to question whether it could be mere happenstance that, simultaneously and across many regions, numerous unhappy individuals joined him in experiencing this same chemical imbalance in their brains. Hari suggested that perhaps the issue isn't always rooted in neurology alone, but can be culturally influenced, proposing that Western civilization, itself, might be unbalanced in a way that is negatively impacting our mind-body connection, at least for a population of sufferers.

Shalom Hartman Institute fellow, Dr. Micah Goodman, suggested that the catalyst behind this phenomenon could be the push for individualism, prevalent in Western society. Embracing a more individualistic mindset can lead to diminished connections with larger groups, and a consequent sense of loneliness and unhappiness. As a big fan of the NBA who watched the great teams of the Boston Celtics in the 80s, and the Chicago Bulls in the 90s, I have seen a similar trend in which the focus has shifted from collective team efforts to the celebration of individual players. Professional athletes often change teams and emphasize personal achievements over team success. This modern approach rewards self-interest and weakens healthy and rich connections to broader groups.

This is because individualism dictates that one must prioritize discovering oneself. In a 2011 opinion piece for The New York Times titled, “It’s Not About You,” political commentator, David Brooks, pointed to a sampling of commencement speeches that urged graduates to, “Follow your passion, chart your own course, march to the beat of your own drummer, follow your dreams and find yourself.” The prevailing idea is that within each person resides a unique essence that is exclusively their own. Parents, teachers, and even movies emphasize the pursuit of one’s distinct self. Upon this self-discovery, the expectation is then to actualize oneself. In essence, individualism entails both self-discovery and self-realization. And that is not a bad thing, but it could become such if it’s at the expense of familial and neighborly connectedness.

Brooks concluded, “The purpose of life is not to find yourself; it’s to lose yourself.” This means losing oneself in a story larger than yourself and a group more expansive than yourself.

It seems as though fame and fortune are overrated, but social connectedness and happiness are not. So, How do we grapple with this seemingly paradoxical phenomenon? How do we achieve greater happiness while still embracing the advantages available to us in our modern world? And, how do we discover and cater to our best selves as

individuals, without losing sight of the people who are a part of our community?

Canadian Rabbi David Herron wrote that humans are perfect imperfections. The fact that we are imperfect is, in fact, the perfect state for us. Therefore, human beings should truly be called human be-comings, as our ultimate endeavor is to become who we can truly be and to help others do the same.

The Torah signals how once God created man, His biggest priority was Ezer Kenegdo, for man and women to acquire friends, others who will help him and her through the challenges of life. Human beings, or human be-comings, need to belong to something larger than ourselves. Dr. Goodman has suggested that modernity and the Western World, by offering consumption as an alternative to the feeling of belonging, has taken too many of us in the opposite direction, and that's something that contributes to our loneliness. We are constantly exposed to messages signaling to us that we would feel happier if we could accumulate fancier possessions, get into a different college, have a different career, and post glamorous photos in front of exotic landmarks in foreign countries. However, this misconception—that the more we own or show off, the happier we will be, deprives us from doing things for the sake of deeper connections and personal growth.

While modernity does bring wonderful ideas and conveniences to our civilization, Ezer Kenegdo, friendships, family relationships, tradition (not unlike our religious practices), and connection to a supportive community remain crucial for our sense of belonging, and to our overall well-being, and continuous growth. Finding a balance between tradition and modernity, individualism and deepening connections, is an essential element of our sense of happiness.



Maybe the next time you are tempted to turn to your Instagram or Facebook page to compare yourself to others, or post a story or picture that might have others questioning their own worth, hold off for a moment, look at a person nearby, and ask them their thoughts on a given topic. I've had the good fortune of getting to know many of you in some way or another, and so I've experienced firsthand what an interesting group of people you are. Join in with me on further getting to know each other. During a break, or after today's services end, or before tomorrow's start, begin a conversation with a new person, or even with one you came here with. The High Holy Days are not just a time to reflect on how we've approached the year we are leaving behind, but also, how we will start anew in the year to come.

I wish you G'mar Chatimah Tovah. May we be sealed for another year of good health, success, happiness, and continued spiritual and communal growth. And let us say: Amen.

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