

The Pursuit of Happiness Meaning

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In her 2017 book, *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters*, Emily Efsahani Smith observes that despite an increase in personal happiness over the past half-century, many negative factors, such as depression and suicide, have also increased. She argues that this is because, despite being happier, our lives lack something even more significant than happiness. We lack meaning.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks also contrasted happiness with meaning:

Happiness is largely a matter of satisfying Needs & Wants. Meaning, by contrast, is about a sense of purpose in life, especially by making positive contributions to the lives of others. Happiness is largely about how you feel in the present. Meaning is about how you judge your life as a whole: past, present, and future.

Happiness is associated with *taking*, meaning with *giving*. Individuals who suffer stress, worry, or anxiety are not happy, but they may be living lives rich with meaning. Past misfortunes reduced present happiness, but people often connect such moments with the discovery of meaning. Furthermore, happiness is not unique to humans. Animals also experience contentment when their wants and needs are satisfied. But meaning is a distinctively human phenomenon. It has to do not with *nature* but with *culture*. It is not about what happens to us, but about *how we interpret* what happens to us. There can be happiness without meaning, and there can be meaning in the absence of Happiness, even in the midst of darkness and pain. (Studies in Spirituality, pgs. 121-122)

Smith identifies five factors that can lead to a more meaningful life: belonging, purpose, storytelling, transcendence, and growth. These five factors are also features of Judaism, and they have been highlighted by Rabbi Sacks across his various writings.

1. Belonging

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Future Tense (pgs. 44-5, 47-48)

Yet the paradox is that if we consider the history of Jews in Exile, we find an even more remarkable phenomenon in precisely the opposite direction. Jews were dispersed throughout the world, they were not part of the same political jurisdiction, but they continued to see

themselves as a single nation, a distinctive and persistent group, often more closely linked to other Jews throughout the world than to the people among whom they live...

What united them? Rav Saadiah Gaon in the tenth Century gave the answer: 'Our nation is only a nation in virtue of its religious laws.' Wherever Jews were, they kept the same commitment, study the same sacred text, observe the same Sabbath and fast days, and said essentially the same prayers in the same holy language. They even face the same spot while doing so: Jerusalem, where the Temple once stood and where the Divine presence was still held to have its Earthly habitation. These invisible strands of connection sustain them in a bond of collective belonging that had no parallel among any other National grouping. Some feared this, others respected it, but no one doubted that Jews were different...

That is the paradox. In their own land, the place where every other nation is to some degree United, Jews were split Beyond repair. In dispersion, where every other nation is assimilated and disappeared, they remain distinctive and, in essentials at least, united. There was something surprisingly strange about Jewish peoplehood.

The Jewish people exist in all its bewildering complexity because it is both the religion and the nation, a faith and a fate. Remove either element and it will fall apart. That is what is wrong and focusing exclusively on fate - antisemitism, the Holocaust, the people that dwells Alone. For it is faith that keeps bringing us back to the idea that Jews are a people: it was as a people that our ancestors left Egypt, as a people that they made a covenant with God in the desert, as a people that they took up the challenge of life in the Holy Land, and as a people that they understood their destiny. Jewish life is quintessentially communal, a matter of believing and belonging. Maimonides rules: 'one who separates himself from the community even if he commits no sin but merely holds himself aloof from the congregation of Israel...and shows himself indifferent to their distress' has no share in the world to come.

Judaism is not a sect of the like-minded. The Jewish people is not a self-selecting community of saints. It is not, in other words, like most communities of Faith. Jewish identity, with the exception of conversion, is something into which we are born, not something we choose. This mix of fate and faith, nationhood and religion, means that from the very beginning, Jews have had to live with the tension of these two very different ideas, and it is that tension that has made you creative, unpredictable, diverse, conflicted, yet somehow more than the sum of their parts.

There were times - between the first and nineteenth centuries - when the primary bond between Jews was faith. There were others - during the Holocaust - when it was fate. It is that double bond that has held us together. When one failed, the other came to the fore. Call it chance, or the cunning of history, or an invisible hand, or Divine Providence, but the old polarities - fate and faith, *goral* and *ye'ud* - remain, dividing Jews and uniting them in a way that is sometimes exasperated but often inspiring. A people Jews were. A people they still are. But if they are to survive as a people, they will have to solve another and yet more fundamental problem: the challenge of Jewish continuity.

- What unites the Jewish people today?
- In what ways are Fate and Faith complimentary ideas? In what ways do they conflict?

2. Purpose

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* (pgs. 3, 12)

One of Judaism's most distinctive and challenging ideas is its *ethics of responsibility*, the idea that God invites us to become, in the rabbinic phrase, his 'partners in the work of creation'. The God Who created the world in love calls on us to create in love. The God who gave us the gift of freedom asks us to use it to honor and enhance the freedom of others. God, the ultimate Other, asks us to reach out to the human other. More than God is a strategic intervener, He is a teacher. More than He does our will, He teaches us how to do his. Life is God's call to responsibility.

Behind the ethic of responsibility is the daring idea that more than we have faith in God, God has faith in us. Despite His frequent disappointments, He does not give up on us and never will. The story of the flood tells of how God was grieved by the evil men do to one another, and of how he tore up the script of that chapter of humanity to begin again with a righteous man named Noah. The surprising denouement of that story is that God himself regretted what He had done and vowed never again to ask of humanity more than it can reasonably fulfill. God neither destroys the world, nor does He give up on his hopes for humankind, but He now knows it will take time. That is what hope is in Judaism: a refusal to give up on your deepest ideals, but a refusal likewise to say, in a world still disfigured by evil, that the Messiah has yet to come, and the world is saved. There is work still to be done, the journey is not yet complete, and it depends on us: we now all too briefly stride upon the stage of time.

- In the above passage, Rabbi Sacks discusses the Jewish "ethic of responsibility." Do you think that this is "THE" (singular or primary) purpose of Judaism, or "A" purpose of Judaism (among others)?
- What are those other purposes?

3. Storytelling

“To understand the Jewish people, one must listen to the way it tells its story.” - Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (Haggadah, pg. 119)

“The Stories that Bind Us” by Bruce Feiler (New York Times, March 15, 2013) [CLICK HERE](#)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Judaism’s Life Changing Ideas (pg. 80)

The greatest gift we can give our children is not money or possessions, but a story - a real story, not a fantasy, one that connects them to us into a rich Heritage of high ideals. We are not particles of dust blowing this way or that by the passing Winds of fad and fashion. We are heirs to a story that inspired a hundred generations of our ancestors and eventually transform the Western World. What you forget, you lose. The West is forgetting its story. We must never forget hours.

With the hindsight of thirty-three centuries we can see how right Moses was. A story told across the generations is the gift of an identity, and when you know who you are and why, you can navigate the wilderness of time with courage and confidence.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Lessons in Leadership (pg. 280)

By making the Israelites a nation of storytellers, Moses helped turn them into a people bound by collective responsibility - to one another, to the past and future, and to God. By framing a narrative that successive generations would make their own and teach their children, Moses turned Jews into a nation of leaders.

- How do stories help you feel more connected to your family? Your community? The Jewish people?
- The Bruce Feiler article describes three different types of family narratives: ascending, descending, and oscillating. How would you classify your family’s story? What about the story of the Jewish people?

4. Transcendence

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Letters to the Next Generation 2 (pgs. 18, 20)

What will we be remembered for? That is the question Judaism makes us confront, especially on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Let me tell you a true story, tragic but also deeply inspiring...

We wept that day. I believe God wept too. Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the Nobel prize winning writer, once speculated that Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, is our way of offering comfort to God for the loss of one of His children. Mortality is written into the human condition, but so too is the possibility of immortality, in the good we do that continues, long after we are here, to beget further good. There are lives that defeat death and redeem existence from tragedy. We knew, that day, that we had known one of them.

[N]one of us knows how long we will live. We just know that one day we will die. Life is too short to waste on “the small stuff.” Judaism teaches us the simplest, deepest truth of all. You make a blessing over life by *being* a blessing to those whose lives you touch.

- The Talmud describes the lips of deceased sages “moving in the grave” when their books are studied by people. How, in your own life, do you give expression to the teachings, lessons and values of those who have died?
- What is an impact that you hope to leave on this world?

5. Growth

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Letters to the Next Generation (pg. 30)

Keep Growing. Don't stand still, especially in the life of the spirit. The Jewish way to change the world is to start with yourself. And Frank once wrote: "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

- What is a spiritual area that you have grown in? How did you achieve that growth?
- What is a spiritual area that you would like to grow in? What is one actionable step that you can take to begin that process of growth?

- Are there any other factors that you believe contribute to creating a meaningful life? Are they also expressed in Jewish life?