

Elul WhatsApp / Telegram Messages

Day XX – XX September

What is happiness? Over the long course of civilisation, it's proved as hard to define as to achieve. Aristotle called it an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. Bentham defined it as the balance of pleasure over pain. Our culture tends to define it as a new car, an exotic holiday, or the latest phone or gadget. A car bumper sticker in the United States proclaims, "The guy with the most toys when he dies, wins." The way we define happiness tells us who we are and in what kind of culture we live.

Before Rosh Hashanah, there is a custom to visit departed loved ones and it always reminds me that the greatest lessons in happiness I ever learned came from funerals. As a rabbi I often had to officiate at them. They were distressing moments, and they never got any easier. Nothing wears away the raw edge of grief, and there is little you can say to a family in the shock of bereavement to ease the pain. Yet nothing taught me more about the meaning of a life.

In my address I had to paint a portrait, one that was true to the person who had died, but one that also summed up what he or she meant to the people closest to them. Talking to the relatives before the funeral, I would begin to see the contours of a life, the things a person had done that made a difference. Usually it meant being a good husband or wife, and a caring parent. It meant doing good to others, preferably quietly, unostentatiously, without expectation of recognition or reward. The people who were most mourned were not the richest or the most famous or the most successful. They were people who enhanced the life of others. They were kind. They were loving. They had a sense of their responsibilities. When they could, they gave to charitable causes. If they couldn't give money, they gave time. They were loyal friends and committed members of communities. They were people you could count on. Shakespeare's Mark Anthony was wrong. The good we do lives after us. For most of us it's the most important thing that does.

A tribute at a funeral was invariably more than the story of a life. It was an evocation of a world of values, the values that made families and communities what they were. I learned more from those occasions than I did from many courses of moral philosophy. This was ethics at the cutting edge. A funeral was more than a family burying its dead. It was an affirmation of life and the values that give it purpose and grant us as much of eternity as we will know on earth.

I learned from those occasions that happiness is the ability to look back on a life and say: I lived for certain values. I acted on them and was willing to make sacrifices for them. I was part of a family, embracing it and being embraced by it in return. I was a good neighbour, ready to help when help was needed. I was part of a community, honouring its traditions, participating in its life, sharing its obligations. It is these things that make up happiness in this uncertain world. Taken together, they make us see what is a risk in our present culture.

No one ever asked me to say of someone that they dressed well, lived extravagantly, took fabulous holidays, drove an expensive car or had a good time. I never heard anyone praised for being too busy at work to find time for their children. Our ordinary, instinctive sense of happiness is saner and more humane than the story told by the media. It suggests that happiness is not the pursuit of pleasure or the satisfaction of desire. Instead it's inseparable from living well. It is a moral concept, and it's made in those places where morality matters – the

family, the congregation, the community - where we're valued not for what we earn, or what we can buy, or the way we cast our vote, but simply for what we are and what we do.