

According to the Mishnah, the first code of Jewish law, Yom Kippur is the happiest day of the year.

So let me ask you, "are you happy right now"?

Perhaps, like the rabbis of the Talmud, you are indeed very happy right now; knowing that God has set aside this day each year as a time for forgiveness.

Or perhaps, despite the cosmic significance of Yom Kippur, you are starting to feel a little cranky as the hunger pangs mount and the caffeine withdrawal is beginning to spawn a mild headache.

Some of us are happy right now, some of us are not. The question for us is "is there anything wrong with this state of affairs?" "Should we, in fact, expect to be happy all the time?"

Apparently, some of us do. And perhaps more important, we may have inadvertently given the message to our children that they, too, can expect to be happy all the time.

Over the summer, I came across a thought provoking article in the Atlantic Monthly that suggests that, indeed, we have managed to raise a generation of young adults who expect to be happy all the time. The author, psychologist Lori Gottlieb, began noticing a few years ago that she was treating more and more young adults who were unhappy in their lives. Objectively, Gottlieb couldn't find anything wrong. These young people had supportive, involved parents, good educations, interesting jobs and lots of friends. But they also had a pervasive sense that there should be more; that their lives were somehow still hollow and empty.

After consulting with lots of experts who were seeing the same thing, Gottlieb comes to the conclusion that we have protected our kids so well from pain, adversity, disappointment and failure, that when they finally encounter the normal frustrations of adult life, they think something is terribly wrong. We do such a great job of making our kids feel good about themselves when they are young, of giving them only positive feedback and actively intervening on behalf of our kids when problems arise in school, sports or on the playground; that when they encounter criticism, failure or even boredom in adult life, they start to feel like something is terribly wrong with them.

Based on what I see going on around me, Gottlieb has a point. We are certainly more determined to shield our kids from adversity than our parents were. I didn't let my older

children leave our block in suburban Los Angeles by themselves until they were well into their teens. That was the norm in Southern California. When I was growing up, I had the run of the neighborhood by age five. My older children didn't receive letter grades in school until they were in seventh grade. Instead, we were merely informed about whether they had met state educational standards or were still "in process". I still have my elementary school report cards; on which my parents were told that my handwriting was "unsatisfactory" and the I talked too much in class. Sixteen year olds in our California community routinely got cars on their birthday so they would no longer have to ride the public bus to school. Sometimes the cars were old clunkers. But I often saw kids who were driving nicer cars than mine pull into the synagogue parking lot. When I was growing up, I rode the yellow school bus though my senior year.

Are we all that different here in Plainview? I don't think so. We too want our kids to live happy, pain-free lives where they feel loved, cared-for and successful. In some cases, we want them to have it easier than we had. Our intentions are good. We want to be the best parents ever. But in our efforts to give our children wonderful lives, we overlook two basic truths. No one can be happy all the time, and no one should want to be.

The first basic truth finds expression in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer we recite on Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur. *Brosh haShana yikatayvoon, v'yom tzom kippur yaychataymun:* "On Rosh Hashannah it is written and on the Fast of Yom Kippur it is sealed. . . Who will be at peace and who will be troubled. Who will be serene and who will be disturbed. Who will be be tranquil and who will be tormented. Who will be impoverished and who will be enriched. Who will be brought low and who will be raised up." No one knows what the coming year will bring. Some of us may live quiet, uneventful lives. Some of us may experience success and good fortune. And some of us, inevitably, will encounter failure and adversity. Only God knows what will be. The only thing we can be sure of us that if we live long enough, we will probably get a taste of all three. Few of us go through an entire life of stability. Few of us don't experience success of one kind or another sometime in our lives. And is there really anyone here who can honestly say "I've never had to deal with failure or adversity"?

Sooner or later in life we all fail. Sooner or later, bad things happen to us. No one is going to be happy all the time. If we expect to be happy all the time, we are setting ourselves up for a life of disappointment.

There are really only three ways to handle the inevitable experience of failure. As we discussed last night, we can choose to blame others for the bad things that happen to us. In other words, we can make ourselves into victims. We all know people who think this way, who go around believing the whole world is against them. There may even be some truth to their belief; but the results are devastating. Making ourselves into victims leaves us bitter, resentful and afraid. We move through our lives expecting to be hurt again, and that expectation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The second way to handle failure is to react as Gottleib's patients did; to let the experience of failure undermine our entire sense of well-being. Especially if we have been shielded from failure all of our lives, it is easy to let the experience knock the wind out of our sails, to make us question our entire sense of self. We all know people who let a single experience of failure deter them from pursuing what they want. There are people afraid to get married, or even date again, because a first marriage failed. There are people who are afraid to try for a promotion or a better job, because they have been rejected so many times. There are people who are afraid to go to the hospital because a loved one died in a hospital bed. If we are not careful, we can allow failure to paralyze us and make us question who we are. If we don't prepare our kids for failure, by allowing them to experience it early and often, our good intentions will prevent our happy children from becoming thriving adults.

The third approach to failure is to embrace it as part of life. Failure can devastate us. Failure can bring us hardship, sadness and regret. But failure can also be a powerful corrective for us; an experience that forces us to learn, to grow and to become more resilient. There is no better role model for coping with failure than Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, who passed away on Wednesday. In his 2005 commencement address at Stanford University, Jobs talks about how, at age 30, he was fired from Apple, the company he founded and made into a leader in the computer industry.

So at 30 I was out. And very publicly out. What had been the focus of my entire adult life was gone, and it was devastating.

I really didn't know what to do for a few months. . . I was a very public failure, and I even thought about running away from the valley. But something slowly began to dawn on me — I still loved what I did. The turn of events at Apple had not changed that one bit. I had been rejected, but I was still in love. And so I decided to start over.

I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life.

During the next five years, I started a company named NeXT, another company named Pixar, and fell in love with an amazing woman who would become my wife. Pixar went on to create the world's first computer animated feature film, *Toy Story*, and is now the most successful animation studio in the world. In a remarkable turn of events, Apple bought NeXT, I returned to Apple, and the technology we developed at NeXT is at the heart of Apple's current renaissance. And Laurene and I have a wonderful family together.

I'm pretty sure none of this would have happened if I hadn't been fired from Apple. It was awful tasting medicine, but I guess the patient needed it. Sometimes life hits you in the head with a brick. Don't lose faith.

Steve Jobs freely admits that being fired from Apple shook the foundations of his life. He felt like a catastrophic, and very public, failure. Like Jonah in this afternoon's haftorah, Jobs considers running away from the scene of his failure and escaping into anonymity.

But Jobs eventually realizes that failure cannot take away his ability to find love in his work and in his life. He turns failure into an opportunity to start over and to learn from his

mistakes. For Jobs, failure becomes the spark for finding new roads to success. And it's worth noting that even after Jobs returned to Apple, he experienced other failures as well. Anyone out there remember the Apple Newton, or the G4? Not to mention the failure of his own health, beginning when Jobs was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2003. In spite of all these catastrophes, Jobs keep on coming back. His perseverance in the face of these failures eventually brought us the ipod, the iphone, and the ipad.

For Steve Jobs, failure was not just a part of life. It was a necessary pre-requisite to success. Failure helps us focus on our strengths, helps us identify what is important in our lives, teaches us resilience, and encourages us to think creatively. That's why we should not expect, or even want to be, happy all the time. As difficult as it is to experience failure and adversity in our lives, these experiences can play a very important role in helping us to become better, more focused more creative and more resilient people.

Like many of us here, I have learned this lesson not only from Steve Jobs, but from my own life experience. In the past ten years, I have experienced the failure of a long term marriage, and the financial implosion of a congregation I helped build from a small lay led synagogue into a thriving institution. These experiences devastated me at the time; they were painful and they ripped out the very foundation of my life and sense of self. Yet, these failures spurred me to make changes and create the life I have today, which has brought me tremendous fulfillment and joy.

For this reason, too, we need to teach our kids, whether they are five or fifty, that failure is a part of life. We need to resist the impulse to shield our kids from adversity, to rush in to rescue them when they run into trouble, to provide for them an unsustainable standard of living. Doing all these things may make us feel like good parents who take care of their kids. But our caretaking does not prepare our kids for what happens when we aren't around to help them. And our generosity can breed a sense of entitlement that can make our kids feel that material comforts are a right, and not something to be earned or appreciated. Our role as parents is not to prevent our kids from failing; but to be there to help them understand that failure is a part of life, and that we love them for who they are--not because they are uniquely talented, gifted or special.

Once we understand the role of failure in our lives, we can better understand what it really means to be happy. Our ultimate goal, our tradition teaches us, is not happiness as we understand it today, but something different altogether.

When we talk about happiness, we are usually talking about how we feel in any particular moment. Being happy means feeling cheerful, upbeat, stimulated, engaged. Happiness is a transitory state of being that depends on where we are, what we are doing and who we are with at a particular moment. Jewish tradition also values feeling good. Judaism encourages us to enjoy the pleasures of life: good food, sex, good friends, the beauty of nature, the chance to relax and take it easy. But our ultimate goal is not to sustain these feelings. In fact, Judaism teaches that we experience our pleasures in moderation--at the right time, in the right place and with the right people.

Instead, Jewish tradition urges us to aim for something higher, something longer lasting. In the words of Hava Tirosh Samuelson, who wrote a recent book on the Jewish idea of happiness, "In the ancient and medieval periods, 'happiness' was understood as 'well-being' or 'flourishing,' and it had to do with the quality of one's soul, "The Judaic approach to happiness has to do with the kind of life one leads, rather than how one feels at a given moment." In other words, our tradition teaches us that how we feel right now not so important. What we should strive to achieve is an overall sense of well-being, or contentment. Part of that sense of contentment is appreciating what we have. As the great sage Ben Zoma taught, "Who is rich? The person who is happy with his or her portion."

But contentment goes beyond just appreciating our blessings. The happy person, the rabbis tell us, is like a tree with few branches and many roots planted by a stream. Even in the face of strong winds, it cannot be moved. Even at a time of drought, the tree will flourish. What gives us an abiding sense of contentment, an overall feeling of well-being, is having deep roots nurtured by a flowing stream. These deep roots are a metaphor for the values we ground our life upon. These values, fed by the mighty stream of our Torah and tradition, include loving our neighbors, giving of ourselves, living with integrity and making God a part of our lives. When we anchor our life in these values, catastrophe and failure may shake us, but they can never bring us down.

What we want for ourselves, and even more important, what we want to teach our children, is that the goal of life is not happiness, in the sense of feeling good. The goal of life is contentment; an abiding sense that we are living life the right way; with an appreciation of our blessings, and with values that guide us toward being good people and good Jews no matter what is happening around us.

So the real question we should be asking ourselves today is not, "are we happy". Happiness, at least the kind of happiness that comes from feeling good in the moment, comes and goes. Much more important for each of us is the question, "are we content: do we appreciate our blessing and do we have an abiding sense of well being that comes from a life grounded in the values of Torah?". If so, then we have nothing to fear from the knowledge that "on Rosh Hashanah it is written and on the fast of Yom Kippur it is sealed." We hope and pray that God will seal us for a year of health, joy, prosperity and stability. May that be God's blessing for all of us this year. But if we are destined for other things this year, may God give us the wisdom and the courage to ground our lives in the things that really matter. May God help us to find a sense of contentment and well-being that will sustain us through whatever lies ahead.