

Fundamental Well-Being

“Three factors that seem to have the greatest influence on increasing our happiness are:

1. Our ability to reframe our situation more positively
2. Our ability to experience and express gratitude
3. Our Choice to be kind and generous”

(Sonja Lyubomirsky ... research psychologist)

I'd like to explore these three factors as we get to step onto this path of renewal, this Rosh Hashanah, this time of beginning again.

Looking at what the influences are on increasing our happiness is not just about finding a way to feel good in the moment. It's about establishing a sense of fundamental wellbeing that can become the anchoring foundation for all our work, all our relationships, everything that we bring to the world- our love, our power to make justice, and bring healing to the planet. Without that anchoring foundation that holds us steady, we become the victim of every storm. So as our world becomes ever more stormy, our work is to look inside and nurture the seeds of fundamental wellbeing.

My faith is that this holy work ripples out. The microcosm of our lives illuminates and sends us to the macrocosm of this world. I am not at all certain that a merely top-down vision of social change, of a government rooted in values of justice and love is at all realistic. My faith is that transformation begins right here in our hearts, and ripples out in ways we could not imagine.

Fundamental wellbeing is the prerequisite that allows us to relax the ego-centric struggles of survival, greed, competition, fear, and discouragement.... and open to the experience of self-transcendence and Unity consciousness, knowing and experiencing that Oneness that is proclaimed in *Sh'ma Yisrael Yah Elohaynu, Yah Echad*. God, ultimate Being is One, and we are bound up in that Oneness. And then we are invited to live in the light of that truth.

Fundamental wellbeing manifests as a deep sense that everything is ultimately Okay and that you are safe. In religious language we call this sense of ultimate safety... our trust in God. Trusting in God doesn't mean that we know how things will turn out. And it doesn't mean that we are free to sit back and wait for it all to happen. But when we are paralyzed by terror and negativity, this trust in God is our medicine, allowing us to release the fear and surrender to the dance.

In the dance, I allow compassion to guide my steps. Feeling the "rightness" of this present moment doesn't make me complacent; rather it fills me with energy and inspiration to move forward. I let go of the story in my head and open to new perspectives. This is Lyubomirsky's first factor of influence, which she calls "reframing our situation." Our minds are continually trying to make sense of the world by creating narratives about our situation, by dividing the world in to what we like or don't like, what we deem good or bad, what we fear and what we desire. This attachment to our particular story about the world, blinds us to what is right in front of us- the beauty, blessing and possibilities that are opening for us right now.

For much of my life I had a story about being marginalized, as an artist, a mystic, a weirdo, a dropout. My story made me feel special but bitter, helpless, disempowered, victimized by the powers that be, and judgmental of mainstream culture. My path to a positive reframe has been miraculous.

Reframe: Oh my sensitivities and creative spirit are exactly the gifts that allow me to be useful to this world. Not fitting in and instead creating alternatives was the best thing I could have done with my life. There are so many other misfits who appreciate and benefit from my determination and imagination. And who knows? Now even the mainstream may be touched and influenced by my love.

I think of the heartbreaks I have endured and reframe those misfortunes as the perfect pathway of learning to be a fully compassionate human, connected, humbled and free of self-pity.

The art of reframing gives us the freedom to write a new story when the old one gets tiresome, depressing or tragic. The art of reframing allows us to receive every challenge as a spiritual practice that will inspire the best in us to emerge.

The second factor is: our ability to experience and express gratitude. Gratefulness is the foundational quality of a Jewish Path. The word for Jews... *Yehudim* comes from the root of gratefulness. You could say we are “The Grateful Ones,” rather than the complainers. In fact, the very first words of our liturgy, meant to be spoken before getting out of bed are *Modah Ani* Thank you. The ability to experience and express gratefulness opens a place inside us in which to receive the gifts of the day. By engaging this gratefulness muscle, we interrupt the ancient default pattern of the brain, waking up and guarding against the next possible threat. “What is wrong today?” As if that might protect us from the oh so inevitable pains of being human. Gratefulness is not a feeling; it’s a practice. It requires expression.

The 3rd factor in increasing our happiness and bringing us to a state of fundamental wellbeing is: Our choice to be kind and generous.

First of all, it feels so radical to call this a choice. Lyubamirsky has found that it is our ability to know it as a choice and make this choice in each moment that will determine our overall sense of wellbeing. Each moment must become a practice of bypassing habit and reactivity and instead waking up to the possibility of kindness and generosity. Whether or not the world receives my gift, I will be changed by the giving of it. My kindness transforms me.

These moments of choice are so small that we tend to overlook their power. For me the greatest opportunity for practice is my marriage and the everyday, moment to moment challenges that show me when I am on automatic, sleepwalking through the day as I deal with the details of housekeeping, paying the bills, checking my email, keeping up with my responsibilities. How do I keep kindness and generosity in the forefront of my consciousness? The Song of Songs says, "I was asleep but my heart was awake."

To make this choice, we have to be awake. So on Rosh Hashanah we are commanded to hear the shofar. It is a sound that has the power to shatter our complacency, and awaken in us the wisdom to know that this moment can be a turning point. May that startling sound awaken us to the miracle of possibilities that is unfolding before us. May that choice to be generous extend out to every being. To the ones we disagree with, to the ones who offend us, and to animals, trees, plants, stones, stars. May we each be bathed in the kindness that we offer.