

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

Ki Tavo 20 “Happy”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. Welcome to new members Sharon Drowos & Evan Frank, Jeremy Rudoler, and Joshua Gerson. Thank you for joining the Mekor Habracha community! And now for some additional announcements – you can find the details in our weekly newsletter, in our High Holiday emails, and also on our shul website.

We are pleased to announce that Mekor High Holiday services will be held both at shul and outdoors. The outdoor services will take place at a private venue just several blocks from the shul. We welcome High Holiday sponsors to help cover the cost of renting the outdoor venue. Please email the shul if you'd like to contribute.

Our new membership year begins on Rosh Hashana, in two weeks, and if you join or renew your membership BEFORE then, your High Holiday seats are free, and you receive discounted rates for your family guests. But even if you're unable to attend services for the High Holidays, please remember to renew your membership, or consider joining. More than ever, we need your support to sustain our shul for the year ahead.

As a special gift to every new and renewing member unit, by request we are providing a High Holiday Machzor along with a copy of my publication, *The Book of Life: A Transformative Guide to the High Holidays*. Deadline for requests is Friday, September 11. Pickup locations TBD.

My annual High Holiday classes will meet this year via Zoom. Class about Rosh Hashana -- Monday, Sept. 14 at 7:30pm. Class about Yom Kippur -- Thursday, Sept. 24 at 7:30pm

Mekor will publish a Yizkor book again this year, to use on Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, Pesach, and Shavuot. The deadline for making dedications is Monday, September 14.

This year, we will be holding more services than usual on the High Holidays, so we need additional volunteers to blow the shofar. Please email the shul if you could help at one or more of our services. We would also like to gauge our community's interest in Mekor providing a public shofar blowing on one or more High Holiday dates, at a location TBD, so please email if you're interested in attending. If you'd like to learn how to blow the shofar, or to brush up on your skills email to let us know, and we'll help arrange some training.

This week's parsha is well known for the *Tochecha*, the admonition Moshe gives the Jewish people, warning of the terrible suffering they will endure in exile if they do not heed God's commandments. Although there is another admonition at the end of the book of Vayikra, this one is much longer and much worse. Not unexpectedly, many ask about the tragedies that have come to pass during the exile, including the Holocaust, and they wonder what could provoke God to inflict us that way. Since God is ultimately unfathomable, we cannot answer that question.

But the admonition raises another question that can reward us with an invaluable life lesson. The Torah states plainly that these terrible things will occur *tachat asher lo avadita et hashem elokecha b'simcha*, *because you did not serve God with happiness*. Trying to make sense of this verse, the Ramban, Nachmanides, makes the incredible assertion that even if we kept the Torah properly, terrible events would still befall us if we weren't happy during our observance. Some commentators (like Rabbi Akiva Eiger) ask, how can you force someone to be happy? Obviously, you can't. Nonetheless, this strange passage must be teaching us the need for something beyond simple obedience to the law.

I was very excited when I heard the same profound answer to this conundrum, from my Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg zt'l and then, sometime later, from my other Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Bezalel Rudinsky shlita. Their explanation was a pragmatic one: Happiness itself is **not** the goal. But the fact is that if you're unhappy, then sooner or later, you will become lax about keeping the Torah. If you don't experience joy in the process, your motivation will fade. You will not persevere in your relationship with God, and inevitably, there will be a breakdown of Jewish stability. I apply this insight when someone wants to study Torah but asks me where to start. I always respond by asking what topic they find most intriguing. Because if the material ignites your interest, you will be more focused and understand better, and that success will stimulate your desire to continue learning. That's why I don't automatically recommend studying in sequence, as in Daf yomi, because if that process doesn't excite you, you'll need another motivation or else you won't stay with it.

And I think it's no coincidence that the beginning of our parsha speaks about the importance of gratitude. The opening verses discuss the mitzvah of bringing the *Bikkurim*, the first fruits of the farming season to Jerusalem as an offering to God.

The offering is to be followed by a declaration that God has fulfilled his promise to bring us to Israel and give us abundant crops. This section concludes by saying *v'samachta b'chol hatov*, that we should be happy with all the good that God gives us. In other words, if we **appreciate** what God has given us, we will feel happy.

We see, then, how the beginning of the parsha is connected to the end. The implication is that if you focus on the positive aspects of your life, you can create happiness for yourself. For example, one common but valuable piece of advice given based on numerous psychological studies is to begin each morning by thinking of 3 things about your life that are positive and that you are grateful for, an exercise that can lift your spirits and help you approach the day with cheerful determination. I believe **that** is life lesson the parsha is designed to impart when it tells us to serve God with happiness.

We all know how easy it is to become preoccupied by the negative facets of life, but that road inevitably leads to a dead end. On the other hand, if instead you are mindful of all the good in your life, happiness will follow, and your joy will pave the way to success.

As we prepare spiritually for the High Holidays, I think this is a valuable message, especially this year, when we are surrounded by so much negativity, and there are so many hardships we could focus on. We must strive to keep things in perspective and focus on the gifts God has personally given to each of us. With that kind of attitude, we can find ways that this difficult year can be a catalyst for surprising accomplishments in the year ahead. Shabbat shalom.