

HAPPY

It is Rosh Hashanah, and everyone is wishing everyone else “A Happy New Year.” (Actually, all the non-Jews wish their Jewish friends “Happy New Year,” and the more assimilated Jews wish whoever they think is Jewish “Happy New Year.”) When we used to send Jewish New Year cards, they also said Happy New Year along with Shanah Tovah. Which got me to thinking. What do we mean by “happy?” Many people, when they extend the wish, add several other adjectives: healthy, prosperous, peaceful, sweet, meaningful, since they want to say something more than “happy.”

Happy is a simple word. I was surprised that when I looked in the dictionary, the first definition of happy was, “Characterized by good luck; fortunate.” The second definition was, “Enjoying, showing, or marked by pleasure, satisfaction or joy.” Somehow that isn’t exactly what I mean by happy.

I am happy when everything is going well. When I find delight in my life. When I love and am loved. When I have no personal worries, and am not worrying about family, friends or the state of the world. When I can share in, and enjoy, those other wishes: good health, prosperity, peace, sweetness, and a meaningful life, which is my wish for everyone.

We must have discussed “happiness” in Philosophy 101, but I have forgotten whatever it was we talked about. If I remember, the Greek philosophers raised a lot of important questions, and “what is happiness?” must have been high on the list. I read somewhere that someone who pursues a happy life is a taker. By pursuing a meaningful life, you are a giver. In the overall scheme of things, happy is good; good is better. If you have a year filled with meaning, happiness will follow.

Some years ago, we visited a friend whose son was getting a divorce after many years of marriage. Our friend was very unhappy about the divorce and asked him why he was doing it. He replied he wanted to be happy. She scoffed and thought his answer was ridiculous. “What the hell is happy? You have a nice house, a good job, great kids. So what if you don’t have a picture-book marriage.”

My mother once remarked, in a moment of sadness, that she had only 15 years of happiness in her life: from the time she married in 1916 until my father died in 1931. I suspect she was equating happiness with economic security, with not having to work, and worrying about paying bills. Going through her papers after she died, there were indications that the marriage was not a happy one. In fact, the years from 1910 until her marriage, when she worked as a cloak finisher, was active in her union, learned to read and write, and discovered the Yiddish theatre, struck me as happy years.

The first dictionary definition said that to be happy is characterized by good luck. Is it saying that the lucky person is happy, or the happy person is lucky? I feel very lucky having been born where and when I was born, but it never occurred to me that those circumstances should make me happy. Millions like me run the gamut from deliriously

happy to miserably despondent. Some people's personalities are happy and they look on the bright side, and others are sad, dissatisfied.

I like the story of the two young brothers with such different temperaments. At Christmas, their father gave the unhappy brother a room full of wonderful toys, and the happy sibling a room full of manure. When the unhappy brother opened the door, he began complaining about each toy. When the happy brother opened his door, he was overjoyed. With all this manure, he said, there must be a pony in here.

Moving from the dictionary to the thesaurus, I found a bunch of equivalent words that made me happy: joyful, cheerful, good humored, content, satisfied, glad, light hearted, pleasurable. That was more like it. Most "Happys" are wished on special occasions like birthdays, anniversaries and holidays. When I wish someone a happy whatever, I would like them to be joyful, cheerful, etc. Whatever it says above. Including good luck.
Happy New Year!

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