

Who Is Happy?

Parashat Shemini/Haftarah Machar Chodesh, Iyyar 5778

A crow lived in the forest and was absolutely satisfied in life. But one day, he saw a swan. "This swan is so white," he thought, "and I am so black. This swan must be the happiest bird in the world."

He expressed his thoughts to the swan. "Actually," the swan replied, "I was feeling that I was the happiest bird around until I saw a parrot, which has two colors. I now think the parrot is the happiest bird in creation." The crow then approached the parrot. The parrot explained, "I lived a very happy life until I saw a peacock. I have only two colors, but the peacock has multiple colors."

The crow then visited a peacock in the zoo and saw that hundreds of people had gathered to see him. After the people had left, the crow approached the peacock. "Dear peacock," the crow said, "you are so beautiful. Every day thousands of people come to see you. When people see me, they immediately shoo me away. I think you are the happiest bird on the planet."

The peacock replied, "I always thought that I was the most beautiful and happy bird on the planet. Because of my beauty, however, I am trapped in this zoo. I have examined the zoo very carefully, and I have realized that the crow is the only

bird not kept in a cage. So for past few days, I have been thinking that if I were a crow, I could happily roam everywhere.”

Perspective is key to our understanding of the world in which we live. Different people can look at the same situation, have the same set of data, and draw wildly different conclusions based on their point of view. The Haftarah we just read moments ago (I Samuel 20:18-42) gives us a unique look into this phenomenon. The narrative appears to focus on David, and yet he is not the main actor. In fact, he is primarily the OBJECT of the actions of others, not the subject who pushes the plot forward.

David is running and hiding; rather it is King Saul and his son Yonatan who are taking actions to either help or hurt David. Why, if David has shared a home with both of them, has acted toward both of them with equal respect and care, does Shaul hate and fear David as his mortal enemy, while Yonatan loves him as his truest friend or as a brother?

It's all about perspective.

Shaul is the first king of Israel, anointed by God and the prophet Eli, but has made some mistakes and is told that God will no longer favor him. He is scared, paranoid, and sees danger around every corner. Yonatan, however, rises from his

father's shadow and wins battles, cultivates friends and followers, and has lived a life where he feels completely secure in who he is and in his position in the world. Where Shaul sees David as the fulfillment of his prophesized downfall, Yonatan sees David as a kindred spirit, a helpmate and friend.

Shaul begins to fear David only as he begins to gain notoriety to defeating Goliath, which Shaul had been only too happy to let him volunteer to do. He looks at David and remembers that he was once favored by God and by all of Israel, and is jealous. He fears David is better than him, more well-liked, more squarely in God's good graces. That doubt and fear have little to do with David's own actions, but much more to do with the many mistakes Shaul has made, mistakes for which he never really attempts to atone.

Yonatan, however, is happy enough with who he is and what he has accomplished to be able to see that someone else's success does not threaten his own. He has no fear or self-doubt because he can examine himself and his life and honestly say, "I have done the best that I could have. Where I have tried and succeeded, I am happy. Where I have failed, I have given it my all. Where I have wronged others, I have made amends, and where I have been wronged, I have forgiven."

This is one of the things that makes Yonatan and David so compatible as young men. Both are happy with their lot. When David is a shepherd, he only wants to be more helpful to his family. When the king requests his musical services, he goes without complaint, leaving his family, his land, and all that is familiar. When battle comes, he volunteers. Even when Shaul starts throwing spears and seeking his life, David TWICE opts to spare him, to live on the run and in constant danger rather than turn against his king, the man who had taken him into his own house.

Our perception of who we are and how our lives unfold create our reality. If we look at ourselves in the mirror and say we are fat or ugly or dumb or lazy or no-good or just not...enough, then that is what we will be. If we take a hard look inside and see that our lives are peppered with blessings, moments of joy, people we love, and things about which we care, that our lives are good, even if they are not perfect or what we had intended, then that will be the reality we experience every day.

Just a moment ago, we sang together:

אַשְׁרֵי יוֹשֵׁב בְּיַתְּךָ, עוֹד יְהַלְלוֹךָ סֶלָה.

“Happy is the one who dwells in Your House; they shall endlessly praise you.”

[Psalms 84:5]

It may sound simplistic, but the answer to the question of how to be happy, is simply to be. Be who you are, where you are, when you are there, and enjoy the opportunity to be there. No one else gets to live your life, and you can't jump into anyone else's. So why not do everything in your power to make it a joyful one?

None of us can resist the days we feel down, when we're tired or stressed or scared or hurt. But a bad moment or day or year does not force us to live an unbearable life; a failure or mistake does not mean that you are a bad person. What others think of you has absolutely no impact on who you are and how you live your life unless YOU let it.

So be you. You are the best you that has ever been and that there will ever be. You are living the most incredible life possible in this very moment. So be you, be here, dwell in this house, in the rooms of your life, with joy. You are the best you that I know. I am happy to know you. Choose to live a joyful life and I promise, you will not regret it.

Shabbat Shalom.