

Rabbi Dennis J Eisner
Rosh Hashannah 5770

Hinei Tov Meod – This is Very Good

It is always a wonderful sight to see so many of you gathered together as we celebrate our Jewish New Year in this place and at this time. As most of you know our tradition teaches us that on Rosh Hashanah we commemorate the time when God created the world. We rejoice in God's creating light and the darkness, heavens and the earth, land and water, mammals, fish and flying creatures, man and woman and then after six days of creation God rested on the seventh day, giving us Shabbat. With each day of creation, with each act, with each day of making our world a better place to live God would step back to see what was made and say *kee tov* – this is good. But after the sixth day when God had seen all that was created, all that was made, God said *hinei tov meod* – behold this is very good.

Here we are 5770 years later gathered in great numbers to recite the words of our prayer book, to hear the blasts of the *shofar*, to eat apples and honey and to say *Gut Yontif – Shanah Tova – Shabbat Shalom*. We have gathered as a community, a community which can proudly stand back and look around, we can see our families, our friends, members of our congregation and we can see all that we have created and say *hinei tov meod* – behold this is very good.

While it is true that when I step back and look out at our congregation today I too see that it is *tov meod* – it is very good; but it is also true that this day comes with a little bit of anxiety. I will let you in on a little secret. I have a few things on my plate these days not to mention the most insane thing I have ever done right before the High Holy Days – Mandy, the kids, and I got a puppy. So if you see me duck out of a service you will know I had to go walk the dog!

The reality is our dog, Ezra, has not caused my anxiety level to rise this past month but writing this sermon has. Each year I struggle to find a compelling topic to speak about, to find a message that moves me to think and to act. I struggle to find a compelling topic that moves *you* to think and to act. I search through books, magazines, newspapers, sermons, speeches and sacred texts. I watch movies, the news and surf the internet for inspiration and information. And then usually the idea comes when I am least expecting it and ends up landing right in my lap.

Several weeks ago I received my first *Happy New Year* card of the season. It was sent to me by a lovely family that was a member of my past congregation and it put a smile on my face as I hadn't heard from them in a while. I opened the card to read their lovely note and I was brought up to date on how they and the kids were doing. Mostly I was touched by the closing line which simply said, "We

miss you.” I set the card on my desk and went about my work and then it hit me. There it was, my *Rosh Hashanah* sermon, staring me in the face, this New Year’s card with the words *Happy New Year* written in colorful script.

I will be honest in sharing that I was moved by the sentiment of the card but at the same time I was also experiencing an uncomfortable reaction to the phrase *Happy New Year*. At first it was hard for me to put my finger on why I felt uncomfortable with this phrase, why I felt this phrase seemed so out of place.

Maybe I was feeling this way because the phrase *Happy New Year* feels secular rather than spiritual. Sure if it was December 31 that would be different; but it’s September and it’s the Jewish New Year. Maybe it is because as a young boy I grew up hearing my Nana and my Poppy wishing others *Gut Yontif or Shanah Tova* – not Happy New Year. Maybe it is because I believe as a people we are far too practical to wish each other a Happy New Year or Happy Shabbat.

Unfortunately, if this past year has taught us anything, if our history has taught us anything, frightful things or wonderful things can happen for no apparent reason and they can happen at any given time. “Who by water, who by fire, who shall be rich, who shall be poor, who shall wander, who shall be driven, who shall live and who shall die?” asks our prayer book at this time of year. We know the future is always uncertain. I know this sounds cynical but let’s face it if you grew up like me, in a family like mine – and I am assuming many of you did – you know that no matter how good things may seem to be we were always waiting for the other shoe to drop. No matter how happy we were supposed to be it seemed like there was always something to complain about.

You may know the old Jackie Mason joke about the waiter who approaches the table of four Jews out for dinner and asks, “Excuse me folks. Is anything all right?”

To be serious I think the veracity of my uneasiness with phrase *Happy New Year* stems from the fact that the phrases *Gut Yontif and Shanah tova* actually mean good year not happy year and I, for one, believe this is by design.

Some of our sages would even say it is the same in that our tradition on Shabbat is to wish each other a good *Shabbos* or a Shabbat Shalom not a happy Shabbat. Because when we really think hard about it, we have no idea what really makes people happy or unhappy.

The longer I am a rabbi, the longer I am married, the more time I spend being a father, the more life experience I accumulate, the more I am convinced we have no idea what will ultimately make us happy. Sadly, I am also learning that so much of the time we have no idea just how happy we already are.

Our struggle to define what makes us happy or what sustains one's happiness is as old as our tradition itself. It's as old as the following story about a man who goes to the rabbi at his wits end.

The man says: "Rabbi, I can't take it any more. I have no peace in my home. I live in a shack so tiny that my wife and children drive me crazy. The noise, the commotion, it's masking me *meshugenah!* I don't know what to do."

"Do you have a chicken?" the rabbi asks.

"I do," the man answers.

"Bring your chicken in the house and come back tomorrow."

The next day the rabbi asks how things are going.

"Awful," the man replies. "The chicken clucks all night. There are feathers and chicken poop everywhere."

"Do you have a goat?" the rabbi asks.

"Yes, a Billy goat in a small pen."

"Wonderful," said the rabbi. "Bring your goat into the house."

The man returns the next day. "The goat ate what little stuffing there was left in our one chair, he bleats all night and passes gas all day," the man exclaims.

"Wonderful," says the rabbi. "Do you have a cow?"

"I do."

"You know what to do" says the rabbi.

The next day the man returns. "Rabbi, if you think a goat smells, you ought to try living with a cow!"

"One more thing," says the rabbi. "I want you to go home, take the cow back to her pasture, the goat back to his pen and the chicken back to her coop."

The next day the man appears in *shul* smiling. "So how are things?" the rabbi asks.

"Wonderful," the man exclaimed, "Never better. With only my wife and children around the house it is so quiet and clean. I can stretch out for a good night's sleep, drifting off to sound of chirping crickets and giggling children. What a blessed and fortunate man I am."

Joni Mitchell sang the words "You don't know what you got till it's gone" and truer words have never been sung. It is an odd phenomenon, but completely human experience that our lives need to undergo an affliction of some sort in order to appreciate what we already have. Sometimes it's hard to realize how fortunate and blessed you are. Sometimes things need to get worse in order for us to realize how happy we are, how good we have it. For some strange reason we live with the perception that the grass is always greener.

My Senior. Rabbi, Steve Leder, from Wilshire Blvd. Temple once wrote:

“I have been a rabbi for 21 years and listened to so many of you over those years and we have been through so much together. We have wept together over so many sorrows. But believe me, if I asked each of us here to pack our troubles in a suitcase and we put all of that luggage on the *bimah* and then had a week to go through each other’s troubles nearly all of us would gladly take our own baggage back home with us. Despite what popular culture would have us believe, no one has it better than us, no matter who that someone is.”

He is right! There is always somebody or something else that we believe will make us happy if we could only be like so and so or if we only had that one thing, we would be happy.

For instance how many of us have wished for a million dollars? How many of us play the lottery believing that if we win we will finally be happy and we will have nothing to worry about?

A poor man is walking in the forest conversing with God. He asks, “Lord, what is a million years to you?”

God replies, “My son, a million years to you is like a second to me.”

The man asks, “Lord what is a million dollars to you?”

God replies, “My son, a million dollars to you is less than a penny to me.”

The man stores up his courage and asks, “So God, can I have a million dollars?”

To which God replies: “In a second.”

We laugh – but at the heart of this joke is what I believe to be one of the greatest stumbling blocks to true and lasting happiness. For so many of us we have succumbed to the perception that If only I had a million dollars then everything would be all right, then I would be happy.

Consider the most recent neurobiological studies following lottery winners. It was discovered that although they experience a temporary upswing in happiness when they hold the winning ticket and cash, virtually all of them are back to their

old selves emotionally, as happy or as unhappy as ever, within one year. The same is true for cosmetic surgery—some people need it, some people don't; but nearly everyone reports that after a year, they are no happier or unhappier than they were with their lives before the surgery. That's why some people go back for more and more and more. No matter what we have lifted, the gravity of life reasserts itself. Houses, cars, flatter tummies, more hair, more stuff—makes no long term difference in our happiness. And neither does misfortune, at least in the long run. Ironically these same studies show that amputees suffer a downturn in happiness after they lose their limbs, but within a year nearly all are back to their former level of happiness.¹

In the same vein our tradition teaches that when King Solomon commissioned a jeweler to make a ring for him with an inscription that would be meaningful to him whatever his mood, happy or sad, the jeweler brought him a ring with these words from the Talmud, *Gam Zeh Ya-avore*, This too shall pass.

That's what the rabbis knew two thousand years ago when they asked us on Rosh Hashanah to contemplate the most haunting prayer of the High Holy Days, the *Un'taneh tokef*. The prayer that asks: "Who will live? Who will die? Who will rest? Who will wander? Who will know peace? Who will be troubled? Who will be needy? Who will be content?" The rabbis knew that we have almost no control over what will happen to us in our lives and that those things whether good or bad will only affect how happy we are for a brief time. They knew what the neurobiologists have now proven, that most of us have a default setting for happiness. It's hard wired at birth and no matter what does or does not happen in our lives; winning the lottery or losing a limb, after a while we end up right back at our original happiness setting.

I also believe this is what my Nana and Poppy understood when they would wish a *shana tova*, a good year. They understood that our tradition is teaching us that what actually makes a person happy is something so incredibly hard to pin down that it doesn't make sense to wish people something that is so elusive. Instead, we wish each other goodness, not happiness, because my grandparents, like the rabbis, knew we have so little control over how happy we are; but we can control how good we are. And God knows the world needs good people a lot more than it needs happy people. Imagine what our country would be like if the American ideal was life, liberty and the pursuit of goodness. Imagine a nation filled with people pursuing goodness rather than their own happiness.

Well I have something to tell you - We, the Jewish people, we the members of Temple Beth El are supposed to be that nation. That's why our prayer - the *Un'taneh tokef* which begins with what we cannot control: "Who shall live and who shall die?" ends with a reminder about what we can and should control.

¹ S.Leder, *More Money Than God*, Volt Press, Los Angeles, CA

Remember? Remember this prayer ends with the reminder that *t'shuvah* (repentance), *t'filah* (prayer), and *tzedakah* (charitable acts) are all in our control.

Remember the prayer ends with the reminder that *t'shuvah* (repentance) enables us to live a life committed to knowing we can change for the better, we can make peace in our families and in our friendships.

Remember the prayer ends with the reminder that through *t'filah* (prayer) we can live a spiritual life transcendent of the material; we can live a life of gratitude.

And remember that this prayer ends with the reminder that *tzedakah* (philanthropy) enables us to live a generous life of giving to those who have less and to inspire visions that will better our congregation, our community, our people, our country, our planet!

These things, these three things, will give us something much greater than happiness, which we have learned we cannot control anyway; these three things will give us a meaningful life no matter what the stock market or the housing market has in store for us.

I want to conclude by relating a story from a New England church whose minister was exploring the church archives and came across the financial ledger from the days of the Great Depression. The story tells how next to many of the pledges there was a second number written with a small "s" beside it, indicating how much the pledge had fallen short. But, there were an equal number of pledges with a small number and an "o" next to them, for those who overpaid their pledge. The author continues, "I read lots of historical material this week, but nothing touched me more than the dusty ledger book from the thirties, from high up on the shelf: In our church, during the Depression, for every pledge that had to fall short, one of many generous people overpaid his or her pledge to compensate."²

I love the history of this church. From everything I can tell Gandhi was never a member. Mother Teresa never belonged there either. They were just regular folks. They dedicated their babies, they worshipped, they reached out to do their part in the world, they cared for one another, they kept their congregation going, and they tried to live good lives.

I know that this has been a tough year. I know many have lost their jobs, many have had to make tough choices this past year regarding issues between what we want and what we need; yet we sometimes don't realize, despite our distress, just how good we have it.

And I have every confidence that like the members of the church in the story I just mentioned that when we, the members of Temple Beth El, are faced with a

² This story is contained in *Thematic Preaching* by Jane Rzepka and Ken Sawyer, pages 115-116.]

similar situation, we will do likewise. That we will not only make sure that our ledgers add up but that we will continue to worship, reach out, take care of each other, and try to live good lives.

The economy of faith is not a rollercoaster ride. Our values, our concern, our care do not zigzag. They are secure investments, growing slowly and steadily all during our lives as long as we put our hearts and our hands to the tasks before us.

When I bless a wedding couple or welcome a child into the covenant in this sanctuary I say *tov meod!* This is a good year!

When I see the huge banner outside which reads Congregants Helping Congregants witnessing the powerful work of our PTBE Employment Network, I say *tov meod!* This is a good year!

When I lead my monthly discussion with our Senior Friendship Club or study Torah on Shabbat mornings, I say *tov meod!* This is a good year!

When I see children and their parents volunteer together with our empty nesters making lunches for Samaritan House as part of our Sunday Sandwich making Hevreh, I say *tov meod!* This is a good year!

When I see over 300 young people and their parents enthusiastically participate in our educational programs, I say *tov meod!* This is a good year!

When the Interfaith Hospitality Network transforms Fellowship Hall into a safe and welcoming home for families who would otherwise be homeless, I say *tov meod!* This is a good year!

When our young families who have grown up as part of our Ganon Early Childhood Educational Program join the temple and become lifelong members of PTBE, I say *tov meod!* This is a good year!

When I hear how appreciative people are of a meal delivered by a member of our caring community as they mourn a loss or recuperate from illness, I say *tov meod!* This is a good year!

When I experience the positive support and leadership provided our community through our temple board our committees, Beth El Women, Brotherhood and SMRTY, I say *tov meod!* This is a good year!

When I see so many of you who have been members of this congregation for 18 years or more stand for a blessing, I say *tov meod!* This is a good year!

When I stand on this *bimah* and look at around at this great temple community, I say *hinei tov meod!* Behold this is a very good year!

Shanah Tova and Shabbat Shalom.

I wish all of us a New Year filed with Goodness and a Peaceful Shabbat.