

The Pursuit of Happiness

Category: Shemos, Yisro

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twersky was a person who worked his entire life to help people reach happiness. What was the key to his work?

Childhood Lessons

This past Sunday, a strange funeral took place in Jerusalem. This wasn't the funeral with ten thousand participants which garnered international coverage. This was a funeral with a small attendance, and it was strange because the deceased was accompanied on his final journey with a happy song. They sang the well-known Chasidic tune, *hoshiah es amecha*. It was the deceased's final request - to sing this song at his funeral.

His name was Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twersky. Rabbi Twersky was born ninety years ago as a descendant of a famous Chassidic dynasty, the Rebbes of Chernobyl. His father served as a Rebbe for his community in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

In the 1930's, no cheder, or even Jewish school for that matter, existed in Milwaukee, and his parents sent him to public school. He didn't have a single friend who observed Torah and Mitzvos.

When he was in third grade, he was a clown in a school Christmas performance. A week later, the teacher received a telephone call from Rabbi Twersky's mother. The teacher expected to be reprimanded for including a rabbi's child in a Christmas event, but to her surprise, his mother actually wanted to know if her short son had integrated well in a class of children who were all taller than him. She wanted to know how he was doing.

The teacher responded that he was doing well. She then commented to his mother, "I thought you would comment about your son's involvement in a Christmas play..."

His mother responded with a powerful statement. "If the education that we gave him in our home does not give him the strength to withstand a Christmas

performance, we have failed as parents.”

Rabbi Twersky would repeat this story whenever he wanted to emphasize that everything comes from the home.

He also related another story from his childhood.

When he was nine years old, he was already a talented chess player. Once, a rabbi staying in their home on Rosh Hashanah heard about his talents and suggested that they play a game. The nine year old was surprised; “It’s Rosh Hashanah,” he told the rabbi. “Chess doesn’t transgress any of the holiday prohibitions,” the rabbi responded. They proceeded to play two rounds.

That evening, he was called to his father’s study. When he entered the room, his father was engrossed in his Torah study, and he waited there for several minutes. His father finally raised his eyes and asked, “You played chess on Rosh Hashanah?”

“Yes,” he responded. “The rabbi said that it was permitted.”

From his father’s facial expression, he understood that he was displeased. Chess may have been permitted, but it definitely didn’t fit well with the spirit of the holiday. His father returned to his book for several more minutes, while little Abraham waited to be excused. Several minutes later, his father looked up again and asked, “Did you beat him?”

“Twice,” he responded.

His father smiled and excused him from the room.

Rabbi Twersky repeated this story to teach a similar lesson. His father wanted to express his displeasure that he had played chess on Rosh Hashanah, but he didn’t want to send him off feeling put down, so he made sure to ask him who won. He gained both objectives – he showed him that he expected more of him, while also preserving his dignity and self-esteem.

Making Man

When he reached adulthood, he became ordained as a rabbi, and then he enrolled

in medical school where he learned psychiatry, specializing in treating addictions like alcohol and drugs.

One of the foundations of his treatment was a teaching of the Baal Shem Tov on the verse, "*Naaseh adam*, let us make man."

In the beginning of Bereishis, the Torah describes how G-d created the world in Ten Utterances, "Let there be light," "Let there be vegetation," and so on. Over the six days, G-d created everything from light, to vegetation, to animals, birds and fish.

Then, on the sixth day, when it was time to create the human being, G-d uses a different terminology. He says, "Let us make man," as if He was inviting someone else to partake in the endeavor. Who exactly was He talking to? And why did He suddenly want someone else's participation? He seemed perfectly capable of doing the rest Himself!

Rashi explains that this statement was an expression of G-d's humility. The human being is created in the image of the angels, Rashi explains, and therefore, G-d "consulted" with them before creating Adam - to teach us a lesson in humility, "that a great person should first consult with and receive permission from a smaller one."

But Rabbi Twersky would cite a revolutionary interpretation of the Baal Shem Tov: G-d is turning to Man himself and saying, "Let us make man." Come - you and I together will create Man. Together, we will make you into a mensch.

All other creations were created perfect. Nobody expects the lion to improve; he will remain as he was created. The same is true of every animal, fish or bird. But the human being is a different sort of creation. He was born with natural instincts, just like an animal; he is born with a sense of self-entitlement. In the words of Job, "Man is born a wild donkey." But although we were born egotistical, self-centered and selfish, our task is to transform ourselves into upstanding human beings.

What is the difference between man and beast? An animal doesn't have the ability to express compassion to anything besides to her own children. An animal doesn't know how to forgive. But the human being is give the wisdom to control his impulses and his desires, and to follow his intellect instead of his emotions. And

when we do that, we become “partners in creation.”

The Pursuit of Happiness

Many people came to Rabbi Twersky for help because they didn't find happiness in their lives. The Declaration of Independence states that every person has the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” but Rabbi Twersky would always ask, “what is happiness?” If someone is wealthy, does that mean he is automatically happy? Does material success bring you true happiness?

There are many people who think that happiness is equated with pleasure. Rabbi Twersky would share that he counseled many very wealthy people, who successfully indulged in pleasures; some engaged in more healthy pursuits, like trips, cruises, sports and so on, while others became addicted to substances. But none of those lead to happiness. To the contrary, they are merely an escape from depression.

How do we find happiness?

In 1962, while he was studying psychiatry, he merited to have a Yechidus with the Rebbe. When the Rebbe learned about his field of study, he suggested that he read the works of the famed psychiatrist Victor Frankel. His professor scoffed at the suggestion, but Rabbi Twersky read them anyway and discovered how right the Rebbe was.

In “Man's Search for Meaning,” Dr. Frankel explains that to find happiness, one must first find meaning. You need to understand your purpose in life and your place in society. An animal is satisfied by eating and drinking; it doesn't struggle with finding purpose, but a human being must have a purpose. He must feel that he contributes to society before he will find happiness.

Where do we find meaning? In the Torah. This week we read the Ten Commandments. These are what give us meaning in life. When we follow the dictates of the Torah, we are able to find meaning and happiness.

A Song of Joy

Two weeks after he composed *Hoshia es Amecha*, he sang it at his brother's wedding. Some Israeli guests loved the song and brought it back to Israel, where it became popular very quickly. For Tishrei of 1962, a charter plane of Chassidim came from Israel to the United States to spend the holidays with the Rebbe. On Simchas Torah, the Rebbe asked the Israeli guests to sing a song from the Holy Land, and one of them chose to sing this song. The Rebbe accepted the niggun and adopted it as a Chabad song; he would often ask to sing it and he sang it on his own several times as well. The song is a prayer for salvation, and the Rebbe associated it with the Jews of Russia; he would sing it as a prayer that G-d redeem them from their exile behind the Iron Curtain.

Rabbi Twersky, who dedicated his life to bringing joy to people, left a will where he requested that this song, which brought so much joy to Jewish people everywhere, accompany him on his final journey to the next world.

Hoshia es amecha...