

## Reality TV & Judaism: Finding Happiness in Our Own Lives

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My confession to you on this Day of Judgment is that I have a weakness for Reality TV. I continue to be fascinated by this genre of television that many thought would be a short-lived fad but has proven to be a lucrative venture. In case you're not familiar with Reality television shows, I'll share a few titles with you: Survivor and the Bachelor, Fear Factor and Wife Swap, American Idol, Nanny 911, the Apprentice and Extreme Makeover: Home Edition. That's a sampling of what's out there and no, I haven't watched all of these shows, but if I'm channel-surfing and one is on, I'll linger and watch. Why? Why do I watch them when they are clearly Bittul Torah? Which is the rabbinic way of saying they are a waste of time...

Let's be honest. Always a good thing to do on the Day of Judgment.

First, I watch because they are a good escape. They say they are reality shows, but really these shows are far from real life...they're certainly far from my reality and SO a good escape from the days' stresses and worries, from sickness and suffering, floods and destruction, war and tragedy. They demand nothing from me except my ability to keep straight all the characters and plots—but even then, half the show is recapping what's past. So, they're an easy escape from life's real challenges and heartbreaks.

But, more than this, these shows hold out the possibility of an answer to one of life's central quests—the search for happiness.

Whether it's by achieving the perfect union, snagging the perfect mate, winning financial wealth, fame, the perfect job or the perfect body...in some way, the story goes, if you get X, you will be happy.

And I watch to see if it really works—after all, confession number 2—I'm a hopeless romantic. Maybe someone WILL find happiness! After winning a million dollars or winning the perfect guy, maybe they will be happy and live happily ever after.

And give a portion of their winnings to their synagogue!! Of course!!

But, really, I know---actually, from studying Torah I've LEARNED—that happiness is not to be found in these external quests.

The rabbis teach in *Pirkei Avot: Azehu Ashir? HaSameah b'chelko...* Who is rich? The one who is happy with his portion. Rich or poor, single or married, childless or with many children, successful or struggling, famous or average—who is rich? The one who is happy with her life—THE WAY IT IS—with all its excitement or lack of excitement, with all its pleasures and pains, with all its ease and its struggles.

Now, this is no small task—to accept one’s lot. And in joy, no less...

It’s much easier to look at someone else’s lot and covet their portion.

We do it from the time we’re very little. Once we’re old enough to grab! It’s a commonly accepted principle of childhood: whatever you have is better than what I have...no matter what it is. Mind you, once I get it, I won’t be happy; I’ll want another toy...preferable THAT one that you just picked up!!

I always wondered why the last of the ten commandments made it to the Top 10 commandments. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house: you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s (Ex.20:14). What’s the big deal about wanting what someone else has? We all fall into that trap every once in a while...It hardly seems comparable to murder, stealing and adultery.

In the Torah the verb *chamad*/translated most often as “covet” signifies a strong craving, an obsessive desire focused on the possession of a particular object. (JPS) Although we generally agree that Judaism does not legislate feelings, this coveting is understood to be such a powerful force that it drives a person to action and overpowers his/her other senses.

BOTTOM LINE, if we are coveting...If we are longingly watching someone else and how they live their lives...We’re not living our OWN life. If we’re coveting, we are wrapped up in worry, and distracted from our real purpose in life. If we are coveting, then we do not have time to focus on our own lives and certainly don’t have time to serve God and the greater good.

If there’s one message that you CAN take from Reality TV this High Holy Day season, it is that sometimes it’s easier to eat a bowl of creepy crawly bugs, win a man’s heart or the country’s admiration than to look inward. Our task this new year, and every year after it, is not to investigate other people’s lives but to turn in to ourselves and search our own souls.

It’s DIFFICULT to stop and look at our lives. Maybe we will not like what we see. Or, maybe we are too cavalier or lazy and we say, “Everything’s fine, my life is good. Don’t fix it if it ain’t broke!”

Maybe we’re too busy taking care of everyone else, helping them to live their lives and neglecting our own life. Well, if that sounds familiar, put yourself on your TO-DO list!

Rosh HaShanah calls us to stop in our tracks and get honest. If we truly want to live a good life, if we truly want to find happiness and joy, if we truly want to be good Jews...we need to stop and evaluate our lives. The rabbis call this process—Cheshbon haNefesh. WE must take an accounting of our lives.

The rabbis teach that if we do a proper self-accounting, a true Cheshbon haNefesh, we will see God's presence and greatness in our lives and we will be overcome by joy and gratitude so that we will ONLY want to repay God with good works, by leading good lives, lives filled with mitzvot—lives filled with charity and good works, study and prayer. You did for me, God, and now I will do for You.

This concept of Cheshbon haNefesh is described by Bahya ibn Pakuda in his ethical treatise called "Hovot haLevavot—Duties of the Heart." Bahya ibn Pakuda was an 11<sup>th</sup> century Spanish-Jewish poet who taught that the essence of Judaism lies in the Duties of the Heart. He wrote Hovot haLevavot to combat the preoccupation with ritual rather than ethical commandments.

Hovot haLevavot teaches that Heshbon haNefesh or "self-accounting is [the] earnest deliberation on one's religious and secular concerns, in the privacy of one's own thoughts, to discover what he has accomplished—and has yet to accomplish—of his obligations."

Contrary to the American ethos, Judaism does not teach that life owes us anything. Judaism does not preach a set of rights owed to us but a set of obligations that are upon us. Life is work. Life is a series of tasks, a series of steps we take to live out our obligations to God and our fellow man, God's creations.

We do a self-accounting not to sit back and enjoy our successes but to determine our next steps. NOW, how can I serve God? NOW, how can I live a good life? NOW, how can I leave the world in a better state than I found it?

This self-accounting should be done "in the privacy of one's own thoughts." What better time than today? What is the purpose of these long services? Why did you find it so important to be here today?

You were drawn here by tradition, friends, family and you were drawn here by your soul, by your nefesh. Don't neglect the care of your soul, your personal Cheshbon haNefesh. Take some time during the services to rest from trying to keep up or trying to understand or trying to be patient and do your own self-account as Hovot haLevavot teaches.

Before I studied Hovot haLevavot, I envisioned this process of self-accounting as a ledger with two columns: the positives and the negatives, the mitzvot and the sins, that which we will keep and that which we will change through the process of teshuvah...

This Rosh HaShanah I want to encourage you to think about your spiritual accounting in a different way. Hovot haLevavot teaches another approach.

When you think of your ledger, there is only ONE column and they are all pluses. [SLOW] Every item you might want to put in a negative column is actually a positive; you just have to see it from a different perspective. Bahya ibn Pakuda is trying to teach us

that through every aspect of our lives, God's presence is revealed. He is offering us a guide to finding happiness in our own portion.

Have you ever seen the children's books, "Where's Waldo"?! There's this vast picture with an incredible amount of fine detail and if you look closely, peeking around corners and blending into the background are little images of Waldo...If you must slow down and look closely, you find him. I say to you, if you just slow down and look closely, you'll find God!! In your successes and in your failures, in your strengths and in your weaknesses, in your joys, your suffering, your friends and your enemies.

Bahya ibn Pakuda teaches that in every aspect of our life, God offers us blessings. And, when we understand God's gifts in our lives, we will be able to accept our lives and our portions in life with gratitude and joy and then, driven by this realization, we will only want to repay God for His grace.

Often we are only able to do this when our own lives are threatened, when who or what we love is taken away from us, when we are confronted by extreme situations that quickly and sharply put the small stuff into perspective. Over the past year, as we have watched the news on TV or read the papers, we have been given the opportunity to learn this lesson as well.

We watch death and destruction in the form of warfare and tsunamis, hurricanes and floods. There must be a reason beyond voyeurism that we put ourselves through the pain and discomfort of watching these images.

One of the lessons we must take in is the value of life and love that reaches far beyond the material possessions one has in this world. When everything is stripped away it is easiest to see what is important. It is our life, in its most basic elements. Our ability to smile and laugh. Our ability to breathe and speak, to reach out and to hug someone or hold their hand. It is our loves in life, our parents, our children, our neighbors and our friends.

Another lesson we can take away from watching the suffering of others is that we are all human beings—no matter the color of our skin, our educational or social background, whether we live in the Sudan or Thailand, or the Gulf Coast or the Northeast...We are all human beings, susceptible to nature's cruelties and often in need of our fellow human being's compassion and assistance. As we sit safely in our homes watching others' suffering, how can we not be grateful for our own portion. But, we can not stop there; we must act on our gratitude and help our fellow human beings in need.

As we evaluate our own lives this Rosh HaShanah, we must challenge ourselves...to find the good, to find the blessings and the gifts that are overshadowed *and* highlighted by our challenges and struggles. As we travel on a personal journey of Cheshbon haNefesh we can travel with each other on a communal journey of Cheshbon haNefesh. As I have come to know Beth El over these past few months, I have seen the wealth of our portion, the blessings and gifts for which the Beth El family can be grateful.

As I have met with over 125 people at ten meet and greets I have been struck by the strength of our synagogue's spirit. Beth El is a warm, friendly family, a home-away-from-home for many. It is a place where people feel welcomed and invited in, where people can be involved if they want to be and if not, they can be observers without feeling judged. It is a place where people are offered the opportunity to study and grow, to lead services, read Torah, preach and teach. It is where people make life-long friendships, develop new friends at new stages of life and find support for life's up's and down's. Beth El is a place that cares for its own and cares for those in need—in South Orange and Newark, in Israel and the Sudan, on the Gulf Coast and anywhere there is suffering.

We have a booming Nursery School and steadily growing Hebrew School, Family programs and family services that are known throughout the country. We have Adult Dinners and adult education programs, study opportunities and social events.

We cannot stop here...It's a good place to rest, enjoy our successes, but then we must continue. As we appreciate our gifts and our blessings, we can only be moved to repay God for God's blessings by cultivating and nurturing our strengths so that we can better serve God, Israel and humanity.

We must offer **more** opportunities for people to study, for adults to learn Hebrew and study traditional texts, for adults to learn with children, for families to learn together.

We must offer **more** opportunities to connect with each other. We have a great website that provides access to Beth El from your home. But we need to provide rides to Beth El for those who feel bound to their homes. We need to provide better access to our sanctuary, to the bimah and throughout our building. We can't say we are welcoming and open if a large part of the congregation can't get here or, once here, can not participate.

We have great children's services and a strong Teen Service but we must offer **more** to our teens on their level, according to their interests, so that we don't lose them before they even go off to college.

We need to continue our social activities and create them with sensitivity to people's different stages of life and circumstances. Not everyone has a family, not everyone has a life-partner, not every one has a ride.

To be a congregation is to be a *kehilah kedoshah*—a sacred community. We come here to socialize and get-together, but that can not be the end. We see the blessings that we are given and so we see the obligations that we have to God. We are blessed with a congregation so that we can fulfill our commitments to God and to Israel.

As we build Beth El, we must build our connection with the Jewish people around the world and with the land of Israel. We must not forget our brothers and sisters in

Israel. As we struggle with our own needs, we cannot forget that our peoplehood is based in the land of Israel. We must support Israel in the media and to our congressman; we must support Israel with our dollars and our efforts. We must also make sure to be a part of building the culture of Israel so that it houses a Judaism that is not foreign to or exclusive of our own. Conservative Judaism or Masorti Judaism in Israel works to protect the rights of all Jews and maintain the values that we hold dear. They need our support.

Last, we must continue to build up our social action programs so that we continue to help those in need. That is why we are participating in Operation Isaiah this year and why we ask you to take home a grocery bag, fill it with groceries—staples, canned goods and dry goods—and bring it back when you return for Kol Nidre Wednesday night. The food will go to St Mark's Food Pantry in West Orange which serves 100 families a month.

Let us count our blessings and share our blessings with others through Operation Isaiah—Please take a grocery bag and do your part.

Our obligation to the founders of this institution who met in Jennie Beck's living room in 1946, our obligation to our children and grandchildren, to God and to ourselves...is to continue to build on this synagogue's strengths so that this community can serve God—through the study of Torah, the service of prayer and the performance of deeds of loving-kindness.

In Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Tarfon teaches (2:21):

*Lo alecha haM'lacha ligmor v'lo atah ven-horin libateil mimena.*

You are not obliged to finish the task, neither are you free to neglect it.

*Im lamad'ta torah harbeh, notnim lach s'char harbeh.*

If you have studied much Torah, your reward will be abundant.

*N'ne'eman hu ba'al m'lachtach she'y'shalem lach s'char p'ulatech.*

Your Employer can be relied upon to reward you for your labors.

It is upon each of us to embark upon the process of Cheshbon haNefesh.

It is upon each of us to work to see God's gifts and many blessings in every aspect of our lives.

It is upon each of us to build upon the good work that this congregation does every time it gets together—and we will be rewarded...we WILL be rewarded...

Kein y'hi ratzon, l'Shana Tovah u'metukah....