

BS"D - Sermon Kol Nidrei 5777

A CONVERSATION WITH MITCH

JUDAISM SEEMS TO BE ALL ABOUT TWO THINGS: REPETITION AND RESTRICTION

EXPLORING PLEASURE VS HAPPINESS

I recently had a conversation with a college kid, I'm gonna call him **MITCH**... not his real name...

These kids are the most honest, they tell the truth how they feel, so it's a pleasure speaking to them.

I asked him to tell me what two words come to mind when he thinks about Judaism.

He said: It's R&R - Repetition & Restriction!

So we talked... for two hours...

Today's sermon is a brief recap of that conversation

REPETITION:

Judaism seems repetitious:

- Same holidays every year
- Same prayers, amidah, shema
- Same tefillin, Shabbat candles

Shouldn't we change it up a bit? Who likes the same things over and over again?

You don't go to same restaurant every day, or take same vacation, lease same car

Torah reading each year over again...

Can you imagine reading the same book over and over again...

In most areas of life we want change

With the exception of the most important part of life:

BREATHING!

You want it monotonous... same reading on the cardiogram every day for 120 years!

We don't look for excitement and changes...

Because that's life itself!

Same with Judaism. Judaism represents life itself, the meaning of life, and it never changes

Same tefillin, same Shabbat candles, same Torah every year!

Same breath, different experiences:

While the breath remains the same hopefully, the experiences we have each day we are granted our breath of life vary all the time

Same in Judaism, it's the same shema each day and the same holidays and torah reading each year. However, the hope is that each time we experience them somewhat differently and deeper...

RESTRICTION:

Life is difficult enough without another set of rules of what I can eat, what type of entertainment in kosher, how and with whom I can party, I mean please... we only go around once rabbi, let's just live it up... who needs all these regulations!

Story of Shliach - who became frum because of his pet fish "Jack"

Was an only child to well to do parents, they bought him a fish to be his "brother", placed in nice pond

Each day played with Jack after school. One day felt badly for Jack that he just goes back and forth in pond... brought out his latest toys and took Jack out of the pond to play...

Jack begins flapping his fins... jumping... boy thought: wow look how happy my fish is... now he's coming alive!

Runs to tell mom, by the time she comes out it's over...

This event hit him hard and he realized there's a moral to the story: People living normal life, with same healthy routine, same stable marriage, look like they're bored and unhappy

Others running around looking for excitement all the time, get high, switch in your wife for a newer model, party in ways that aren't kosher... seem to be happy... screaming, shouting, jumping... it's a happening situation!

While in truth – all that jumping might not be happiness at all but rather a desperate attempt at life... like the fish, there's a feeling of desperation, life feels empty and meaningless, so people are gasping for air, trying to do something crazier today than they did yesterday in the hopes maybe they'll feel alive...

While the one living the moral kosher life, with the seeming monotony, when we're acting to ourselves as human beings, not animals, fulfilling our purpose in life which is to live meaningful, moral lives, we are like a fish in water... as happy as can be – because we realize we matter, we have a purpose!

MITCH:

Ok Rabbi, I get the whole fish in water story... the restrictions are good...

But I want to enjoy life! I live for pleasure! That's all I really want out of life...

No you don't – I said... (He was taken aback... how do YOU know...) What you really want out of life isn't pleasure, it's happiness!

Realize the difference between pleasure and HAPPINESS.

Often they can cross lines, and that's fantastic

But not always

Sitting for hours on the couch watching soap operas downing a tub of ice cream can be pleasurable...

But it's certainly not conducive to happiness... You get up feeling depressed and empty

Conversely, put in a hard day's work, or sweat out a tough workout, burn the midnight oil to pass an important exam towards your degree, not always such a pleasure, but you feel good, there's happiness.

Should be mandatory refrigerator magnet in every household on the planet:

Nothing good is easy, and nothing easy is good...

OY VEY & AHHHHHHHHH....

Start with Ahhhhhhhhhhh, you'll say Oy Vey later. Start with Oy vey, you'll say Ahhhhhhhhh later!

Example 1:

Going to restaurant with Laibel, I pointed it out to him: People seem happier on the way in than on the way out... because it's physical pleasure. it's fleeting.

I noticed at Synagogue or JLI – it's the exact opposite: people enter slouched & leave with a spring in their step...

So Laibel asked – but some are happy... so why some yes and some not...

I suggested: Those who came to spend time with the family are walking out happy, satisfied. Those who just came to eat... they're done eating, so they're walking out unhappy...

Example 2:

Getting off plane, we're minding the kids, full time work, couple behind us watching 4 hour movie, no kids, didn't move...

As we meet in baggage claim: our party is upbeat, connected, close, happy

The two of them are on their phones, testy and barking shouts at one another, angry at themselves...

Pleasure doesn't always equal happiness. And conversely challenge often does.

MITCH:

Rabbi I understand... you're starting to make some sense...

What we want in life is not pleasure, its happiness...

But... (very nervous now...) does that mean Judaism doesn't believe in pleasure...

Of course not! Actually Judaism encourages pleasure...

Shabbos all about delicious food

The first mitzvah is marriage... so much for celibacy...

Joke – “It says: CELEBRATE...”

A young monk arrives at the monastery. He is assigned to helping the other monks in copying the old canons and laws of the church by hand. He notices, however, that all of the monks are copying from copies, not from the original manuscript. So, the new monk goes to the head monk to question this, pointing out that if someone made even a small error in the first copy, it would never be picked up. In fact, that error would be continued in all of the subsequent copies.

The head monk says, "We have been copying from the copies for centuries, but you make a good point, my son." So, he goes down into the dark caves underneath the monastery where the original manuscripts are held as archives in a locked vault that hasn't been opened for hundreds of years. Hours go by and nobody sees him. So, the young monk gets worried and goes down to look for him.

He sees him banging his head against the wall and wailing, "We missed the "R", we missed the "R". His forehead is all bloody and bruised and he is crying uncontrollably.

"What's wrong, father?"

“The word is CELEBRATE!”

Conventional wisdom is the ideal religious spiritual life is one of fasting, celibacy, and poverty.

Judaism doesn't agree with that at all...

In fact it encourages all human endeavor, and the joys and pleasure that come along with it, when done in a kosher way

Enjoy delicious cuisine, but make it kosher and healthy and a way to connect with friends and loved ones

Enjoy success in business, but only through honesty and integrity, without stepping on others on the way up the ladder, and enhancing the lives of your employees, clients and society at large

Enjoy a healthy life of intimacy and love, in the context of a committed marriage, brings two people together in an inseparable bond of body, mind, heart and soul

The restrictions aren't there to minimize our fun, just to make sure the fish stays in the pond...

The restrictions are actually guidelines to make sure the pleasure helps enhance our happiness rather than robbing us of it...

Moses' first revelation is at the burning bush. The sign of G-dly presence is: the fire keeps burning, it never consumes, it never goes out...

G-d could've revealed to Moses in so many ways: an earthquake, volcano, sky writing, neon lights... What's with the burning bush?!

Powerful lesson here:

Fire means passions. Life, pleasure excitement, passion.

G-d is teaching Moses the most important lesson we need to know:

Passion is kosher, and ok!

Some faiths denigrate passion. Not sure where they got it from, the Bible certainly is full of passion. In Judaism passion isn't un-kosher.... It's absolutely kosher...

Which passion is healthy, which fire is good? A fire that never goes out!

Pleasure without happiness leaves us feeling empty, even guilty, and it is short-lived.

Any experience based only on pleasure, a meal, a trip, a relationship, sooner or later the fire goes out...

There may be some fire, but the fire doesn't last long, the fire goes out.

Pleasure within the framework of meaning

Passion within a committed marriage is kosher and encouraged.

(If one of your New Year's resolutions will be to take your beloved on a second honeymoon or in general make more time to keep the flame of love burning, that would be a successful result from Yom Kippur. Passion within marriage is absolutely a mitzvah! Plus, when there's passion within the marriage, there isn't passion outside of it...)

These are fires fire that doesn't go out... they don't leave us feeling empty. They actually grow on us...

At my son's wedding someone wished him: May you always be as happy as you are today... he said Amen.

I leaned over and whispered to him: Berel, don't say Amen to that... it's not a blessing...

I explained: In an environment where marriage is based on just external attraction, the happiest day is the first day... then it's downhill from there... there may be lots of fire, but the fire begins to go out...

In marriage based on shared values and purpose, on Torah, on an understanding we're living out a shared destiny, the first day may be very happy, but it only grows from there... Each day there's more satisfaction. Alongside which comes also a fire of pleasure that grows, that's alive, that doesn't leave us empty but full and fulfilled.

So Judaism isn't really about R&R – Repetition and Restriction...

It's just about "R" – CELEBRATE!

May it be a year that we CELEBRATE each day with joys and pleasures that are not fleeting but are wholesome and deep.

When we live this way, every day... is reason to CELEBRATE!