

Shabbat Chol Hamoed October 15, 2011 / 17 Tishrei 5772
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Chag Samayach! There are many happy Jewish holidays, in fact most of them are, but Sukkot alone is called, "Zman Sim-cha-taynoo" - the Time of Our Rejoicing. Today I want to talk about happiness and the things, the material things, that make us happy. We like to think that what makes us happy is not material - relationships, love, a sense of purpose, but we all know that this is not entirely true. Material objects do make us happy. But, some material objects makes us happier than others, and I would maintain that the happiness an object gives us is not dependent on its price but rather the joy it gives us in any given moment. It's what it means to us at the time that determines an object's worth, not how much it costs.

Now this may seem logical - that it is not the cost of an object that gives us joy, but rather what we think of that object at any given moment - but in fact our brains tell us otherwise. We are, in many instances, hard-wired to believe that expensive is better. Let me share a story:

This is an enlightening story of story of a terrible man - Herman Goering. Goering was Hitler's second in command, his designated successor. And like Hitler, Goering fancied himself a collector of art. He went through Europe in WWII stealing art, often from Jewish collectors. He also occasionally bought art, of course with stolen money. What he really wanted was something from Vermeer. Hitler had two of them and he didn't have any. So he finally found an art dealer, a Dutch art dealer named Hans VanMeegrin, who sold him a wonderful Vermeer for the cost of what today would be \$10 million. And it was his favorite artwork ever. WWII came to an end and Goering was captured, tried at Nuremberg, and ultimately sentenced to death. Then the allied forces went through his collection and found the paintings and went after the people who sold them to him.

The Dutch police came and arrested VanMeegrin, who was charged with treason, which is itself punishable by death. Six weeks into his prison sentence, VanMeegrin confessed, but he didn't confess to treason. He said, "I did not sell a great masterpiece to that Nazi - I painted it myself. I am a forger." Nobody believed him but he said - I'll prove it. Bring me a canvas and paints and some liquor and I'll paint a Vermeer even better than the one that I sold to that Nazi. So they brought him the stuff and he painted a beautiful Vermeer and the charges of treason were dropped. He got a lesser charge of forgery, received a year sentence, and died a hero to the Dutch people. What happened when Goering was told that his favorite painting was actually a forgery? According to his biographer, "he looked as if he had discovered for the first time that there was evil in the world" and he killed himself soon afterwards. (I am indebted to Paul Bloom for this account.)

Once VanMeegrin was on trial he couldn't stop talking about all the great masterpieces that he himself had painted and museums all over the world had to take down these beautiful paintings because they had lost their value. But we have to wonder: Why? Why should it matter since the art was no less beautiful even though a Dutch art dealer painted it?

And the answer is because the value was directly linked to the cost. When the painting was "rare" it was valuable. When anyone could go to VanMeegrin and get a masterpiece the same beautiful pictures were cheap and ordinary and the joy and happiness of owning one was far less. That's just human nature.

Scientists have proven the same thing time and again. Knowing the cost of an object influences how much we like it. Many studies have shown that if you take ordinary wine but pour it into a bottle with an expensive label on it most people will tell you it tastes better than if it were served with

its own label. In fact they have even given wine to people in MRI's and when they told them the wine that they were tasting was very expensive, the pleasure centers in their brains lit up like the 4th of July, but "cheap" wine had no effect.

Now these findings are a little disturbing because they seem to suggest that our desires run contrary to our values. We don't LIKE to think that we judge the worth of something solely based on its cost. We want to be thankful and appreciative for what we have and take joy in that. You likely remember the Mishna, "Who is truly wealthy? The one who is happy with what he's got." And the reason that these two values collide is because our very human nature contradicts our conscience, and our conscience is guided by something supernatural, or as we more commonly refer to it, something spiritual, or as I like to call it, the pull of Gd. And that is precisely why the Torah mandates that we go out and take meals, and even live, in a Sukkah. The material world says more expensive means more happiness. The spiritual world says, more satisfaction, more appreciation, more gratitude means more happiness.

Could you come to these conclusions on your own? Maybe, but statistics and science seem to say that the odds are stacked against you. You need something to remind you what matters most, and that's why we have rituals. And the reason we are told to dwell in the Sukkah, whose worth is thousands of times less than our homes, is to remind us that we don't always need to listen to the voices of the material world trying to convince us that more money means more happy. We can hear a more powerful voice, one that comes from inside (but really from above) when we take our faith seriously. Sukkot reminds us that the value of an object is not the result of what it costs but the joy it gives us at any given moment. The holiday is called "Zman Simchataynoo because" we are happiest when we realize that our greatest source of joy and pleasure is really with us all the time.

