

Yom Kippur Morning 5783

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WITH GOD AS MY SHEPHERD, I WANT FOR NOTHING

The smallest known image created by the prolific poet, illustrator, and engraver William Blake (no relation) is an etching measuring two by two-and-a-half inches—smaller than a Post-It™ note—that Blake created for a children’s book called *The Gates of Paradise*.

Published in 1793, it contains 18 images, each with a short caption. This particular image depicts a small, faceless figure standing at the bottom of an immense ladder that stretches up into a starry sky, leaning against the crook of a crescent moon.

As the figure (a child?) attempts to mount the first rung of the ladder, craning his neck toward the celestial object of his desire, a faceless couple (the parents?) can be seen, standing off to the side, at a distance, clutching each other.

At the bottom, in bold lettering, is the caption: *“I want! I want!”*

And if there is any depiction of the human condition better than this, I am not familiar with it.

At one time or another—maybe most of the time—we are all that faceless child, reaching for the moon, grasping for what we cannot have, staring stubbornly heavenward while our feet never get off the ground.

“I want! I want!”

Or, maybe we are the anxious couple, standing helplessly off to the side, and all we can do is hold each other as we watch someone we care about want and want, and still not have.

The Rabbis taught: איזה הוא עשיר? השמח בחלקו. “Who is rich? One who is happy with one’s portion.” Such a noble aspiration; so difficult to attain.

At best, we are like the angels going up and down the ladder in Jacob’s dream, hovering between contentment and complaint: one minute over the moon, the next, jolted back down to earth.

It could well be that happiness, fulfillment, that thing we’re after (whatever “that thing” may be: to feel loved, to feel seen, to feel understood, to feel valued, to be of service, to have good health, to have better grades, to have a fitter body, to have what my neighbors have, or what I think they must have, to have our loved ones know satisfaction and success and love and good health, oh, and by the way, could my daughter please just meet a nice Jewish boy?—that *whatever* we’re after, even when we attain a piece of it, even when we do grasp a corner of the moon—that, even then, the

happiness such attainment confers proves ephemeral, and sure enough, sooner or later, we lose our grip and wind up right back at:

“I want! I want!”

Satisfaction is rare. Want is universal.

Perhaps my perspective has been unduly shaped by Covid and our turbulent state of public affairs. It seems more likely that Covid and the prickly present moment have combined to amplify our already disconsolate state of mind, but cannot be blamed for its root cause, which is—simply put—the human condition.

That is to say: we do not suffer because of pandemic disease or high inflation or climate change or partisan rancor, but because we are human.

Like generations of readers, I take solace in the words of the twenty-third Psalm which begins, רעי לא אחסר, *Adonai ro'i, lo echsar*: *“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want,”* and which includes some of the most indelible images of tranquility and contentment in all literature:

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.”

And *“My cup runneth over.”*

But all is summarized by the two Hebrew words which lay out the theme of the poem, לֹא אֶחְסַר, *lo echsar*, “I shall not want,” or, more faithfully translated, “I lack nothing.”

Another way to define suffering, then, is the perception of *lack*, and another way to define happiness is—permit me an awkward phrase—the *lack of lack*: when, even momentarily, we do *not* want, have nothing *to* want, and, when we look over our lives and our world, despite all the dross and all the mess, we nevertheless can say: “my cup runneth over.”

In these words we also find a framework for understanding how God shows up in our lives: as the tranquility, joy, contentment, that we experience when we “want for nothing.”

“*I want! I want!*” is the root of so much suffering. Such a mindset—obsessed with lack, hellbent on acquisition—can be seen at its pathological extreme in, say, Vladimir Putin, who must be one of the most miserable men on the planet, despite his inordinate power, wealth, and privilege.

Such an example, while useful for illustrating the concept, is grotesque. We are not like that man. Still, let’s consider, on this Yom Kippur morning, this day of introspection, how the gnawing feeling of “*I want! I want!*” lodges within each of *us*, how it shapes our lives, drives our ambitions, and perpetuates our suffering.

Happiness strikes me as fundamental to life, or at least to a life well lived. Jefferson put the pursuit of it, alongside life and liberty, as an “unalienable right.” But notice that he did not view happiness *itself* as a right, only the *pursuit* of happiness: the implication being that its attainment is far from guaranteed, and that each of us must seek and find it for ourselves.

Any number of factors may contribute to our happiness—factors like wealth or prosperity, health and physical wellbeing, friendship, companionship, and love, attainment and achievement—but none of these factors necessarily guarantees it.

Our material situation affects our happiness, and financial resources can improve our quality of life, our comfort or convenience, the opportunities available to us, the security of our families; but surely we know people who are rich in dollars but poor in happiness.

Good health may also contribute to happiness. People experiencing chronic pain or discomfort have reason to feel discouraged, depleted, even depressed. But surely we know people in peak physical condition who lack happiness; and surely we know people who are frail or sick and who nevertheless never cease to surprise us with their positive outlook and joyful way in the world.

Good friendships, meaningful relationships, often correlate with happiness. The Torah speaks true when it says, “It is not good for a person to be alone.” Few forms of suffering are more painful (or more universal) than

loneliness. Companionship, friendship, partnership, love: these add richness, beauty, and joy to life. At the same time, we all know people who find contentment in their own company, as well as people who have deep and lasting relationships and who nevertheless are in an inner state of suffering.

We also often assume that achievement leads to fulfillment. Explicitly and implicitly we teach our children the virtues of setting goals, achieving outcomes. We emphasize advancing in school and employment, pursuing opportunities that often impel us to work harder in order to achieve more and better.

So we work, and work, and work; we set goals and pursue them; we sometimes exceed even our own expectations as we make our way up the so-called ladder of success; and then, one day, many of us wake up realizing that, with every goal accomplished, we still feel an insatiable “*I want, I want!*” from deep within. Attainment may provide a measure of satisfaction, but it rarely leads to lasting happiness. It is certainly no antidote to suffering.

I wonder what would happen if we tried on a Yom Kippur mindset—and not just for today. What would it feel like to stand before ourselves, our community, and God with only our *mitzvot*, our deeds, and our *middot*, our dispositions, and not our résumés, to speak for us? Maybe we’d discover that, rather than deriving from some external condition, “happiness is an

inside job.” That happiness, the absence of suffering, the *lack of lack*, describes an *inner* state of being.

We can shift our mindset to think of suffering as being in contention with *what is*, and happiness as what happens when we are not in contention with *what is*—even if it’s just a temporary reprieve, a momentary state of acceptance, the grace of “*lo echsar*,” that “I want for nothing.”

Throughout this holy season, it is customary in many Jewish communities to read each day from Psalm 27: “Only one thing do I ask of God; this, my only request: that I might dwell in God’s house all the days of my life.” Its close cousin, Psalm 23, ends on a similar note: “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

The house of God of which the Psalmist sings is not a real estate listing. It has no physical address, no doors or rooms. It is not to be found at the end of a ladder to the sky. It metaphorically describes a tranquil state of mind, an inner calm and equanimity. To “dwell in the house of God” is to be at peace with *what is*, for our minds and hearts and souls to align in acceptance of our present state of being.

I find this poetic image of “dwelling in the house” of God a whole lot more relatable than the notion of “believing in” God. For me, “faith” and “belief” are difficult words and difficult concepts. My relationship with God does not emerge from what I *believe*, much less from the kind of absolute trust or belief conveyed by the word “faith.”

My understanding of God, rather, emerges from what I have *lived* and what I have *learned*, what I have *experienced* and what others have taught me about their experiences.

I am, therefore, rather inclined to talk about how we *experience* God, how God “shows up” in our lives, than about how we do or do not “believe” or “have faith” in God.

For me, God *shows up* when I *experience* tranquility, contentment, connection, joy, and, above all, when I recognize—even for a moment—that I lack nothing. When the incessant buzz of *I want, I want!* is quieted just enough for me to hear something deeper, a melody that has been playing all along, beneath the clamor: *I lack nothing. I may not have everything I want, but, **at this moment**, I have everything I need.* When we learn to distinguish between what we *need* and what we *want*, we begin to approach happiness.

Over my sabbatical, I went back to Hebrew School, enrolling in an online *ulpan*, or immersive language class. Among the many common expressions we learned is one of my new favorites. In modern Hebrew, if you want to say, “I’m cool with that,” you say, השלמתי עם זה, *hishlamti im zeh*, the word “השלמתי” being a verb-form of *shalom*, meaning, “I am at peace with that,” or “I am whole, complete, fulfilled.” I am in a state of *shalom*.

When, looking over my life, I can say, השלמתי עם זה, *I am at peace with this*, I am content—even if for a moment—that is when I experience God, the God

of the 23rd Psalm, the God of “I want for nothing,” the God who appears not as *Avinu, Malkeinu*, as Father, or King, or Judge; not the God who appears at Sinai, but, rather, who appears as Shepherd: the God beside the still waters, who restores my soul. In those moments, I can say: “*I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me.*”

Nothing more. Not *judging*, not *governing*, not *parenting*, not *recording* or *recounting*. Just “*with me*”—in the calm, lucid awareness of *hishlamti im zeh*, “I am at peace with this.”

In preparing these remarks, I have turned to Bible and Midrash, to philosophers medieval and modern, seeking inspiration in sources as disparate as the Hasidic Rabbis and the Dalai Lama.

But I have found no better teachers than my twin nephew and niece, Jacob and Shirah, who will turn eleven later this month.

Jakey and Shirah are my sister Rebecca’s younger kids. She also has Samson, who celebrated becoming Bar Mitzvah over Labor Day weekend. Samson is what we call neurotypical. Shirah and Jakey were born with cerebral palsy.

Cerebral palsy, or CP, is the most common childhood motor disability, affecting somewhere between one and four children out of every 1,000. It is believed to be caused by abnormal brain development or damage to the developing brain that affects the control of one’s muscles. While CP always

affects one's ability to move and maintain balance and posture, the diagnosis actually encompasses a wide spectrum of disorders. Many children with CP will learn to walk, talk, attend mainstream schools, and go on to lead lives that most of us would think of as "normal."

When Jakey and Shirah were very little, we would dream that one day, they too would grow up with such abilities and opportunities. But here they are, almost eleven, and they cannot walk on their own; they get around in wheelchairs pushed by others. They cannot speak (with words, that is); they cannot feed or dress or toilet themselves.

Because of their growing needs as they approach adolescence, and following extensive and, at times, agonizing considerations and conversations, our family helped Jakey and Shirah to move, this summer, to a residential community upstate that provides extensive services to people with developmental disabilities.

By all accounts, they are happy there, and, no surprise, the amazing staff of caretakers, educators, and therapeutic professionals all fell in love with them instantly.

I am, truth be told, hard-pressed to think of a time when these two children *haven't* been content. Sure, they have their moments. Jakey gets anxious meeting new people, and Shirah, who likes to be the center of attention, makes it known when she is not getting enough.

But, so far as I can tell, Jakey and Shirah might be two of the happiest people I know. They love music and stuffed animals. They love french fries and pizza and afternoons at the pool. They love hugs and silliness. Shirah, in particular, loves it when Aunt Kelly sings to her. They have a big brother who adores them and loves playing with them. My sister, together with Jakey and Shirah's father, their stepfather, and Grammy and Poppy (my parents) have all been wellsprings of boundless support, love, and connection.

And they have in each other a best friend, playmate, and constant companion. You'll often find them just giggling or holding hands.

Still, many people see only what Jakey and Shirah lack, and miss seeing what they have. They miss seeing how much delight they have and bring to others. Internally resourced happiness, without dilution or complication. A rare and precious kind of *shalom*.

And, I think, the reason they are so happy, and have so much to teach us about happiness, is because, unlike most of us, they perceive no lack in their lives. Nothing is missing, from their point of view.

Without words, but with their innermost being, I imagine that Jakey and Shirah are telling us, *lo echsar*, "I want for nothing." I have food and clothing, a warm bed and a safe home. I have a family that loves me and people who care for my every need. I have my best friend by my side. If I don't feel good, or if I'm hungry, or if I'm scared, or confused, or lonely, and

I just raise my voice—my distress will be over in a matter of moments. If I do suffer, I need not suffer long. I have all I need.

They remind us that there's another way to translate *lo echsar*, which is, "I am not lacking." ***I am enough.*** God does not need me to be anyone other than who I am.

And is there any more Yom Kippur teaching than this?

So let us pray:

With Divine love to shepherd us, may we be at peace with who we are, and want for nothing.

May we wake each day to apprehend and appreciate green pastures, tranquil waters, a soul that feels restored.

When we walk through life's darkest valleys, even in the shadow of death, may we feel unafraid, safe, at peace, for the Holy One is with us.

May we move forward through whatever life offers us, guided by the comfort of a caring hand.

Even in the presence of those who hurt us or harass us, may we be content with what has been placed upon our table.

May we hold our heads high, and when we lift our cups, filled with the mixed wine of life, may we drink deeply from an overflow of the sweet stuff.

May we walk in awareness of the love and goodness that follows us all the days of our lives.

And may every place we dwell be the house of God.

Amen

