

Home is Where the Heart is Happy

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According to a series of surveys completed by the Gallup Organization, the happiest person in America is a tall, Asian-American, observant Jew who is at least 65 and married, has children, lives in Hawaii, runs his own business and has a household income of \$120,000 a year.

Such a person doesn't exist. He is a figment of researchers' imaginations, a grouping together of averages and formulas, means and medians, all distilled into a perfect picture that can't possibly exist in the real world. Or so you'd think.

Meet Alvin Wong. He is 69 years old and tall, standing at 5 foot 10. He is Chinese-American. He and his wife, Trudy Schandler-Wong live together in Honolulu, where he runs his own lucrative healthcare management business, making more than 120 thousand dollars per year. Mr. Wong keeps kosher, and considers himself an observant Jew. In March Mr. Wong got his fifteen minutes of fame. That's because the Gallup organization created a fantasy, a composite sketch of America's happiest person. And someone took the sketch and went out and found the real guy. He's the financially comfortable, tall, Asian-American Jewish family man who lives in Hawaii.

The reporters asked him for words of wisdom on how to live a happy life.

"My life philosophy is," Wong said, "if you can't laugh at yourself, life is going to be pretty terrible for you."

He then asked the interviewer if this was all a practical joke.

Thomas Jefferson wrote that we all are entitled to the pursuit of happiness. However, just because we ought to pursue it doesn't mean that we will know how. Regardless of what the survey says, Alvin Wong's happiness isn't ours.

If we can't move to Hawaii and can only dream of being 5'10", Alvin Wong's happiness remains elusive. But our own happiness we can find as we approach this new year. And for us busy Angelinos, it probably won't look anything like Alvin Wong's.

While taking a summer beach vacation, my own personal version of bliss, I read a book called *The Happiness Project: Or, why I spent a year trying sing in the morning,*

clean my closets, fight right, read Aristotle, and generally have more fun. Its author, Gretchen Rubin, takes her personal pursuit of happiness seriously by

devoting a full year to increasing the quality of her life. At the outset she explains that she is not a generally unhappy person, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she *could be happier*.

She writes about her realization. As she watches from the window of a New York City bus, she sees a woman crossing the street in the rain. The woman is feebly trying to balance her umbrella, cell phone, pouting child and unwieldy stroller.

Rubin she sees herself in this woman. She writes,

"I wasn't as happy as I could be, and my life wasn't going to change unless I made it change. In that single moment, with that realization, I decided to dedicate a year to trying to be happier."

Rubin struggles with the parts of life that are a challenge for so many of us: stress, family, diet and exercise, balancing work and home life, and taking care of others while caring for ourselves. But unlike so many of us who accept this state as our modern condition, she devises a plan to find more joy in the good life that she has – to make herself *happier* with herself.

Part of the work that we do during Elul, the month leading up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is an assessment of our own lives and the parts of ourselves that we want to change in the new year. During this time we ask forgiveness: both of others whom we've wronged, and also of ourselves. The process isn't complete until we have truly changed, finding ourselves in the same situation again, and acting with better intentions and results.

Though Gretchen Rubin was thinking about the *other* New Year when she embarked on her Happiness Project, we can learn an incredible amount from her process when it comes to completing the work of Elul. What Rubin notices so poignantly is that the 'wrongs' that she commits – both to others and to herself – are the sorts of 'wrongs' that become rote in our lives, and might not even seem 'wrong' at all. She notices that behaviors like nagging her husband and children, taking herself too seriously, not making time for fun, and eating poorly all make her feel bad, and that unhappiness spills over into her relationships. Rather than the dramatic alphabet of sins we recite during the High Holidays, sometimes we hurt others and ourselves most with the repeated offense of very, very small misdeeds.

During Elul, it's traditional to sing the words of Psalm 27 each day.

*Achat sha'alti me'eit Adonai otah avakeish:
Shivti b'veit Adonai, kol y'mei chayay.*

One thing I ask, I ask of You, I earnestly pray for:
That I might dwell in Your **house** all the days of my life.

According to this psalm, as we do the work of Elul – the noticing, the changing, the asking, the forgiving – there’s really one ultimate goal: *shivti b’veit Adonai*, to dwell in God’s house.

With all the talk of home we’ve been doing this High Holy Day season – which we will continue to do as Rosh Hashanah ends and Yom Kippur approaches – it might feel daunting to stretch ourselves to include yet another definition of coming home.

To define God’s home as a place we can actually be... it’s so abstract, so personal – we might doubt our ability to actually find our way there.

Yet, according to our daily liturgy, Gretchen Rubin and Alvin Wong might be closer to dwelling in God’s house than even they know. We read in the siddur:

Ashrei Yoshvei Veitecha, od yehallelucha, selah!

Happy are those who dwell in your **house**;
they will sing your praises forever!

All the times I’ve said this prayer, I assumed this line meant what it said: that those lucky ones who get to dwell in God’s house are happy ... but as we know, these texts are meant to be turned and turned again. And when we flip *Ashrei Yoshvei Veitecha* on its head, we see that the *Ashrei*, the *happiness* comes first. Another interpretation can be that when we make ourselves happy, we encounter the Divine. In other words, our happiness is what brings us home with God. Happiness is the path to God’s house.

Perhaps Alvin Wong finds himself at home with God and himself as he embraces his unique cultural and religious background with his family in Honolulu. And Rubin explores a connection to a Higher Power through yoga and journaling. Her depiction of being close to God looks different from Alvin Wong’s, just as yours looks different from mine. However, our tradition offers us wisdom on how to get to happiness – even if we all take a different, winding road as we approach.

In Pirkei Avot, the Sayings of our Ancestors, we read:

Eizehu Ashir? HaSameach b’chelko.

Who is rich? One who is happy with their portion.

We learn here that neither wealth nor happiness are outside of us: rather, an appreciation of what we have, and what we’ve been given is all we need to attain that elusive state of being.

But of course, it’s easy to say 'be happy with what you have.' In practice, I might be very happy with my car or my house - but that doesn't mean I won't have a

twinge of jealousy when I see yours. This is one of those small misdeeds against myself

and against you that adds up over time. Little by little my envy of your life becomes a bigger problem, disabling me from seeing my own blessings. These small, everyday crimes against others and ourselves make us unhappy. They cause us to doubt ourselves, our relationship to others, and ultimately, to God.

Happiness is ours for the taking.
God's House is ours to dwell in.

It requires awareness.

It takes *work*.

By developing our own happiness project. By noticing our blessings. Acknowledging, then reversing our habits that make others and ourselves feel bad is what allows us to be *sameach b'chelko*, **happy** with our portion.

Think for a moment:

What are your small misdeeds, the habits you have that you would like to change?

Do you nag? Are you envious? Do you cut corners or say 'no' more than you should?

Now notice:

How can you start right now, and make the first small change?

Happiness is not about becoming what we aren't:

Happiness is learning how to make the most of who we truly are.

The pursuit is our own. It is just there ahead of us: within our reach.

And as we step forward into this new year, let

'*Ashrei yoshvei veitecha,*'

'happy are those who dwell in your house'

be a description of our own lives.

Allow God to dwell in your happiness.

We've been given a charge to choose life:

a path that enables us to smile, laugh, and be happy with our lot in life.

When we choose happiness, God dwells in us.

This year, stand in front of the mirror. See yourself, in your city, in your skin, with your income, your family, your life. And as you look, see who has the potential to be standing there:

You. The happiest person in America.

Shanah Tova – may it be a sweet, and happy new year.

