

Each and every day, Sisyphus wakes up to find the boulder at the bottom of the hill. The same hill he had climbed the day before and the days before that. He stands up, leans his shoulder into the boulder and begins a new day.

Good evening and Shanah tovah, many blessings and thanks to each and every one of you. Thank you for the opportunity to address you and to engage with this wonderful tradition with you. Most importantly, perhaps, thank you for being here this evening, in spite of the boulders you may be carrying with you.

The idea for this sermon came from the most unlikely of places: Tiktok! Rest-assured, this wasn't any old video of some kid pouring mentos into a coke bottle to see what happens. This video was primarily about finding happiness in a seemingly futile existence. Sisyphus, a rather depressing, yet powerful Greek myth, is meaningful to us because each and every one of us can relate to the story. It is for Sisyphus as it is for us: same boulder, different day.

The video I saw went on to cite philosopher Albert Camus stating that, if we are to understand the myth of Sisyphus as an accurate representation of our lives, as a truly endless and futile pursuit akin to pushing a boulder up a hill, "then our only hope for fulfillment in life, is to imagine Sisyphus 'Happy.'"

This same video also points out that bowling is actually an apt example of this Sisyphean happiness. In both the Story of Sisyphus and bowling, a heavy object is thrust toward a goal, only to return moments later...again and again and again at least until a ball gets jammed in the gutter. While this tiktok video has certainly shifted my perspective regarding Sisyphus and perhaps bowling, there are however two glaring issues in the comparison of the two. For one, Sisyphus doesn't get to walk away from the bowling ball or turn in his shoes after a few games and, for most of us, aside from maybe the great bowlers of all time, like the Jeffrey Lebowski's of the world, bowling isn't what gets me up in the morning.

Sure, bowling puts a smile on my face, but it doesn't make me happy in the truest sense of the word. So, what is happiness and how might we come to understand Sisyphus— or ourselves for that matter—as happy?

Holocaust survivor and Psychologist, Viktor Frankl observed that “happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue.” It must come naturally as an “unintended consequence” of personal dedication and openness to a cause beyond one’s self. This notion of happiness — a byproduct or symptom of one’s pursuits in life — means that we can’t achieve happiness directly. Happiness results, *indirectly*, from other things we do that have deep value and meaning. **And what if finishing the task does not simply create meaning or happiness for us?** What if, rather, our happiness and fulfillment comes as a result of hard-won experience, by covering the same ground after countless dead-ends and mistakes? What if meaning-making, and the happiness that flows from it, is an *iterative*, life-long, or even generations-long, exercise? What if it is the process itself that is the source of happiness?

In that case, Sisyphus might be the happiest person in the world! Perhaps his sheer stick-to-it-ive-ness is the source of his happiness. Did Sisyphus learn something new about himself each time he pushed the Boulder? Did he try different methods? Different routes? How did he grow with each failed attempt?

To answer these questions, I looked to a Sisyphean character who rivals the original: Moses! Is there any other character in our tradition more associated with climbing the mountain?

Moses, like Sisyphus, must confront the same challenges over and over again. From Exodus to Deuteronomy, Moses pushes the stiff-necked, boulder of a people—the Israelites—through the desert.

His role as leader of the Israelite people has immense pressures and obligations that persist from on high and from his congregation below, and he must push onward until his dying breath on Mount Nebo. It is, of course, fitting that Moses dies on a mountain, because he spent his life climbing them.

Like Sisyphus, Moses pursues a job that can never be completed. Seemingly cursed to watch his life’s work roll away from him, does Moses die resentful? Infuriated? No! “Moses was 120 when he died” “His eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated.” And we continue his work, in a manner of speaking, still trying to figure it out thousands of years later.

Had the Israelites followed through on their promise to “do all that God had commanded,” there would be no reason to read the Torah year after year. There would be no reason to be here today.

To this day we force Moses to push *us* up the mountain, the proverbial location of the elevation of the entire Jewish people. Year after year from generation to generation, we reroll our Torah to begin again. We push, we strive, we fail and succeed; we stumble, we return to the same places week after week and year after year, and—at our best—we continue to grow with each trip up the mountain.

Unlike Sisyphus who finds himself at the bottom of the hill each morning, we continually take our tradition to new heights and new vistas, looking back only to renew the path ahead of us. By taking on this task of participating in the upward march of Judaism, we have in some small way, taken upon ourselves Moses' boulder.

We have chosen the difficult, yet rewarding path in pursuit of Torah. It is in the *Pursuit of Torah*, not its accomplishment, completion or achievement that happiness is derived; Simchat Torah, which we celebrate in just a couple of weeks, literally the Joy of Torah, is about beginning to read Torah - *again and again and again*. We are told to “cling fast to it, grasp at it,” not put it on a shelf to collect dust. Why? Because: “Torah is a tree of life for those who hold fast to it, and all of its supporters, its boulder rollers, find *happiness*.”

We have made the conscious choice to accompany Moses in pushing Israel towards the top of the mountain; to persevere in the face of obstacle and uncertainty; to make sacrifices, to reconcile, to increase knowledge, to study, to repair the world. We realize that the job is arduous and that it is not necessarily to be completed by our hands or even the hands of the students, the children, that we may raise up.

Ultimately we trust in the promise of the psalmist:

אֲשֶׁר יֵתֵּן מִיְּדֵי הָיָה לְכֹל בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה.

Happy are those whose path is full, wholesome, and integrous; as it is for the ones who proceed with God's Torah. To find happiness in this moment of struggle and uncertainty is the great test of this sermon. The question isn't whether we have a boulder to bear

or not, we do—all of us. The question is how we will choose to see it, how will we engage with the weight of our times. Will we see this moment as a curse, a burden that might flatten us? Or an opportunity to discover strength we did not know we had? An opportunity to refocus our efforts on what matters most? To seek and build community, teach the next generation the values that will build a better world, to chip away at the great stumbling blocks of our society.

As we stand at the threshold of a new year, knowing well that the terrain seems to shift daily, leaving us feeling unsteady in our steps—we must remember that, even though the boulder feels heavier these days, the responsibility remains the same: to lean into the moment, not abscond from it. In this moment...we can't afford to walk away from the boulder. If Sisyphus could be imagined happy, if Moses could climb again and again without losing vigor, then perhaps we, too, can reframe our burdensome boulder. In this way, each prayer, each mitzvah, each moment of kindness, each return to Torah—becomes an ascent.

Rosh Hashanah gives us the gift of reframing. The same challenges await us tomorrow as yesterday, the same hills to climb. But we are invited, today, to shoulder them with fresh eyes and renewed spirit. To see the sweetness in our striving not futility, but purpose. To find, in the rhythm of repetition, the unexpected music of joy. *Shir la 'ma'alot: esai einai el he 'harim Mei ayin yavo ezri. Ezri mei 'im adonai oseh shamayim v'aretz. Al yitein lamot raglecha al yanum shomrecha—hinei! Lo yanum v'lo yishan shomeir yisrael.*

A song of ascents: I lift my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come? My help comes from adonai who made heaven and earth. God will not let your feet give way, your guardian will not sleep or slumber. May we push forward, onward and upward together, determined and unabated, toward the promise of a world made more whole.

Shanah tovah