**The Pursuit of Happiness 5768**

Let me start with a question: What do you want most for your children? To be happy! Its probably the universal answer, some may say that we want our children to find peace, to find a partner to share life with (when they are old enough and can support themselves) , but essentially those answers all mean the same thing – we want for our children what all parents want for there children, that their lives be infused with meaning, that they feel wholeness and contentment, that they experience much of life's joys and little of life's sorrows; that they be happy.

When our children are happy we are happy and to the extent that there happiness has anything to do with something we did as their parents – we then consider our efforts at parenting to be a success. What is the measure of successful parents? Happy kids!

The most important lesson that we learn in life is that; success is not happiness, but happiness is success. Its doesn't matter how high paying our job, how big our small business, have often our Blackberry buzzes with that important call from that client that must talk to us and no one else. We can be successful and not be happy, but if we are happy then by definition we are successful it is in the end the only measure that really matters.

Our children for the large part have not yet learned to think this way. In there life, success is the path to happiness – not the result. The road to happiness is well marked for them, it is dotted with external measures of success; good grades, high test scores, getting into a top school, advance placement, early admission, the honor list. How do you become happy and make your parents happy? Be successful in all you do and happiness will follow.

It may surprise you but our children view our love as conditional. If I succeed, Mom and Dad will love me. If I fail, Mom and Dad will be disappointed in me. This is not what we say to them, we say, "just try your best." As though we reward the effort not the outcome. And while we may actually do that, while we may champion the noble fight, to the victor go the spoils. Not only in terms of high GPAs, good colleges and high paying jobs, also our love and attention. Have you ever seen a bumper sticker that says, "My child get's B's but is happy." Of course not, our bumper stickers read My Child is an Honor Student, our license plate frames proclaim Proud Parent of – insert the name of a top middle, school or college. We brag about there successes, because our children are our mirror. We place then in front of our own image and that image looks back at us as we judge our success as a parent by there success as a child. They didn't get into Harvard – we got into Harvard!

They know that there success makes us happy, they see the pride we take in there accomplishments, the pain we feel at there failure. Our children love us, were good parents, we love them and coach them and encourage them, we give them every resource every advantage possible to succeed and they want to succeed, they want to repay our efforts on there behalf and make us happy.

And so our kids have an intense fear of failure because to fail is to not be good, to not fulfill your potential – to let down your parents, to waste your gifts. Failure has become a sin and success has become a virtue. We have confused achievement and success with being a good person.

Such high stakes demand an all or nothing pursuit of success because for our teens it is THE measure of goodness. And this intense pressure to succeed causes otherwise good, honest and responsible students to compromise their values to get ahead. They learn to cheat, kiss up, form treaties, contest school decisions and act in ways that run counter to the school rules and guidelines…in the words of sociologist Denise Clark Pope, they learn to 'Do School' to work the system however they can to stay ahead of the curve, at the top of the class.

As one of my 8th graders explained it to me when we were discussing the ethics of cheating in our weekly Jewish ethics class. Cheating is OK because what matters most is your grade, grades are the most important thing, because if you have good grades you can get into a good college and if you get into a good college you can get a good job and that is the whole point of being in school.
The same strategies our teens use to stay afloat or get ahead in school we use in the work place. Both justify their actions. We do what is necessary because we are providing for our family and our children do what is necessary so that one day they will be in a position, because they have a good job - to provide for a family.

We think that achievement and of success, will make us happy. But when did the pursuit of happiness come with a report card and a GPA? Who says happiness is an Ivy League school, a resume built from Nursery School, and a course load that allows no time to reflect and to think…only to react and produce.

All of this pressure to succeed; this constant pursuit of some external validation that you are good is really just a modified expression of materialism. Turning every valuable relationship into a commodity – what can I get from this so that I can achieve that?

In students, it creates what David Elkins famously termed 25 years ago the hurried child. Only now the parent is not the only one hurrying the child, society is hurrying them too. The message is clear don't stop here – what's up ahead or around the corner that is what you really need.

And so our students, who know that success in the present is truly measured by success in the future, hurry through school, they hurry through life. They have things to do and places to be. Teach me what I need to know to prove to you that I know it so I can satisfy this requirement and move on to the next. Such pressure, which comes from a fear of not making it, a fear of failure, is so powerful that to waste time on anything not in pursuit of this goal is a sin.

For the last 40 years UCLA and the American Council on Education have surveyed college freshmen over asking them why they went to college. In the 1960's and 70's the vast majority of incoming college freshmen answered 'to become an educated person' or 'to develop a philosophy of life.' Beginning in the 1990's the majority of students when asked the same question answered, "to make a lot of money".

This is dramatically different from our childhood, when our parents worried if we would ever grow up, much less ever get a job. We tested them and challenged them – we explored, discovered, experimented – we took our time – because we knew the one thing we had as kids that we would not have as adult was time.

I can remember, as a child, lying on the grass watching the clouds roll by. I could stare at the clouds for hours, daydreaming and imagining what it would be like to touch one or sit on one.

Einstein discovered the theory of relativity by conducting thought experts. He would imagine a problem and test solutions to it in his mind. He would daydream.

Do our children ever have time to daydream anymore? And if we suggested it would they ask what the point was? To what end? To what purpose will that serve me later in life? I guess we could tell them daydreaming got Einstein the Nobel Prize therefore it could lead to something – but that would be to wholly miss the point.

Our children need this time to think, to contemplate, to do the very important work of childhood, which is to veg out, contemplate life, relieve boredom by entertaining themselves, discover and enjoy a general sense of peace and contentment, to discover themselves, who they are and who they want to be. They need this time to experience true happiness so they will know what they are missing as adults when happiness becomes a compromising goal. Wendy Mogel writes, "If kids are not taught to reflect on things how can they learn to weigh issues, actions and consequences later in life." Plato, said it even better, "An unexamined life is not worth living."

But, you say – Rabbi, the world has changed – your reminiscences are quaint, but we live in the real world. If our children are not prepared for that – they will not succeed and if they don't succeed they will not be happy. We push them so hard because the times demand it. We want them to be happy.

But when do you want them to be happy – when they are adults? Why not now? Are you happier now with the demands of your life then you were when you were 15? When was the last time you sat staring at the clouds day dreaming? Who would not trade the demands and concerns, worries and fears of our adult lives for those of our teenage years? But would you trade them for the pressures of teenagers today?

Story about Boy and Rabbi

There has been a change in the conception of childhood and children have suffered a loss. Indeed childhood may be lost. As our children are initiated at a younger and younger age into the adult world, in every way their lives have become more difficult, more confusing - in short more like ours. No wonder they want to grow up so fast. They work just as hard, make less money, have less freedom and still have to be in bed by 10pm.

But this isn't the Jewish way. Judaism is present world focuses. The reward for doing G-d's work is the quality of your life while you are here, while you are living it. The reward is not in what you will obtain in the future but in what you experience in the present. This moment, this interaction, this experience, this is the reward. There is nothing more. Indeed there is nothing greater.

Achieve, perform, succeed are not Jewish values. My child is a *mensch* has nothing to do with his GPA, its is about his DNA.

A person's worth cannot be measured by test scores or the diploma that hangs on the wall, nor the balance in their checkbook. Jewish values are honesty, integrity, reverence, respect for family and tradition. We value education but not as a means to an end, it is an end in itself. We study *L'shma* for the sake of Heaven, not the reward; for how it impacts our soul and relationship with the Divine, the world around us. We study not to master over things but to understand them.

In Judaism wisdom is a holy pursuit – it is *kadosh* - because the purpose of wisdom is the repair of the world. *Ltaken olam b'malchut shadai,* to repair the world in the image of God. The acquisition of Jewish wisdom is to cultivate the heart, elevate the spirit, broaden the mind - not to fatten the purse.

Judaism is a sacred tradition. It says NO to obsessive achieving for grades as the extrinsic markers of 'success' at the sacrifice of character and meaning and purpose. We were not given mind, soul, heart and spine to "make it." We were given these gifts to sanctify life, to be Holy- *Kidoshim T'huyu* - you shall be Holy – not you shall be an "A" student – the two are not synonymous. We desire an "A" character, "A" people, not "A" grades.

Not a high GPA - Grade Point Average but a high Goodness Point Average.

Not 1600 on the SAT, but 613 on the only test that truly matters – are you a good person – are you a *mensch*?

When we as parents pressure our kids to be outstanding while neglecting the very process by which outstanding children are formed we lack Holiness – we fail. Outstanding is not a report card – outstanding is a character. We, too, must not seek external validation or reward for what is an internal achievement. Psychologist Madeline Levine writes “outstanding children are those who have developed a “self” that is authentic, capable, loving, creative, in control of self and moral.