



Parshat Tetzaveh
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Finding Our Cady

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Have you heard of the legend of the butterfly? When you look for the butterfly, it eludes you. But when you stop looking, that butterfly lands on your shoulder. I was thinking of the legend of the butterfly this week, and here is why.

I have long been attracted to books about happiness. I have read or perused two books by Tal Ben-Shahar on happiness, one called Happier and the other The Pursuit of Perfect. And then a new book by Jonathan Haidt called The Happiness Hypothesis. I would read each book hoping to discover answers to basic questions like: what is happiness and how can we attain it? And yet, somehow the butterfly never landed. After reading each of these books, I was no closer to answering the question what do I do to increase happiness?

And then this week, in the most unlikely of places, the butterfly landed on my shoulder precisely when I was not looking for it. I devoured a book that would seem to be about the very opposite of happiness. It is number one on the New York Times' bestsellers list for non-fiction, When Breath Becomes Air by Paul Kalanithi. On p. 143 of this book, in one sentence, I experienced something that I took to be an epiphany, a deep insight into the human condition.

But first some background. Paul Kalanithi was a brilliant young neurosurgeon and writer. He amassed all kinds of advanced degrees from illustrious institutions: Stanford, Yale, Cambridge. By his early 30s, he had earned 5 degrees in science and in literature. After graduating from Yale Medical School, he went into an intense, 14 hours a day, or more, neurosurgery residency at Stanford. He was happily married to his wife Lucy, also a doctor whom he met at Yale Medical School, who was also in an internship program at Stanford. He

was about to finish his program and have his pick of neurosurgery opportunities. Great wife. Great work. Great career trajectory. Great life. Everything was going swimmingly--except for persistent back pain and mysterious weight loss.

He sees his colleagues at Stanford. What is going on with me? This is how his book begins:

I flipped through the CT scan images, the diagnosis obvious: the lungs were matted with innumerable tumors, the spine deformed, a full lobe of the liver obliterated. Cancer, widely disseminated. I was a neurosurgical resident entering my final year of training. Over the last six years, I'd examined scores of such scans, on the off chance that some procedure might benefit the patient. But this scan was different: it was my own. (p. 3)

Paul Kalanithi was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. He would pass 22 months after diagnosis.

It was in the context of this hard and sad story that the insights I could never get from the happiness books landed on my shoulder.

Paul and his wife Lucy are talking about whether they want to have a child. Paul is in the throes of treatments that leave him weak and tired. His prospects are very uncertain. They both know that, should they bring a child into the world, it is overwhelmingly likely that Paul will pass when the baby is just a baby. The baby will never get to know his or her father. Lucy raises the following objection to their having a child:

“Don’t you think saying goodbye to your child will make your death *more* painful?”

“Wouldn’t it be great if it did?” I said. *Lucy and I both felt that life wasn’t about avoiding suffering. (emphasis added)...*The defining characteristic of [life] is striving. Describing life otherwise was like painting a tiger without stripes. (p. 143)

Life is not about avoiding suffering. Life is about finding meaning, and we find meaning through our noble strivings. They decided to have a baby, and eight months before Paul passed away, their daughter Cady was born.

Bringing a child into the world, in the last year of his life, a heroic affirmation of life at a time of crisis, evoked for me the famous Haftarah from Jeremiah. The Babylonians are coming. It is 587 BCE. They'll be destroying Jerusalem in one year. At the time of the Haftarah they are literally besieging Jerusalem. Jeremiah himself is in prison, having been incarcerated for his Debbie Downer, dark but true prophecy that the Temple would be destroyed, Judah would be defeated, and the people would be dispersed. In this super dark time, Jeremiah buys land in Jerusalem, the field of his cousin Hanamel. A statement of hope. A statement of worthy striving. One day I'll be out of prison. One day the Jews will be back.

The heroic gesture. Bringing new life into the world, conceiving Cady, in a dark time, parallels the prophet's purchase of real estate in a dark time.

But both gestures leave me wondering how, in *an ordinary time*, not a crisis, can we be faithful to Paul and Lucy's insight that life is not about avoiding suffering? Life is about finding meaning achieved through worthy striving. How do we do that on an ordinary day?

The answer to that question is found in our Torah reading today. The first half of Exodus features huge moments of crisis and liberation. The Israelites are enslaved. They are oppressed. God and Moses and the ten plagues come to set them free. After the Exodus, more huge moments. They are stuck at the Sea of Reeds until the sea splits and they pass through on dry ground. After finally being done with the Egyptians, who drown in the sea, there are more huge moments: the Israelites stand at Sinai and receive the Torah, literally with pyrotechnics, God coming down upon the mountain, the mountain quaking, thunder and lightning.

After all that drama, the second half of the book of Exodus is about a time more ordinary:

no more signs and wonders, no more miraculous splitting of the sea, no more coming down to Sinai. It is an ordinary day, and the Torah tackles the question: how do we find meaning on an ordinary day. And the answer is: work on something big and important and holy together.

The Israelites work together to build the Tabernacle. Their experience raises three questions:

Are we working with other people to achieve meaning? The Torah says over and over again that the whole community was involved, that everyone who excelled in ability, everyone whose spirit moved him, came together.

Are we giving our distinctive gift? The silversmiths did metal work. The wood workers carved. The seamstresses sewed. The jewelers put the rare stones in the right places. The spice and oil experts created aromatic concoctions. Everybody did their thing, gave their gift. What is our gift?

Are we giving our gift, and working with other people, for the purpose of some larger good that we find compelling? All the Israelites knew what they were doing and why. The overarching purpose is: *va'asu li mikdash v'shechanti btocham*, build me a sacred space so that I, God, can dwell among the people. Life is not about avoiding suffering. It is about some larger principle of meaning—whether helping the presence of God abide in our midst, or whatever sacred purpose animates your daily rounds.

Paul and Lucy Kalanithi found their meaning in a great crisis by bringing their daughter Cady into the world. This dying man holds his newborn daughter, and he pens this:

There is perhaps only one thing to say to this infant, who is all future, overlapping briefly with me, whose life...is all but past.

That message is simple.

When you come to one of the many moments in life where you must give an

account of yourself, provide a ledger of what you have been, and done, and meant to the world, do not, I pray, discount that you filled a dying man's days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more but rests, satisfied. In this time, right now, that is an enormous thing.
(p. 199)

What I learned from this profound memoir, that I did not learn from all those books on happiness, is that happiness does not come when you look for happiness. Happiness comes, in ordinary times, even in very hard times, when we look for meaning, when we build our worthy project, when we work hand in hand with others, when we overcome grief and pain and difficulty, dark days and dull days, and yet we persist because we believe in our cause. When we are in the throes and in the thrall of our building project, not looking for it, that is when happiness may finally come. That is when the butterfly may finally land on our shoulder. Shabbat shalom.