



*Parshat Chayeh Sarah*  
**November 11, 2017—22 Cheshvan 5778**  
**Gritty Not Glossy**  
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Have you ever gotten one of those holiday cards that show other people's seemingly perfect lives? A woman named Ruth Whippman tells of the time that she received a holiday card from a family that was just beautiful. She describes it as a brochure, in color, of a large family that had five children, each sparkling and gleaming and oh so happy. The house was neat and perfect. No dishes on the counter, no piles of laundry on the floor. The kids were smiling and skiing and drinking hot chocolate while reading. The parents were happily in love, with one another, with their happy brood, with life itself.

Ruth Whippman confesses that this card did a number on her. She had just had her second child. She now had two, not five, and this second child made her feel like her world was spinning out of control. In her home the dirty dishes *were* on the counter. The piles of dirty laundry *were* on the floor. The kids were crying. She and her husband were just trying to make it through the day. Could any family be that happy? Could any home be that clean? Could any lives be that perfect? What's wrong with me?

She was so agitated she called this family and asked if she could visit with them. She spent several days with the family. There she learned that real life, even for them, is more complex and less happy than the glossy holiday brochure. Indeed the pressure this family felt, in their community, both to *be* happy, and to *look* happy, was itself a cause of unhappiness.

This story caused me to turn to one of my favorite books, Harold Kushner's When All

You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough which contains a simple recipe for a worthy life. He lays out three simple ingredients.

First, belong to people. Who are the people in your life? To whom do you belong? Who belongs to you?

When Ruth Whippman first moved to America from Britain, new country, new culture, not so many friends, she was feeling lonely. In a sign of the times, she downloaded an app on her smart phone so that every hour her phone would buzz with a positive affirmation. "I am beautiful." Or "I am enough." But there was a problem. Whenever her phone would buzz, she hoped that there was another human being, a friend, on the other end, who wanted to have a cup of coffee with her. Instead, her phone would offer this canned affirmation, "I am enough," and it made her realize she is not enough, without people. She shared this vignette in the Times recently in an essay entitled "Happiness is Other People."

She points out that we live in an isolationist culture where we spend more and more time alone and less and less time with other people. We commute alone. We are on our devices alone. At the end of the day we decompress alone.

If an essential requirement for a worthy life is belonging to people, and if we live in an age of isolation, what are we to do? I actually have an answer for that one. The core purpose of Temple Emanuel is to help each of us belong to people. Yeah, you are busy, but if you take a class, you will be with people. If you commit to a regular prayer life, you will be with people. If you do tikkun olam, you will be with people. If you lead shiva minyanim, you will be with people. If you go to Israel with our community, you will be with people. It is rare when a deep and systemic social problem can be solved. But that happens here. Outside, loneliness and atomization. Inside here, you will never be alone. You will belong to people.

Rabbi Kushner's second ingredient is "Accept pain as part of your life."

This second ingredient—the inevitability of some pain—has me thinking about a blessing that is becoming increasingly elusive, sometimes impossible, to attain. That is, a good night's sleep. You go to sleep. You wake up 6, 7, 8 hours later feeling utterly refreshed. What happens when that doesn't happen?

I had been wondering what does the Torah have to say about sleepless nights? After all, the Torah speaks about life in all of its fullness. Sleepless nights are a part of life. What is the address in the Torah for those who cannot sleep?

Last week my father in love, Rabbi Arnold Goodman, found the address. At the end of last week's reading, when God commands Abraham to bind his son Isaac for slaughter, the Torah takes pains to point out: *vayashkem Avraham ba'boker*, Abraham got up early in the morning to go with Isaac to the mountain. Why this detail? Why do we need to know that Abraham was on the road by 5:00 am? My father in love observes that it is to teach us that Abraham could not sleep. Abraham was having a sleepless night.

He worried about what we worry about. He worried about his children. How is Ishmael doing? I banished him. How is Isaac doing? What I am about to do is very traumatic, to say the least. He worried about his wife. Sarah loves Isaac. She will never forgive me for this. He worried, am I doing the right thing?

Like Abraham, we worry about our children, about our spouses, about our work, about whether we are doing the right thing. Like Abraham, all too often that worry costs us sleep.

Here is the question: do our sleepless nights incapacitate us, cause us to do nothing? Or do our sleepless nights catalyze productive action? In Abraham's case, for every worry, he does something about it. He worries about Isaac. He sends his servant to find a bride for Isaac. He

mourns his wife. He finds her a holy burial plot. He struggles with his own loneliness after Sarah dies. He remarries to a woman named Keturah and keeps on living until his last day.

Can you accept pain as part of your life and yet keep working at it, never giving up on it? Your marriage has pain. Keep working on it. Your kids are not thriving. Love them through it. You are stalled out at work. Retool and reinvent so you can get unstalled. By never giving up, we can transform sleepless nights into days of impact.

Which leads to Rabbi Kushner's third ingredient for a worthy life: "Know you have made a difference." Who or what is better off because I am here? If your answer to that question now is satisfying to you—you can identify, by name, people who are better off because you are here, causes you believe in that are better off because you are here—great. But what if you go there, you ask the ultimate existential question—does my existence matter—and you don't like the answer?

That is the power of the Abraham story. On two occasions the Torah will tell us how old Abraham was when a certain event happened. He was 75 when he answered God's call *lech lecha* and made it to Israel. He was 99 when he circumcised himself. Why tell us these ages?

To teach us that we are never too old to change. Never too set in our ways to find a new purpose. Abraham's defining moment was going on the *lech lecha* journey, but he did not do that the first 74 years of his life. His crowning moment was to circumcise himself, but he did not do that the first 98 years of his life. If we have not yet made the difference that we want to make, it is never too late.

Last year, the name J.D. Vance became a household name. In an autobiography entitled Hillbilly Elegy, he tells his story about growing up as, in his word, a hillbilly. He is unsparing as he shares the pain and dysfunction of his home. He does not know his father. His mother had a

number of children with a number of different men. She was abusive when she wasn't neglectful. He was raised by his grandparents. His grandfather was an alcoholic. His grandmother was constantly angry at her husband and once threatened to light him on fire if he was drunk again. He was drunk, and she did light him on fire. Most of Vance's friends cannot get out of that environment. They are stuck in a world of poverty and drug and alcohol abuse. The book relates how he managed to get out. He enlisted in the Marine Corps after high school. He served in Iraq. He then graduated from Ohio State University and managed to get into and attend Yale Law School where he was the only hillbilly. The book ends with him now a principal at a leading Silicon Valley investment firm, happily married. He has made it. From no education to a great education. From no money to lots of money. From no job prospects to a thriving finance position. From parents who weren't married and grandparents who fought all the time to a peaceful and loving marriage. From an impoverished bleak town in Ohio to the Bay Area. From no peace and serenity to peace and serenity. The end. Happy.

Except that there is a coda to the end. Having lived both in Appalachia and now the Bay Area, J.D. Vance was super alive to the difference in what sociologists call the power of ZIP codes. There are certain ZIP codes, like the Bay area, like growing up near Stanford, like growing up in Newton, where kids are far more likely to grow up and have a successful adult life. There are other ZIP codes, like Appalachia, where his ancestors grew up in Kentucky and where he grew up in Ohio, where kids are far more likely to succumb to social vices like drugs, alcohol, teen pregnancy, broken family life, and poverty.

He had made it. But he felt like he had not made it. He had still not made the difference that he wanted to make. So he gave up his fancy home and big job at the Silicon Valley

investment firm and moved back to Ohio to found an organization that combats the opioid epidemic.

His *lech lecha* journey back home, to do hard but important work helping combat the drug scourge of our time, does not make a nice glossy holiday card. But it does make for a life of purpose.

What about us? Where is our *lech lecha* journey taking us?

Do we belong to people? How do we connect more deeply with people?

Can we accept pain as part of our life? Can we transform sleepless nights into days of impact?

Are we making a difference and, if not, what are we going to do, and when are we going to do it?

Lives of deep meaning are not lived out in glossy holiday cards. They are lived out in gritty days of people, pain, and purpose. Shabbat shalom.