THE HAPPINESS BOX

by Rabbi Label Lam

Every once in a while when reading a bed time story to the younger children I find myself in the end wiping a tear from the corner of my eye and wondering if any of the children are really capable of appreciating the depth of the seemingly simple story, if it is not meant more for the parents and if we get it either.

One such book reappeared on the bookshelf recently. It must have been with all the stuff for sukkos 'cause it certainly belongs there. It's called, "The Happiness Box". The plot is something like this. There’s this kid that’s never happy with what he has. He finds things to complain about all day. Whatever he has is not enough or not just right and all he can find is fault.

One day after his family moves into a beautiful new house a giant package arrives. It’s a washing machine or some other large appliance and the kid is suffering from existential nausea because it’s not for him. His clever father convinces him that the box is the real item of desire and it’s just for him. It’s called "a happiness box" and while inside one must think only happy thoughts.

This boy accepts the premise of the box and at first begrudgingly but later with greater ease is able to generate happiness producing thoughts such as: "Sometimes my mother makes dinners I like." And other such affirming statements that put him into a state of mind that makes him feel rich and full. After a while he's complaining a lot less. Then he becomes anxious about going to summer camp because all his possessions need to fit neatly into a duffel bag and he would have to leave "the box" at home. What would become of his state of happiness? He then realizes the great truth that the happiness is not in his box but in his head. The important life lesson is well learned. The children are fast asleep but I am more awake.

The simple child's story reminds me a little of a bad joke about a fellow who claims his dog is so talented he can do anything he is commanded to do. The challenge is taken up by a friend who throws a stick a distance and commands the dog, "Fetch!"

The dog looks up at him and begins his diatribe. "All day long people tell me what to do. Roll over! Jump! Go through the fiery hoop! Good dog. Bad dog. Sit! Heal. Eat this! Don’t eat that! I can’t take it anymore. It’s no fun being a dog. I hate it. I wish I were never born! The fellow interrupts the dog and tells him with a sense of outrage, "All I asked you to do was fetch." The dog answers back with surprise, "Ohhhhhh! I thought you said "Kvetch". 
Sukkos is referred to in our liturgy as "the time of our happiness". How do we celebrate? We leave our lovely homes and sit exposed to the elements in little boxes. We are commanded by the Torah; "and you should rejoice with your holiday and be only happy!"

Maybe the story is not so simplistic and the joke not so (as we say in yiddish) "farfetched". It's very easy to be focused on what's missing in life; to give special recognition to the cruel and heartless; to the unfinished business of history and history of business. Even more so these days we need a way to regain a sense of optimism. How about 7 days in "a happiness box" to see what's right in G-d's world. Hearing clearly the commandment as it is pronounced is a critical point. No where does it say, "kvetch"!

We all know how we can feel sometimes and how it creates a contagion of negativity. Therefore we hung two signs in our sukkah. One upon entering reads, "You are entering a no kvetching zone". The other posted prominently reads, "Don't even think of kvetching in the sukkah!" The Vilna Gaon called this the hardest mitzvah in the Torah to fulfill. So, don't expect it to happen with a simple story, a bad joke, by reciting an imperative verse, or by hanging a humorous sign but it sure is a good beginning.

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