

IPODS, EYEBALLS, & HAPPINESS

by Jon Erlbaum

INTRODUCING ... A CLASH OF 2 COMPETING QUOTES (LET'S GET READY TO RUMBLE!). WHICH CLASSIC QUOTE WILL EMERGE VICTORIOUS?

- In the first corner, we have this week's **RRR-1** (Relevant Religious Reference #1): **"One who makes a vow to ABSTAIN from wine is a considered a 'sinner'" (because he has DENIED one of the permitted pleasures that his Creator made available) - Babylonian Talmud, Nazir 19A. VS.**
- And in the other corner, we have this Week's **RRR-2** (Relevant Religious Reference #2): **"Eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure, sleep on the ground, live a LIFE OF DEPRIVATION... If you do this, you will be happy..." - Ethics of the Fathers (Avos), 6:4**

THE I-POD & THE EYE-BALL

The secret to happiness? A Panasonic 58" Flat-Panel Plasma HDTV, hands down! Come to think of it, I'm pretty partial to the iPod Touch. And dare I neglect to mention the iPhone 5G (coming soon, to an online merchant near me), the newly anointed "APPLE" of my eye? Speaking of my eye, by the way, I think we've stumbled upon the happiness dilemma: neither the I-POD nor the I-PHONE is any match for the EYE-BALL, which is constantly scoping the scene to find the next best thing. So what does Judaism send us as a recipe for true happiness? A mixed message!

On one hand, we are held accountable for all of life's "permitted pleasures" that we abstain from and don't take advantage of. And on the other hand, we're told we can somehow be happy through living "a life of deprivation" (see the 2 competing **RRR** quotes above). Can we really attain pleasure through salt and sleeping bags, as the 2nd quote suggests? And how does that strategy mesh with the 1st quote's mandate of making sure to sample the smorgasbord of life's pleasures?

RESOLVING THE CLASH: THE OUTWARD BOUND EXPERIENCE

The trick is to train ourselves to derive maximal pleasure from minimal outside stimulation. Think Outward Bound, a program in which participants are placed in challenging, unfamiliar settings. By providing its participants with a bare MINIMUM of EXTERNAL RESOURCES, the program forces them to MAXIMIZE their own INTERNAL RESOURCEFULNESS. Similarly, Judaism prescribes an "Inward

Bound" regiment, challenging us to master the internal appreciation of life's simple pleasures. **Once we learn how to truly savor the pleasure available in the "eat bread with salt" experience, then we are ready to be contented connoisseurs of the fancier delights among "permitted pleasures"**. Once we learn to appreciate life's bare necessities, we are well on our way towards being happy with our luxuries as well.

Indeed, our Creator wants us to connect with Him through experiencing intense levels of the spectacular pleasures He created. But Jewish wisdom effectively teaches us that the more we learn to get from less, the more pleasure we become truly able to experience. Moreover, another valuable lesson can be gleaned from the Outward/Inward Bound models: **the more low-maintenance we become with our consuming need for outside pleasures, the more we can handle the many situations in which they may not be available.**

WHO IS RICH? THE ONE WHO HAS EVERYTHING!

Our Sages summarize these secrets in the following powerful proverb: "Who is (truly) rich? The one who is happy with his lot!"[1] So simple and yet so elusive! **If the end goal of wealth is happiness - and if happiness is an outgrowth of appreciation - then no external riches can ever succeed in filling the happiness void (even iPod's & HDTV's).** Our Forefather Jacob proclaims a similar sentiment in this week's Portion, in his inspiring and instructive words, "I have everything" [2]. In essence, Jacob was answering the implied question of "who is rich" with the profound response, "the one who has everything". That is to say, a person who feels he has EVERYTHING HE NEEDS thereby possesses the happy sense of completion that monetary wealth is purported to offer. May we all - the descendants of Jacob - merit to internalize our Patriarch's passionate perspective, leading us down the road towards becoming contented connoisseurs of true, lasting pleasure!

Have a Wonderful Shabbos! Love, Jon & The Chevra

1. *Ethics of the Fathers* - Avos - 4:1

2. Genesis, 33:11