

*Shanah Tovah* - I'll start, as always, with wishes for a Good and Sweet New Year of 5770 from my family to you and yours!

Let's be honest - it has been a rough year. Since we gathered here last Rosh HaShannah, we've been through economic turmoil and recession, the "Madoff" shanda, wars in Gaza, Iraq, Afghanistan, an escalation of terrifying rhetoric in Iran, illegal-organ-smuggling rabbis, Agriprocessors' kosher scandal, the attacks in Mumbai, India, and I'm just scratching the surface. And on the local and personal level, many of us gather here on Rosh HaShannah in the midst of pain - be it struggling with illness, coping with recent loss, confronting economic and job insecurity, or any of the other things that cause us pain.

It would be easy to dwell tonight on depressing topics. While I won't - because as easy as it would be, it is equally inappropriate - I feel as though to begin this sermon without acknowledging the real sense of struggle so many of us are experiencing would be dishonest. And, in fact, my intention tonight is to try and recast our struggles, to hold up the hope that out of adversity, perhaps strength and new growth can appear.

Society doesn't make it easy. We live in a world where we are taught to see shortcomings and imperfections, to see the failings of others as confirmation that we are not so bad off - especially in comparison to the folks we watch on the local news each night. For more than a week this summer, every single media outlet was consumed with demonstrating how bizarre and unhappy Michael Jackson's life was - in copious minute and tawdry details. And somebody must have been watching, reading and listening.

Just think of how many channels on our ever-growing line-up of stations are dedicated solely to pointing out our flaws! Entire shows are devoted to attaining better abs, clearer skin, thicker hair or whiter teeth. On the surface, there's nothing wrong with any of these aspirations. In fact, I've deliberately chosen from the dozens of examples four that I could certainly use! However, that's just where the discontent lays - on the surface. We are a culture that assigns so much weight to the value of first impressions - to the perception which often becomes the reality. And yet, human beings are so much more nuanced than any split-second first impression can portray.

Among the many, many TV shows that I enthusiastically follow (probably too many!), one that I have never seen is the FX show, *Nip/Tuck*. However, I was struck by an interview<sup>1</sup> with the shows creator, broadcast last spring. In it, Ryan Murphy speaks of the spark for a running theme in the show, which -for those of you who, like me, don't have the stomach to watch real or simulated operations on TV - portrays the lives of two plastic surgeons at work and at play, and you can let your imagination take it from there.

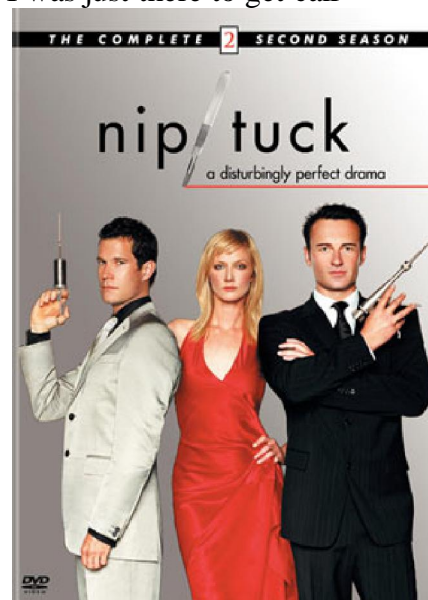
Murphy spoke in the interview of research he had done while working as a journalist, writing a story on new trends in plastic surgery in Beverly Hills. He tells the interviewer about a particular line that shows up in every episode of *Nip/Tuck*. He says:

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1. Fresh Air, NPR, May 15th, 2009

“I went in to this plastic surgeon’s office... and I pretended that I was just there to get calf implants, and he used this line on me: ‘Tell me what you don’t like about yourself,’ which started me into a spasm of ‘Well...’... but, by the end of the hour-long consult, he had me convinced about a lot of things, and ... it sort of threw me because he actually convinced me that I would have a happier, better life if I would just work on what he deemed my physical imperfections... The audience can really relate to [this line] because everybody has stood in front of a mirror and looked at their face, and thought, ‘Well, what if do this, or what if I fix that...’”

Every episode of *Nip/Tuck* begins with that question “Tell me what you don’t like about yourself?” In fact, fan gear for the show include t-shirts and baseball caps emblazoned with that line. Can you imagine going through your day with the question “Tell me what you don’t like about yourself” across your chest?



In a very different television special this past year, Michael J. Fox examined the value of optimism from as many different angles as he could find. Originating in his own experience dealing very publicly with the diagnosis and manifestations of Parkinson’s Disease over the past ten years, Fox has become somewhat of a symbol for an optimistic outlook on the world. There is even a billboard on southbound 476 that some of you may have noticed that just bears Fox’s face and the word “Optimist.”

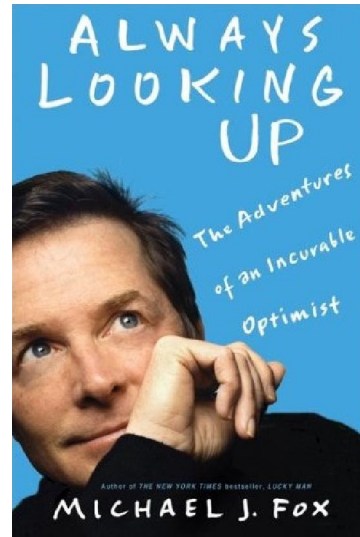
He rightly points out that over the last several decades, countless scientific studies have sought to understand depression - what are its causes, how might it be confronted and treated. At the same time, barely a handful of studies have asked the question - what goes in to an optimistic attitude, how might one attain this outlook? Fox takes his question on the road, visiting with members of a small dairy cooperative seeking to stay alive in an era of corporate mass production; spending time with legendary cyclist and cancer survivor Lance Armstrong; flying to the tiny mountain kingdom of Bhutan, whose “Gross National Happiness Quotient” is fundamental to the outlook of the residents and national policy; and other explorations in the pursuit of further definition of optimism.

Fox also released his most recent book “Always Looking Up” this past year - and explores in a personal sense the question of remaining optimistic despite his own struggles with Parkinson’s Disease.

Writing in “Always Looking Up,” Michael J. Fox recounts many times when his life with Parkinson’s Disease has made normal tasks more complicated than they should be. He writes about being with his wife during the last presidential campaign, on September 11th 2008, when both Barack Obama and John McCain separately addressed a gathering at Columbia University on the topic of public service. Fox recounts being particularly affected by the tremors and loss of body control, that he was in the very worst of the worst, but could not figure out a way to get out of the v.i.p. section he was sitting in without risking causing a scene. Hemmed into the row

by Jon Bon Jovi, Toby Maguire, Leonardo DiCaprio and the rapper Usher, he simply couldn't get up - much less physically make his way to the end of the row while one or the other of the candidates was addressing the crowd. Eventually, as they went to commercial break, his wife, Tracy, is able to physically help him move out of the room to another area where he can attempt to regain some control over his body. He writes:

"In less than a minute, I was in the quiet corner of an anteroom, guzzling a cold bottle of water. I had urged Tracy to go back to her seat; she promised to come back and check on me at the intermission before Obama took the stage. I spent the next ten minutes mulling over how lucky I am."<sup>2</sup>



**How lucky I am.** And it is true - he is tremendously lucky. But in order to see it, he has to consciously look past the things that are a struggle, the things that could block his vision of just how fortunate he is. Past the tremors, the uncontrollable body, the loss of independence in movement - he is fortunate to be alive, with a loving family, with the influence that comes with his celebrity, with a wife who stands by him in joy and in pain - in that very moment, he was fortunate to be in the room, up close, with one or the other of the candidates who would become the next president of the United States. Michael J. Fox is very lucky - and he clearly faces significant struggles on a daily basis, as well as a prognosis for further losses in a disease without a cure. But, he is also optimistic. He writes in the book about putting together the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research, that has in a few short years funded \$149 million in Parkinson's research, that when he created the foundation, he went into a Manhattan board room with the newly hired research director and CEO with a proposal to their initial funders: "We're going into business in order to put ourselves out of business." It was a strange approach to most of the funders. He told them that under no circumstances did he want to see a great gala event celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the organization. Rather, as one of his earliest ads proclaimed, the most important and celebrated day of their work from their founding day would be the day they close up shop. Now that is optimism.

This may seem a strange topic to some - to dwell on *Erev Rosh HaShannah* on the topic of optimism. Is it even a Jewish value??? There really isn't a traditionally Jewish word for optimism. Our Israelis in the room will probably translate it with the very clumsy modern Hebrew word "*Optimi'ut*." And many will claim, with solid backing, that Judaism is a very pessimistic faith. Certainly there are factors to make that claim. The weight of Jewish history and suffering has not brought us to a glorious view of the world and the way the Jews have been treated over the millennia. The general Jewish de-emphasis on a reward in the afterlife, a heavenly compensation for our life, has left many questioning the ultimate purpose of life. Even just from a general temperament, Jews have a reputation for being a bit cynical in their view of the world - think of the great Jewish comedians over the decades, not an optimist among them. But, is it really the case that optimism is a foreign idea to Judaism? I would like to make the

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2. Michael J. Fox, *Always Looking Up*, pp. 224-5

case that this is not so.

This past Spring, I had the chance to spend some time studying with a great scholar, Rabbi Art Green. He is an expert in making the texts of Kabbalah, Hassidic masters and other Jewish spiritual traditions relevant in the modern world. He's also a former Philly-guy having served many years at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote. He taught us a particular text that I'd like to share in this discussion. He says it is the text that he studies every year during the days leading up to *Rosh HaShannah*, in preparing his own soul, making sure that he is in the right frame of mind to enter the New Year.

The text comes from Reb Nachman of Bratzlav, a great Hassidic master, who came to prominence at the beginning of the 19th century, but whose influence is felt much more deeply now, nearly two hundred years after his death. Reb Nachman was the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism, which in his day was sort of the Jewish equivalent of being born a Kennedy (to mix many metaphors!) - that is, great things were going to be expected of you. Today, Reb Nachman's memory is associated with a number of movements, primarily those that put tremendous focus on bringing JOY into Judaism. Those of you who have travelled in Israel in recent years have seen bands of young people riding around the country in vans with speakers blaring Hassidic music, dancing and chanting, including the ubiquitous non-sense chant found written on walls all over Israel "*Na Nach Nachama Nachman Me'uman.*" He told his disciples: "This is a very important thing - you must strive to be joyous as much of the time as you can. To push away darkness and depression."

On the surface, this counsel seems simple and trite - kind of the Jewish version of Bobby McFerrin singing "Don't Worry Be Happy." But with a little background on Reb Nachman, it is clear that the words are anything but simple. Reb Nachman lived a short 39 years, but packed a good deal of suffering into a short life. He is considered by most scholars to have dealt with significant clinical depression from an early age. He had a variety of health problems, and ultimately died of Tuberculosis after losing his wife and several children to the disease. He lived to a large degree in the shadow of a famous family, as I mentioned.



It is clear from his biography that he was an exceptional and brilliant student turned master, but he faced a number of political detractors, who engaged in campaigns against him and his teachings, even denouncing him to the secular authorities on trumped up charges. Through all of this, and much more, Reb Nachman's singular focus was on helping his students see the good side of everything in the world. Not to ignore the suffering and evil, but to choose - consciously, deliberately, through practiced measures - to see the good.

In the text that Rabbi Green shared with us, Reb Nachman says: דע כי צריך לדון את כל אדם לכף זכות ואפילו מי שהוא רשע גמור "Know that you must judge every person with a measure of generosity" "Even one who appears to be a completely wicked individual" צריך לחפש ולמצוא בו איזה מעט טוב "You must examine this person, and keep looking until you are able to find some *Me'at Tov* -

some good point.”<sup>3</sup>

Reb Nachman begins with the instruction that you need to look at a person, think of the most irredeemable person you can imagine (at the moment I studied this text, I certainly imagined Bernie Madoff), and you need to be able to look at that person until you can find within them some “*Me'at Tov* - some bit of goodness,” even if you have to look very hard to get there. He assures us that it is there - the individual might not even be aware of it themselves. But, says Reb Nachman, if we look for it, and then relate to that individual according to that good point, with a measure of generosity, they will BECOME that good point, indeed the good point will grow, lifting them up as a result. Our view of the other will bring them to the point of no longer being completely wicked, totally evil. Indeed, our viewing them in this way MIGHT even cause them to turn away from the wickedness that is so much a part of who they are. The principle is evident to anyone who has ever stood in front of a classroom of small children: Approach them as rotten, mis-behaving rascals, and that is likely what you will find. Approach them as open hearts and minds, hungry for learning and affection, and that just might be how they act.

Bottom line: Our perception of the other has a lot to do with the reality that we will find. Our perception, our perspective often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But that, says Reb Nachman, is only the beginning, the easy stuff. Looking at others and finding the “*Me'at Tov* - the good point,” even when we look at rotten folks, is simple! It pales in comparison to looking at ourselves and trying to find that same “*Me'at Tov*.”

We can look and examine our souls, he says, until we find some good point, some kind of *mitzvah* that speaks to our credit, but then, he continues - making a beautiful and subtle analogy:

“...you find it and discover that it too is full of holes. You know yourself too well to be fooled: 'Even the good things I did,' you say, 'Were all for the wrong reasons...' Then keep digging, because somewhere inside that now tarnished-looking *mitzvah*, somewhere within it there was indeed a little bit of good.

That's all you need to find: Just the smallest bit: a dot of goodness. That should be enough to give you back your life, to bring you back to joy. By seeking out that little bit even in yourself and judging yourself that way, you show yourself that that is who you are. You can change your whole life this way and bring yourself to *Teshuvah*. It's that first little dot of goodness that's the hardest to find (or the hardest to admit you find!). The next ones will come a little easier, each one following another. And you know what? These little dots of goodness in yourself - after a while you will find that you can sing them! Join them to one another and they become your *niggun*, your wordless melody. You fashion that *niggun* by rescuing your own good spirit from all that darkness and depression. The *niggun* brings you back to life, and then you can start to pray...”

That “*Me'at Tov*,” the good points turn eventually into notes on a staff, creating the melody of our lives, the *niggun* that speaks to our self-worth. It starts with seeing the good in others; it

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3. *Likkutei MoHaRaN* Shemini Atzeret Taksa”ch, 1:282

goes deeper by seeing that good in ourselves, and that can be even harder; but it winds up as a brand new melody! And when we join our melody to that of others, we create harmony, counterpoint, a symphony of the music of life. Against the backdrop of this text, those Happy Dancing *Hasids* make deep spiritual sense. But this tradition is not theirs alone - it was meant for all of us, it was meant for the world.

Last month, my family and I lost one of our closest friends, really a member of our family - my Aunt Dena. Though not related by blood or marriage, she was the epitome of one of my favorite categories from sociology - fictive family. The details are not (particularly important), but Dena fought valiantly against multiple cancers over the past three years, and ultimately lost her battle. When Dena was first diagnosed, I visited her in the hospital, and she told me that among her regrets in life was the fact that she had never visited Israel, being a strong lover of Israel and dedicated Zionist, but never having made the trip. Life had been busy with small children to raise; money had been tight; work had been consuming; in short, it just never worked out. She told me that she was going to fight and get better, and then get on a plane and go to Israel. She was totally convinced, and I can remember the conversation as though it was yesterday. I fantasized at the time about having her come with me on a family mission, or just travelling together and what her face would look like as she saw the golden stones of Jerusalem for the first time.

The last three years were consumed with treatments, glimmers of hope and even sustained periods of near-health. They were also filled with some causes for real rejoicing - I celebrated standing under the huppah with Dena's son Dan and his bride, Amanda. Dena was blessed with more grandchildren, and the ability to watch them grow. But ultimately, she never made it on that plane to Israel. When I visited her in the hospital about three weeks before she died, Dena had gotten a particularly positive report from the doctor, and was told that she would likely be going home the following day. We sat and talked for a while, then she asked me "Do you think they would let someone like me go on a trip to Israel?" Now, she had been in the hospital for weeks, was in the midst of treatments, was fairly de-conditioned from a long time in bed, but she was every bit serious in asking about getting on a trip to Israel. And I told her that, while I didn't know, I would certainly try to do the research and check into arrangements that could be made for sick people travelling to Israel. With the cold benefit of hindsight, it was clear that this was purely a dream. Physically, it is unlikely that she would have been able to make the flight, let alone the stress of travelling in Israel. But that moment of dreaming together was emblematic of one of Dena's greatest traits; one that was spoken about by each of her children and myself in our eulogies - her eternal optimism. She could look at the world and see past all the darkness to find just the smallest glimmer of light.

Another story symbolic of that optimism. Another family friend told me at the funeral that she had been on the phone with Dena some weeks before, and they were talking about this and that, when there was a bit of a lull in the conversation. We all know what it is to talk with someone who is very sick, and gauge just how much they want to talk about their struggles or if they want to talk about anything but their struggles. So there was a moment or two of quiet in the conversation, and then Dena broke the silence, saying "You know, I am so blessed." And it was not wishful, and it was not denial of the pain and fear. It was simply the honest assessment that, from her vantage point, she felt blessed beyond measure. Not "I am so blessed, despite all the

things I struggle with.” Simply put “I am so blessed.”

To say these words and to mean them, in all times, this is the height of optimism. Not the polyanish optimism that says “it will all work out for the best.” Often it does not. Not the delusional optimism that says “always look on the bright side of life.” Life can be very dark some times. But the real optimism that says “I am so blessed.”

Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines Optimism as “an inclination to put the most favorable construction upon actions and events or to anticipate the best possible outcome.” By that definition, it is hard to argue against the wisdom of Optimism, from a human standpoint, from a psychological standpoint, from a Jewish standpoint. In fact, the basis for Jewish optimism dates back, quite literally, to the beginning.

*Bereshit* - in the beginning, the portion we will read on the Second Day of *Rosh HaShannah*, recounts God’s reaction to the creation of the world, to the creation of human beings. On the third, fourth and fifth days of the creation story in Genesis 1, the phrase וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי טוֹב - “And God saw that it was good” appears, even multiple times on some days. And on the sixth day, having created humanity, Torah teaches us: וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה-טוֹב מְאֹד “And God saw all that God had created, and behold, it was exceedingly good.” It is hard to argue against the essential goodness of creation from a Torah point of view.

In important ways, this optimistic outlook, this “inclination... to anticipate the best possible outcome,” has been with us throughout the 5770 years that we mark with this day of *Rosh HaShannah*. In times of abundant blessing, and in times of unimaginable suffering, on a national, communal and personal level we have affirmed an optimistic view of the world.

How many of us remember hearing for the first time, perhaps in reading the words of her diary, the optimism of Anne Frank? I can remember first coming into contact with this sentiment, knowing full well how the book ends; knowing the minimal sliver of the suffering that is conveyed in her words; knowing how massive and evil a design was the *Shoah*; yet to read the following diary entry from Anne Frank, written on July 15th, 1944<sup>4</sup>, just weeks before she will be found and arrested, stirs the soul. She confided:

“It’s a wonder I haven’t abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart. It’s utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more.”

I think the attraction of Anne Frank’s words to young people as well as adults, lies in the fact that she is right about the world and humanity. Yes, our culture may tell us to ask ourselves and others “What don’t you like about yourself?” And yes, we live in a world of hurt and pain, much

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4. <http://www.annefrank.com/who-is-anne-frank/diary-excerpts/>

of it caused by human cruelty, and much of it with no clear cause or purpose. History has taught us the ways that the greatest minds have been harnessed to bring about untold suffering.

BUT, if we can approach the world looking for the *Me'at Tov* of Reb Nachman, the good points that are constitutional to all people; if we can dig down deep and find them in ourselves, we can eventually arrange the dots on a staff and sing the music of a world that is *Tov Me'od*, we can be the optimists that see and expect the good in the world and in people - and then that just might be what we get. Wishing for all a Good, Sweet, Healthy, Optimistic New Year of 5770. *Shanah Tovah!*