

IS IT BETTER TO LOOK GOOD OR FEEL GOOD?

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INTRODUCTION

During the summer as I was thinking about sermon topics and reflecting on what are the issues that we are all facing, I found my answer in a bank. As I stood in a rather lengthy line and the High Holy Day clock was ticking, I became more frustrated and kept thinking that I should be at home focusing on the big issues that people are dealing with and what our tradition can offer at this important time of year. I finally looked up at the T.V., designed to help people forget that they are waiting in line and saw Jim Cramer, the financial advisor. The closed caption wasn't working so all I could see was Jim Cramer moving around in his usually frenetic style. But then I noticed a banner on the bottom of the screen with the question "Is it better to look good or feel good?" Could Jim Cramer, a Jew, be sending me a message for a Rosh Hashanah sermon?

"Is it better to look good or feel good?", it is an intriguing question, but what did he mean by it? With the volume turned off and the closed caption not working, I had no idea what he was saying so I began to imagine what he might mean with the question. It had to be about business, so what could the question refer to?

Perhaps it was about investments in companies and whether the actual financial health of the company was more important than its perceived health. Was it more important for a company to look like it was doing well or for its financials to reflect a sound company for a good investment. Was this a question about reality and perceived reality? Are there companies that "look good" and seem to defy their financial status because they look good to the public? Is perceived reality better than reality? We certainly live in a world in which this is true.

OBSESSION WITH LOOKING GOOD

As soon as I got out of the bank I went home and went on Jim Cramer's website. I had to know what he had really been talking about. I discovered that while he was making a recommendation for purchasing stocks, his question was not about companies, but rather people. He was recommending companies that deal with improving our looks. In his words, as a society "we prefer looking good over feeling good." He was recommending a pharmaceutical company that markets among its many "look good products" things like acne medicines, dermal fillers and a facial wrinkle treatment that was competing with Botox. His investment recommendation, he argued, is based on the fact that we live in a culture in which people will pay to look good rather than feel good.

But were there deeper implications to the question? What did it mean that we were a society that preferred to look good rather than feel good?

ED TENENBAUM

The question seemed profound and it began to ruminate with lots of possibilities and then about three weeks ago I attended the funeral of a dear colleague Rabbi Ed Tenenbaum. At age 92 Rabbi Tenenbaum was a remarkable man. Tireless in his efforts, he was a fixture in the Los Angeles Jewish community. For twenty years he served as the regional director of United Synagogue. And then in 1965, in his late 40's, he became the

rabbi of Temple Beth Zion, a very small congregation, on Pico Blvd. After 45 years as the rabbi of this congregation for mostly elderly congregants it was on a Shabbat morning fulfilling his role as rabbi that he feel ill and passed away. At age 92, in addition to his rabbinic duties, Rabbi Tenenbaum was still the head of the bet din, the rabbinic court, for conversions, and part of the bet din for divorces, taking part in a couple of dozen of these activities each week. At age 92 Rabbi Tenenbaum was hard of hearing and used a walker.

Did Rabbi Tenenbaum look good physically? Not always. Did he feel good? Most days he felt the infirmities of his body. But Rabbi Tenenbaum wasn't old. He radiated a spirit of meaning and purposefulness.

After the funeral, a colleague and friend of mine commented that Rabbi Tenenbaum didn't have any wrinkles on his face. And while genetics, sun exposure and even chubby cheeks can impact how many wrinkles you have, Rabbi Tenenbaum's face seemed to radiate the joy of life that he felt. As I thought about Rabbi Tenenbaum, I thought about Moses and how his face radiated with light every time he came in contact with God. The light from his face was so bright that it was hard for the Israelites to look at him. I believe this radiance is what is meant by feeling good. It is the internal well being that is present on our faces. Rabbi Tenenbaum represented the teaching of our rabbis that "a person's outside should reflect his inside." Applied to our context, a person's outside countenance should reflect his inner well being.

FACE AS REFLECTION OF WELL-BEING

We are all aware, that we can almost always know how someone is doing on the inside based on their external appearance. More specifically by their face.

We all know what it feels like when somebody says, "you don't look so good today" or the friend who wants to be brutally honest and says, "you look terrible." Sometimes we respond, "yea I just got a couple of hours sleep last night" and other times we admit that there are a lot of things weighing on us. But then there are the other times when we were feeling great until the person says something and we don't know what to respond. We think to ourselves, "I got plenty of sleep last night...I'm really not worried about anything...but you tell me I don't look so good...I don't feel so good."

If the eyes are the windows to our soul then our face is a reflection of our well being. We all know the people whose faces radiate with light and those whose are puckered up from their sour outlook of life.

FEELING GOOD

So how do I understand the question, is it better to look good or feel good? It is not about the choice of whether to diet or go for liposuction. For me it is not about joining a gym or getting a facelift. For me, feeling good is the inner peace we feel about life and looking good is the way in which our looks, in particular our face, reflect this inner peace.

I have people constantly coming into my office who don't have this inner peace. Whether it is about marriage, work, children, friendships or a larger lack of direction in their lives, people come into my office trying to figure out what it is that brought them in to see a rabbi.

People don't realize that with every issue our souls are weighed down. Sometimes we become so used to the weight we don't even know we are sinking. But the face doesn't lie; we don't call them worry lines for nothing. When I did a web search of how to avoid worry lines, I came up with the suggestion "don't worry." As a window to our soul, our face says a lot about our spiritual condition. When we don't look good, it is often a reflection that we are not feeling good.

PANIM

The English word "face" reflects the outward appearance of something, while the Hebrew has quite a different meaning. The Hebrew word for face is "*panim*." It comes from the same grammatical root as "*pnim*" meaning interior. The Hebrew is trying to teach us something about the nature of our face. It teaches us that our face reflects the true essence of what we are feeling inside.

There are many Hassidic stories in which the faces of holy men are described as radiating holiness. This Divine spark is accessible to all. We see it...actually see it, in the faces of people who personify goodness and wholeness. People who live their lives with honesty and integrity. It doesn't take holiness to radiate this light, it simply takes a person whose inner peace radiates outward. The book of Ecclesiastes (8:1) states: "The wisdom of the person shines in the face."

But for many people, their face becomes a mask to hide their true feelings. We give a smile when we are feeling pain. We feign certainty when we are uncertain. We try to look confident when we are afraid. When our exterior does not match our interior, we are not at one with ourselves.

There is a tradition that the Kabbalist known as the Ari, of the 15th century, could read people's faces. And because of this, many people, when they walked past him, would cover their faces because they felt that he might see past their mask and were ashamed.

LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

There is a wonderful tradition associated with the Persian new year of Norooz. While gathered around the table for an elaborately prepared meal called Haft Sheen, included among a number of things passed around the table like flower blossoms and sweets is a small mirror. One tradition says that the mirror is supposed to represent the image and reflection of life.

I would like to suggest a universal Jewish ritual to begin Rosh Hashanah in which we look in a mirror and ask ourselves, "is this face hiding what I'm feeling inside?" It is not about noticing the small lines that tell us we are experiencing life, but rather does my face radiate and reflect a wholeness and oneness I feel inside? Or do I need to address my brokenness and find new meaning?

The *shevarim* and *teruah* blasts represent the potential brokenness of our lives. The three blasts of the *shevarim* reflect lives that are not quite whole, while the nine staccato blasts of the *teruah* bring to mind the true brokenness of life. We must strive to become a *tekiah*- the single unbroken long note. In this model, that is why each *shevarim* and *teruah* is preceded and followed by a *tekiah*; to tell us that our brokenness can be made whole again.

Imagine if Rosh Hashanah began by taking a long hard look at ourselves in the mirror and challenging what we saw.

TESHUVAH TO OURSELVES

Then and only then we could begin the true process of teshuvah. By now, hopefully most of you know that this word means return. Although, often translated as repentance, its true meaning is return. We talk about returning to God, but what about returning to ourselves? What about returning to the people we wanted to be?

We begin our young adult life with so many dreams and visions of what we want to do. We begin our marriages and relationships with idealism. We begin our professional life with aspirations. And then....life happens. Successes and failures begin to define who we are. The failures begin to diminish our expectations. There is nothing wrong when idealism wanes to realism, but when it is eclipsed into cynicism then we have a problem. With too many failures people become broken vessels. Anything that is placed inside, seems to seep through. And those cracks become apparent on our face. I speak daily with those people whose lives are broken and they don't know how to fix them.

Even successes can take us off our path. Ego and the petty preoccupation with material things can take us from the path we intended. Friendships are defined by what they can offer. From the outside these lives look great. In cases where success has led to the loss of direction the individual cannot always see the cracks. In fact, the vessel looks wonderful. But their souls are seeping through the fine cracks that seem invisible to the eye. They can feel that somehow their lives are not quite full and yet not sure why. The dark chic glasses become the focus and can cover up the unfulfilled parts of our lives. Sometimes success is more dangerous than failure because it is more difficult to find the leaks.

On the High Holy Days we need to return to ourselves. We must evaluate how we look and evaluate it against how we feel. The goal is to get our inner and outer lives back in sync.

TESHUVAH TO OTHERS

What other teshuvah is necessary to help us feel good? Returning to the important people in our lives. I see too many broken relationships that cause a heavy heart. Too many people are estranged from a family member or a friend who was once dear to them. And these estranged relationships weigh on us. There are people who come and go through our lives and then there are those who are family and friends who have a piece of our heart. When we are cut off from them, even when it is our doing, we become a little broken. Our vessel is diminished when they are not in our lives.

And then there are people who are still in our lives, but whom we are estranged from. We see them. We talk to them. But we cannot share our pain. We can't share our emptiness. This is when we feel the loneliest; when we don't have anyone to talk to. That is why some people come to my office; they have no one else to talk to. No one to help them deal with their issues. It breaks my heart when someone enters my office and tells me that they can't share these concerns with the people who matter most in their lives. And in these moments of non-sharing there is further estrangement. How many of

your friends are in a private pain of which you are unaware? How many of you keep yourself shielded from the support of those around you?

ISSUES OF LIFE

What are the issues that weigh heavily on people? You all know the answers. It is a society that demands that everything look perfect from the outside; perfect family, home, job, school, children. Like a spotlessly polished car or an impeccably furnished house many people portray their lives as perfect because this is what they feel society expects.

But there is no such thing as perfection in life. The Garden of Eden was but a fleeting moment. Our own Torah tells us that Adam and Eve could not live in the Garden of Eden. To remain in the Garden required perfect behavior and we are not capable of that. The only answer for the imperfections of Adam and Eve was to dwell in the imperfect world. The only perfect life is the one in which the imperfections are accepted.

It is the inability to live up to the perceived expectations of society that bring some people into my office. I had congregants come into my office this year to talk about their financial situation and they felt like they were the only ones in such a dire situation. When I told them that we had many families in difficult situations, some who could no longer afford their homes or had depleted their savings and others who are still unemployed, they didn't feel so alone. But these things are kept so private; because everything has to appear so perfect.

Some of you may know the stories of family members or best friends that have less than perfect families. To some, these imperfect lives seem to be the exceptions in the perfect world. But I can tell you that most if not all of our families that appear perfect are hurting in some way. How often do you hear about a divorce and say, "but they looked so happy." Or the family with a teenager that seemed to be so perfect, who is caught doing drugs. Or the outwardly successful businessman who is caught embezzling.

There can be great consequences to trying to live the perfect life. Like the families that continue to go into debt in order to preserve their lifestyle, not for themselves, but rather for the public image. They try to keep up the perception that everything is fine. Savings are exhausted, credit cards maxed out, 401Ks emptied, bills unpaid; money shifted from one account to another and each month wondering if like a house of cards it will fall. Some families are one card away from everything falling apart. How many people suffer because they feel they have to live up to the standards of someone else?

Voltaire was correct when he wrote, "perfection is the enemy of good." It is the search for or the desire to be perceived as perfect that stops us from feeling good.

COVERING UP

What happens to the people whose faces don't reflect their inner turmoil? The one's who wear the mask and either won't let anyone in or don't have anyone to share their pain with? What about the people who wear the mask that looks good from the outside, but they are a mess on the inside?

Minimally this dissonance of the exterior can lead to a sadness that cannot be shared and often can develop into a full depression. By placing more importance on keeping our exterior look, that is the looking good part, we don't allow ourselves to deal

with the internal angst, the feeling good part. It is sad that the pretence of looking good prevents us from feeling good.

Another consequence of the dissonance between our inner and outer well-being can be addiction. It is another way to place a mask on our inner turmoil. While addiction can be an illness attributed to an inherited trait, it often begins as a way to self-medicate pain. The energy it takes to look good is sometimes so difficult that only alcohol or drugs can help.

That is why Twelve Step programs are designed to admit the problem and find the strength to recover. It used to be an embarrassment for someone to admit that they were addicted to alcohol, illegal drugs or even prescription medication. But today it is no longer true. I am proud of someone who says to me "I am a recovering substance abuser." Jews in particular did not want to believe that substance abuse or spousal abuse was something that could take place in our community. These things were a shanda. But the truth is that Jewish families are as imperfect as every other family.

And what can happen when the outer face masks the inner pain for too long? Or the inner pain is too great? This is when suicide appears to be the only solution. It is an irrational answer. For some people we can see the downward spiral that leads to suicide, but for others this process takes place internally. When a person can't share the inner pain and the effort of trying to make sure that everything looks good becomes too difficult, then suicide can appear to be the only answer. In these cases that is why so often we respond in surprise and say, "I had no idea."

CONCLUSION

It is sad to say that we live in a world in which, in general, it is better to look good than feel good. We live in a society in which people will spend all kinds of money for procedures to make themselves look good; will expend all kinds of energy and even deceit to make the face and outer life appear fine, but forget that to truly shine with the radiance of contentment we must deal with our internal issues. In order to look good, we must feel good.

Forty two years younger than Rabbi Tenenbaum, I want to feel good and look good like he did. We should all feel as good and look as good as he did. And we can. All we have to do is forget about the search for perfection. All we have to do is accept our imperfections. All we have to do is say, "life can be good enough as long as I can share it with others." We must put away our masks and show our true faces.

On this day of Rosh Hashanah let's forget about looking perfect and accept our imperfections. Let us be part of a community that doesn't have to hide behind a mask, but rather can let our faces reflect who we truly are so that others can see who we truly are. Let us recognize that wholeness has nothing to do with perfection. Let us strive to open our hearts to others and to God with the hope we can help heal and strengthen each other. My this be a year when feeling good will make us look good and our faces radiate with the wholeness we search for....and let us say, amen.