

An Inconvenient Truth: Happiness Is Not For Sale
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When our daughter, Debbie, became Bat Mitzvah, I wrote a poem with wishes for her and all children. At our grandson, Ari's, brit milah, I made the same wish: "... for him to be a person of character, strong but not unbending, gentle but not weak. I wish that he walk in just paths and not be afraid, that he speak words of wisdom and friendship, that he learn to act with lovingkindness, humility and generosity. I wish that he would grow to build and preserve what is good and beautiful in our world, that he know there is a people, a rich heritage to which he belongs and that from that sacred place he is connected to all who dwell on earth."

I wish, I wish... but I worry. I worry because I do not see us training the next generation of young people to be gracious and grateful, to have a sense of wonder and appreciation, of joy and purpose, to value courage and kindness, to be persons of character. Instead of educating responsible citizens, we are training conspicuous consumers who value material goods above all else.

Experts report that by age three children begin to believe that consumer brands actually embody their personal qualities – whether they are cool, or strong or smart. In a recent study, researchers at Stanford University found that children ages 3 – 5 tend to rate food that is wrapped in McDonald's branded paper as tasting better than the same food wrapped in plain paper. They are unable to distinguish between facts and illusion.

Would it surprise you if I told you that more children go to the mall each week than come to synagogue? No news to anyone here. But perhaps the following reality will, if not surprise you, disappoint you: More children go shopping each week than read, participate in youth groups, play outdoors or spend time in household conversations. Our youth know better the names of commercial brands than of Presidential candidates.

Our children and grandchildren get more information and messages from big business trying to sell them something than they do from anywhere else. Advertising spends billions of dollars to target our youngsters. And they are paying attention, close attention.

Studies have shown that children under 18 spend \$150 billion in consumer goods and services in the U.S. annually, much of it without parental supervision. Teenage girls spend in excess of \$33 billion a year on items related to fashion and beauty. And in case you are skeptical, then just ask some teenagers what they will pay for a pair of jeans.

A national survey of childhood materialism found that more than a third of children ages nine to fourteen would rather use their time buying things than doing

almost anything else and more than half agree that when you grow up, the more money you have, the happier you are. In 2004 a study at UCLA reported that nearly 75% of college freshman believe that it is more important to be rich than to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. It was the highest percentage in 13 years.

Research shows that the more children buy into the materialist message, the lower their self-esteem and the higher their rates of depression and anxiety. On the one hand, advertisements lead our youth to believe that happiness can be bought, that things will bring comfort and satisfaction. On the other hand, consumer culture teaches that you should never be satisfied with what you have; that you can never ever have enough. Such a culture of materialism creates an environment of continued discontent.

Nathan Dungan, a leader in the financial services industry, who has done research on young people's attitudes toward money, suggests that American adolescents observe "The Teen Commandments". They follow them religiously:

1. You shall keep nagging until you receive.
2. You shall not wait for what you want.
3. You shall not settle for anything less than the very best.
4. You shall fit in at all costs.
5. You shall grow up as fast as you can.
6. You shall choose extravagance over moderation.
7. You shall desire more, because more is better.
8. You shall be entitled to what you want.
9. You shall pursue the perfect look at any cost.
10. You shall forget reality; confuse wants with needs.

In the synagogue we talk about a different set of commandments - about self-respect, sharing and *tzedaka*, about responsibility, *gemilut hasadim* and deeds of lovingkindness. But that message is being overpowered and displaced by advertisements that encourage self-indulgence and a sense of entitlement, that teach our children about needing to have it all and having to have it all, now.

There are thousands of carefully psychologically crafted messages that the media daily direct at our children telling them to spend. Where is the voice strong enough and loud enough to offer a different message about what it means to grow up to be a *mensch*?

The Jewish ethical tradition is that voice. The riches of Mesopotamia did not seduce Abraham to remain there. In the Torah, Abraham is called an *ivri*, Hebrew. *Ivri* comes from the root that means "to cross over." Geographically, it describes Abraham's crossing the river of his birthplace to a new land. Morally, it describes his ability to stand on the other side, counter culture to the majority.

How do we help the next generation, like our ancestor Abraham, to stand on the other side, to stand up to consumer culture when what they want most to do is to be a part

of it, to fit in? When our Jewish kids are among the best shoppers, have the most lavish parties; wear the latest styles regardless of expense, then we have to find that voice again.

Rabbi Harold Schulweis writes that against the grain of uniformity, a Jew needs to dare to say, “no.” No- to the ruthless pursuit of power, wealth and greed. No- to a life without care and concern for others. No - to a life devoid of idealism.

It is not enough to say no to over-indulgence, to extravagance, to greed. We need also to say yes- yes to a life that is not defined by how much we possess but how much we serve. And yes – to more family conversations, more reading and less shopping. The decisions we make when we plan B’nai Mitzvah celebrations, choose how to spend our time, how to share our resources, teach more than anything we can say about what really matters, what makes for a good life. We can teach our youth what really matters next week. (Help our children to say no to the North Central/Carmel football game on Friday night of Kol Nidre and no to soccer on Yom Kippur afternoon and yes to honoring the holiness of the most sacred day on the Jewish calendar.

Judaism is not an ascetic tradition. It does not see self-denial as a virtue. We are commanded to put an end to poverty, not to celebrate it as a pious choice. Judaism recognizes that wealth can do enormous good. It teaches that in the world to come we will be held accountable for every permissible pleasure we were offered to enjoy but refused. But, if what we have is never enough; if we cannot in this life stop doing whatever it takes, at whatever personal costs, to acquire more and more, then we are not living the kind of life Judaism wishes for us and we should wish for the next generation.

In congratulating Barry Bonds on his new homerun record, Hank Aaron said: “The home run record is just a number, and now Barry has it... Let’s celebrate and move on. People don’t seem to realize that it’s not what defines me. It’s not my legacy. It’s just an accomplishment I was proud of which made it easier for me to do the things I wanted to do, the things that really mattered. And none of that has changed.”

Our children need to recognize that achieving wealth or fame are not ends in themselves, but simply the means to do things that really matter. They need to learn from other people who live lives of generosity and grace, of courage and caring, regardless of social or economic status. Our children not only require coaches for soccer and tennis and tutors for improving their SAT scores. They need spiritual mentors for life.

You may say: look, my kids are grown, or I don’t have any children or grandchildren. But it takes more than a parent or two to raise a good human being; it requires, as the saying goes, a village, an entire community that models a just and compassionate way of life. We need to teach our children an inconvenient truth- that happiness is not for sale, that it is found within themselves and their relationships with others.

Here at the synagogue we try to create opportunities for our kids to learn that they have the ability and obligation to make a difference. We want them to know that they are

not what they spend or what they own, that they will not be defined by their financial portfolio but by their moral character.

In your seat you will find a card. One side invites you to help make Beth El Zedeck a more welcoming congregation. The other side invites our teens to pledge their time to projects that give back to the synagogue and community. We have distributed these cards at our BET and USY services, but you too can help. Talk to your kids, grandkids, teen relatives, and encourage them to make a pledge.

There are numerous Jewish trips to Israel, Eastern Europe and summer camps that help to foster Jewish fellowship and identity. This is important. But the Jewish community offers too few meaningful experiences that encourage young people to put into action Jewish teachings of social justice and responsibility to others. We need to do more. We need to provide more opportunities which teach our youth that having more does not mean being more.

None of us, young or old is immune to the allure of our consumer culture. When our oldest grandson, Darwin, came to visit this past summer, we immediately went out and bought what we assumed he needed to be happy: a sandbox and plastic swimming pool. But it didn't take very long before he fell out of the sandbox and lost all interest. After a couple of hours of blowing up the pool and filling it with water, our grandson declined to go in. The water was too cold.

It was then that this one-year-old little boy reminded us about the real things in life that make for joy. As we took a walk around our neighborhood, he jumped in the rain puddles that had formed from a recent summer shower; he paused to smell flowers by the road, and stopped to listen to a bird singing. When we went inside and couldn't find any toys to interest him, we turned on some music, and we danced. He laughed, and we were happy. Those precious moments didn't cost us anything and they were worth everything.

As we enter the Jewish New Year my wishes for all of us are for those precious moments that don't cost anything but are worth everything. May friends greet us with a smile and little children with hugs and kisses. May we spend hours around the dinner table in good conversation. May we read a great book and dance to music. May we bypass the latest things and hold on to the lasting things. May we teach the next generation to do the same. May it be for all of us a good and sweet new year.