

Once there was a little boy named Jimmy who lived in the country. They had to use an outhouse, and Jimmy hated it because it was hot in the summer, cold in the winter and smelled all the time. The outhouse sat on the bank of a creek, and Jimmy decided that when the time was right he would push that outhouse into the creek.

One day after a spring rain, the creek was swollen. So, Jimmy decided that today was the day to push the outhouse into the creek. Jimmy got a large stick and started pushing. Finally, the outhouse toppled into the creek and floated away.

That night Jimmy's dad told him they were going to the woodshed after supper. 'Going to the woodshed' was not something Jimmy wanted to hear, so he asked why. Dad replied, "Someone pushed the outhouse into the creek today. It was you, wasn't it, son?" Jimmy answered yes.

But thinking quickly, Jimmy said, "Dad, I read in school that George Washington chopped down a cherry tree and didn't get into trouble because he told the truth. Why should I be punished? I told the truth."

Dad replied, "Well, son, George Washington's father wasn't in that cherry tree."

Ah, family life! There are often laughs and smiles in day-to-day family life. But life, of course, is about more than laughs and smiles. When we view the bigger picture, we're looking for a 'good life', not simply a 'happy life.' We want a life filled with *tova* and *bracha* -- good, and blessings.

How do we measure 'the good life'? What is life all about?

Maybe you saw a recent news item about Natalie Carson.

Natalie, a 19-year-old California woman, turned to Craigslist for an unusual, and heartfelt request. The title of the ad she placed said, "*Young female college student looking to rent family for birthday.*"

Natalie said she grew up in foster care, was never adopted, and never had a birthday with her family. So she took to Craigslist in hopes of renting a family to spend time with her on her birthday. In her ad, she offered to pay \$8 an hour.

It's a request that may seem so simple, but Natalie said it would help make a usually difficult day, special. "It's something that I've never really had. Of course, I've had birthdays, but they haven't been good," she said. "Usually every birthday is really painful and hard."

A Harvard study that followed 268 sophomores from the late 1930s and early 1940s over the course of their adult lives showed that the single most important predictor of successful aging, defined by physical and mental health and satisfaction with life at age 75, wasn't cholesterol level, treadmill endurance or intelligence. It was having close relationships. Based on the extensive data collected over seven decades, the author concluded:

"The only things that matter in life are your relations to other people."

What matters? People matter. And in particular, close relationships with your family. That's what it's all about.

This week's Torah portion contains the story of the *misonenim* -- the complainers. These complainers were kvetching about many things. One verse [Bamidbar 11:10] teaches that Moshe heard the people crying to each other, expressed by the words *bocheh l'mishpachso'sav* -- crying to their families. At the opening of their tents, they were crying in family groups. The people would gather in family groups out in the open to publicize their complaints to one another. It was like a family picnic, but instead of a family "laugh-in," it was a family "cry-in".

What were they crying about? Rashi explains that they complained about new restrictions that the Torah legislated for matters concerning family life. But in reality, they were crying over nothing.

Getting along with relatives was hard then, and is no easier today. Isn't that ironic, given that there's nothing more important than our family?

Any country music fans here? I like the themes in country music; family, home, sentimentality. How many country singers does it take to change a light bulb? Four. One to change the bulb, and three to sing about how much they miss the old bulb!

The popular country duo Brooks & Dunn had a marvelous song, "That's What it's All About". The lyrics describe a man who has spent the day dealing with difficult people and traffic jams. But when he arrives home

And the one you love is waitin' there

*Hey, that's what it's all about
Hey, this is the life I couldn't live without*

Is there anything more important than the one you love?

*You're tired, numb, stressed and your mad
She smiles and says "I love you dad"*

*Hey, that's what it's all about
Hey, this is the life I couldn't live without*

Our children. Our grandchildren. What could be more important?

My wife Chani is in Israel. All the kids are there. She's with the grandchildren. She's never sounded happier.

I asked her not long ago how she liked being a grandmother. She said, "It's wonderful Absolutely wonderful. But I still haven't gotten used to being married to a grandfather."

Go figure!

"The only things that matter in life are your relations to other people."

Judaism says that there's a Torah obligation not simply to 'get along' with family, but to have a caring, giving, beautiful relationship. The Talmud states, "If you do one of these things, you can call upon Hashem and He will answer you: 'One who loves his neighbors, *brings his relatives close* ...lends to the poor in time of need.' "

The statement, '*He will answer you*' means, '*He will love you.*'

Then why is it that when it comes to family that it seems so hard? George Burns once said, "Happiness is a warm, close knit family that lives out of town." Why is it that family is the toughest nut to crack?

People who are closest to you know your weaknesses -- past tense -- and remember you 'before the Torah was given.' A rabbi was once considering a job as a rabbi in his hometown, when another rabbi said to him, "too many people remember you playing marbles." My siblings occasionally remind me that when we were younger I had an annoying habit: When we played the board game *Risk* and my prospects for winning looked dim, I would yell 'Earthquake!' and tip over the board. Relatives remember us with our faults and foibles -- so it's more difficult for them to see us as adults who are accomplished professionals or representative of a new way of life.

A second challenge that makes it difficult getting along with family is that they see you now -- present tense. There's a halacha that a Torah teacher shouldn't eat in front of his students. On a certain level there's a loss of dignity in seeing a teacher eat. My children see me eating, in my pajamas, sometimes getting angry, asleep, and right after I wake up. Like the guy who just gets married, and realizes that it takes his wife two hours to get that special curl into place. You have a challenge with your relatives; they see you in all situations, and that 'aura' isn't there.

How can we become closer with our relatives?

1) Parents, siblings, children, spouses -- and others -- know a lot about life. Why don't you ask them?

Ask their opinion about something. "Should I change schools? Take this degree? Should I do this, buy this?" They may have certain prejudices, but you don't have to listen. They might faint the first time you ask for their opinion, but the second time they'll be happy. Talk to your

relatives. Don't present yourself to them as a teacher: Come as a student. If they see that your maturity, education and increased observance has made you a better person, that will be the best *kiruv* (outreach) in the world.

2) Concerning parents, realize you have an unpayable debt of gratitude for the life they gave you.

We're here because of our parents. And to the extent we're connected to Judaism, we're also 'here' because of our parents. The values and upbringing they gave us created our spiritual lives. It may be that your parents had relatives in the 1800s or 1900s who came to America -- at the time a spiritual wasteland -- and the halachic side of Judaism got lost. But much of Judaism remained; the vibrant part, the character, morality, industriousness, fairness. The bulk of Judaism still exists within us, as a legacy from our parents. Appreciate that.

3) Extend yourself with your relatives. Make it a point to spend time with them, and visit. Attend the graduations, weddings, simchas, and other occasions. Stay in touch regularly through calls and emails, even if your efforts aren't reciprocated.

We began our remarks with the story of Natalie Carson, the young woman who wanted to 'rent' a family to help her celebrate her birthday. On Friday, Natalie said she's grateful for an outpouring of support, and is a bit overwhelmed by a flood of emails as her story has received international news coverage. She's talking with people who have offered to help make her birthday special. Now she's asking others who want to help to instead support other foster care children or organizations that aid foster kids.

What does that mean for us?

It should help us to appreciate what is truly important: *The only things that matter in life are your relations to other people.* Think of your family and friends, and count your blessings.

Hey, that's what it's all about.