

Sermon/Drasha Parshas Shoftim "What Would You Wish For?"

A woman was walking along a California beach and stumbled across an old lamp. She picked it up and rubbed it and out popped a genie.

The genie said "OK, OK. You released me from the lamp."

Woman: "Great news! I get 3 wishes, right?"

Genie: "This is the fourth time this month and I'm getting a little sick of these wishes so you can forget about three. From now on I'm a one-wish genie. So... what'll it be?"

The woman sat and thought about it for a while and said, "I've always wanted to go to Hawaii but I'm scared to fly and I get very seasick.

Could you build me a bridge to Hawaii so I can drive over there to visit?"

The genie laughed and said, "That's impossible. Think of the logistics! How would the supports ever reach the bottom of the Pacific? Think of how much concrete...how much steel!! No way. Think of another wish."

The woman said, "OK. I've been married for 15 years and my husband is absolutely impossible. He always has to get his own way, and he's stubborn as a mule. He watches hours and hours of sports on TV and is always in front of the computer with his fantasy league. And our twin 7-year-old boys are little terrors. So, my wish is: to understand men, to know what makes them tick, and to know how to make them truly happy."

The genie said, "Lady, you want that bridge two lanes or four?"

A genie, a bottle, and a wish. Even one wish. Wouldn't that be cool? We used to talk about that when we were kids, and wonder if we had one wish what would we ask for. What do you think most people would say? Can you spell 'Powerball'? Some might say 'world peace' or 'the cure for cancer', but I'm fairly certain that if people were honest, the most common wishes would be for wealth, looks, power or fame. After all, isn't that what most societies -- and advertising -- are about?

You get one wish. What would it be?

While you're thinking of what you'd ask for, I will tell you that some great people in Jewish history have dealt with this question before. Dovid HaMelech (King David). Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon). The Anshei Knesses HaGedolah (Men of the Great Assembly -- 120 prophets and great rabbis during the early 2nd Temple, who composed the Shemone Esray).

In Psalm 27, which we began saying in the month of Elul, Dovid HaMelech raises this question

explicitly.

Achas sha'alti may'eis HaShem, osah avakaysh. Shivti b'bais Hashem kol y'may cha'yei

One thing I ask from HaShem, it I seek: To dwell in the house of Hashem all the days of my life.

Wisdom. King David is asking for the wisdom and understanding that comes from dwelling in HaShem's abode.

In a fascinating passage in the Book of Kings (1 Kings 3:5) King Solomon heard the following : "*G-d said; 'Ask! What shall I give you?'*" WOW! That was better than any genie in a bottle wish - that was the Creator of heaven and earth saying Solomon could have any request without putting conditions on it.

Here is what he prayed for: "*Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?'*" (1 Kings 3:9) Solomon was asking for wisdom to be a good king. The Tenach says; "The speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing."

Do you think the people in power in the governments around the world need a bit more wisdom to solve the problems they face?

And when the *Anshei Knesses HaGedolah* ordered the 13 requests in the middle of our Sh'moneh Esray (a daily prayer said three times daily), they included petitions for health, wealth, tshuva, forgiveness, return of the Jewish people to the land, and the coming of the mashiach (messiah). But the very first request? Wisdom and understanding.

On my own I wouldn't have given that answer. But if David and Solomon wanted wisdom more than anything else, and it's the very first thing we pray for, there must be something to it.

But to say simply 'wisdom' doesn't suffice. What kind of wisdom are we talking about? What was David referring to? What would you want to know? I sat down earlier this week and drew up my own list. Here goes:

Get closer to Hashem

Be a better Jew

Get along with others

Be a good/better husband, father

How to deal with difficult people

How to inspire and motivate others

Identify my potential and know how to reach it
Understand my weaknesses and strengths

I realized that I don't have anything material on my list. I've got a great bicycle. And though I like chocolate frozen yogurt and ice coffee, I was too embarrassed to put them on the list.

I noticed, however, that there's a common denominator underlying all of my wishes -- and maybe yours, as well. The one thing they all point to is happiness. While we might not wish that explicitly for ourselves, when it comes to our kids, we do say, "All I want for my kids is to be happy." So it must be that happiness, and the knowledge of how to obtain it, is a universal priority.

We realize there is no true happiness in material pursuits. On the contrary, they are often the source of much misery. And while whether you're rich or poor it's nice to have money, asking for money and 'things' is a dangerous trap. And besides, any mature person realizes that material things shouldn't be ends unto themselves, but the means to help us achieve what is truly important.

I'd like to suggest that one aspect of wisdom, if granted, would absolutely deliver happiness: *The knowledge that we should wish to have the constant ability and opportunity to give to others.* That's what you should ask Aladdin for -- or whatever your genie's name might be. Why? Because our greatest happiness is in our making others happy. There is no question that if anyone ever said to you, "You made a huge impact and difference in my life", it gave you the highest level of satisfaction down to your core.

King Solomon illuminates this truth in *Mishlei*, his book of Proverbs. There he writes that "the soul that blesses will be saturated [with delight], and one who gives to others will himself be satiated." Give to others. That's what it's all about, as these following stories indicate.

Having your credit card declined can be awkward and humiliating. But it's an even worse experience if you're at the airport, rushing to make your flight. And when it comes time to pay the mandatory fee to check a bag, the airline counter employee lets you know that your card won't go through -- usually within earshot of many people. This happened last week to a fellow named Andy. He said, "Having my card declined was extremely embarrassing, even though I didn't know a single soul in that airport."

Andy's story had a happy ending, though. When he returned to the counter, an anonymous stranger had generously paid his baggage fee and left a note that said:

"Hey, I heard them say your card was declined. I know how it feels. Your bag fee's on me. Just pay it forward the next time you get a chance. Have a safe flight. :)"

The random-act-of-kindness post went viral, and inspired others to share how they spontaneously helped strangers.

During a trip to an auto parts store, a man (Joe) noticed a woman with two kids leaving the store without a battery she needed for her car, since she couldn't afford it. Joe kindly bought the battery and installed it for her. "I asked her to pop her hood, and she at first looked at me like, 'What?' and then saw what I had with me. She asked me why, and I just said, 'Because someone did something nice for me once.' I installed her battery while she was crying and thanking me."

Another man (Bill) commented that while in a convenience store at 3 a.m., a man was purchasing diapers, milk, formula, and toilet paper, but his card was declined. As he was calculating which necessities he really needed, Bill came to his rescue. "So I walk up to the counter and give the guy \$20," Bill wrote. "I don't say a word, and I don't expect anything in return, not even a thank you. But the guy turns around. Gets on his knees and wraps his arms around me and tells me that I have just made a profound difference."

King Solomon writes that "the soul that blesses will be saturated [with delight]." It will get into your bones. The kindnesses we do for others will come to define us, ultimately penetrating our being. Thus, "the soul that blesses" that seeks to saturate others with delight, will itself "be saturated with delight". What we radiate towards others will in turn become our essence.

The Rambam (Maimonides) cites this explanation as the basis for joy that comes from giving. He writes that "there is no greater and more wonderful joy than gladdening the hearts of the poor, downtrodden, orphans and widows. That is because then one so closely resembles the spirit of Hashem."

So.....if you had only one wish, what would you wish for? If you follow the advice of some great Jews, you'll ask for wisdom and a knowing, understanding heart. Don't wait for a genie to appear to grant you this wish -- because you heard it here, first :) Seek to make others happy! This is the single most important key to happiness -- and a piece of wisdom we can't live without.