The Real Dream of Happiness: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tavo

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By
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A criminal justice Professor at the University of Alabama, Dr. Adam Lankford, recently spoke to a group of sociologists. He attempted to understand the all-too frequent mass shootings that take place in the United States. Although the U.S. represents only 5% of the world's population, it accounts for 31% of public mass shooters. Between 1966 and 2012, 62% of all school and workplace shooters were American.

While the prevalence of gun ownership in the Unites States is a contributing factor to this phenomenon, Professor Lankford suggests that aspects of American culture play a significant role. As reported in the Washington Post (August 27, 2015), "It's the social strains of American life—the false promise of the American dream, which guarantees a level of success that can't always be achieved through hard work and sheer willpower; the devotion to individualism and the desire for fame or notoriety."

Americans grow up thinking that they can achieve great things. A 2010 survey found that 81% of American high school students believed they would have a "great paying job" by age 25. A similar survey conducted in 2014 found that 26% of high schoolers expected that they would soon be famous. But reality eventually sets in. Most people will never achieve their unrealistic expectations. They settle into a lifestyle that is below that of the "American dream." This leads to feelings of frustration, dissatisfaction with life. A small percentage of these disillusioned Americans become so alienated that they resort to acts of crime and violence. By going out in a "blaze of glory," mass shooters attain the power and fame (notoriety) that they could not achieve in their lives.

Dr. Lankford's analysis is relevant not merely to mass shooters, but to all sorts of people who feel dissatisfaction with their lives. We are bombarded with images of athletes and entertainers, business moguls and con artists, who have amassed great fortunes, who live in huge mansions, who seem to have a monopoly on "success." They have so much money; their names are frequently in the news;

they are invited to fancy meetings with famous politicians. People ask themselves: why do they have so much and why do I have so little in comparison?

While the American Dream prods us to achieve great things and promises us great opportunity, it also creates unrealistic goals and expectations. Very few will fulfill the American Dream; and many who do, are still consumed with feelings of dissatisfaction. They wonder why they didn't achieve even more. They cast jealous eyes on those who seem to have done better. The American Dream, like the end of the rainbow, seems to be eternally elusive.

In this week's Torah reading, we read about the mitzvah of "bikkurim," the bringing of the first fruits. Farmers had worked long and hard; and now they were commanded to bring the first fruits of their labors to the Sanctuary. They were to make a recitation upon handing over the baskets of fruit to the Cohen. "A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number. And he became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians dealt ill with us and afflicted us and laid upon us hard bondage." God eventually redeemed us from Egypt and brought us to a land of milk and honey. The Torah then states: "And you shall rejoice in all the good which the Lord your God has given unto you, and unto your house, you, and the Levite and the stranger who is in your midst" (26:11).

In describing the mitzvah of "bikkurim," the Torah is presenting us with a powerful framework for understanding our lives. It reminds us to look back at our humble origins; to remember our past hardships and struggles. By doing this, we come to appreciate how far we've progressed since then. We become grateful for what we have. We are taught to share what we have with others. We are taught the grandeur of being happy with what we have, of appreciating the blessings we enjoy. "Success" is not measured by how close we have come to fulfilling an often unrealistic goal, but by how much satisfaction and happiness we enjoy through our work and our ability to share with others.

How much happier life would be if people would internalize the Torah's message: "And you shall rejoice in all the good which the Lord your God has given unto you."
Instead of the illusory and frustrating "American Dream," we might all be happier with the genuine dream of happiness offered by the Torah.

Angel for Shabbat