

**Finding What We Need**  
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So, I want to tell you a story about toothpaste.

A few months ago, I was in a CVS, and I needed to find some Crest toothpaste. I, personally, do not use Crest toothpaste. But our kids do, and so I was charged on this day with finding a new tube of Crest toothpaste.

Knowing that our kids, like many kids, can be quite particular about what goes into their mouths, I was determined to find the exact right kind of Crest toothpaste. I forgot to check the old tube before I left the house, but I seemed to remember that they liked plain old regular Crest, the white, minty kind. I thought my mission was a simple one.

And so there I was, an innocent among the drugstore shelves, looking for “regular” Crest. I saw Crest Vivid White, Crest Multicare, Crest Whitening Expressions Liquid Gel (in 6 different flavors!)—but nothing called “regular” Crest. I found Crest Sensitivity Protection, Crest Tartar Control Whitening plus Scope Liquid Gel, Crest Rejuvenating Effects (!), Crest Kid’s Cavity Protection Spiderman Liquid Gel—but no “regular” Crest. I encountered 23 different types of Crest toothpaste. Each was special, unique, and not what I wanted. Indeed, I was beginning to despair that there ever was such a thing as “regular Crest.”

After a good 15 or 20 minutes, feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, and slightly dazed, I grabbed the closest thing I thought would work, and stormed out of the store with my purchase.

For some reason this somewhat bizarre memory has stayed with me, many months later. As I was ruminating and trying to think of useful things to say to you this High Holydays, the Crest experience kept coming back to me. And so, with your permission, I’d like to delve a little deeper into this, and see what we can learn from my encounter with the many forms of Crest.

What does my shopping trauma have to tell us about the process of *teshuvah*, of “turning,” of making change in our lives?

When I first reflected on my experience, I was angry at the manufacturers of Crest. Actually, it was more than that. I was filled with righteous anger at our entire consumer culture, which keeps multiplying product upon product in an attempt to get us to spend money on things that two days ago we didn’t even know we needed. My experience, I was later to find out, was one of consumer choice overload. I read a very interesting book about this recently, called *The Paradox of Choice*. It talks about how choice is an ultimate value in our American culture—we like our choices, and we like to have choice about almost everything – or so we think.

But the “paradox” part is that too much choice actually makes us unhappy, according to many surveys and scientific studies. For example, two sets of customers encountered a variety of high-

quality jams at a gourmet food store. The first group was presented with 6 different samples on the table, and the second group saw 24. They could taste as many as they wanted, and then were given a \$1 discount on any one jar of jam that they chose. The larger display of 24 jams attracted more shoppers, but these people were much less likely to buy than the folks who only saw 6. Only 3% of the 24-sample customers, versus 30% of those who saw the six samples, were able to choose one kind of jam to buy. All kinds of things kick in when we have too much choice – we start second-guessing ourselves, it’s hard to choose “the best” when there are so many alternatives, we’re more likely to regret what we do end up choosing. (*Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz, pp. 133-34)

If we think about this in terms not of toothpaste or jam, but making change in our lives, it’s interesting to reflect on the role of choice—especially too much choice. Let’s say we’re less than satisfied with our lives, with who we are, with where we are in this moment. We’d like to think we’ve got some choice in the matter – which we do. In fact, our Jewish tradition is quite adamant on this point: that, as human beings, we are given free will, and we have some power to determine the quality of our lives, even if we can’t control all that happens to us.

What happens, though, is that sometimes we go on imaginative choice overload. Unhappy with where we are, we start looking for a different life. We start fantasizing about all the alternative lives we could be living--anything as long as it’s not our life. “If only I had that job...” “If only I had that partner...” “If only I had cultivated that talent, or moved to that city, or studied something else in college...” The next thing you know, you’re staring at a shelf with a hundred different products.

My own experience is that that kind of thinking is not particularly helpful. If we start imagining a thousand different ways our lives could be, all the things we could do, the overwhelming volume of choice can be paralyzing. Or, looking at our imaginary life choice buffet, we might get even more depressed about the actual life we have.

But at the root of it, there is a more fundamental problem. When I have tried to locate my sense of dissatisfaction, or some deeper unhappiness, in some external aspect of my life—in my job, for example, or in my most intimate relationship or lack thereof—it has led me to entertain the fantasy that if I could just find the perfect—you fill in the blank—the perfect job, the perfect partner, etc.—then everything would be okay. But just as there is no “perfect” choice of toothpaste or jam, there isn’t one out there in any other aspect of our lives. Which doesn’t mean we can’t find the work or person or place to live that suits us well, that fulfills us deeply, that is meant for us. I fully believe we can. But the ironic reality is that finding those things is usually the result, not the cause, of being where we need to be within ourselves.

Which goes back to my problem with finding the “right” Crest toothpaste. Apparently, I was searching for something that doesn’t exist, based on my own faulty assumptions. It’s possible that once upon a time there was something known as “regular Crest”—in fact, somewhere back at the dawn of recorded history, there was most likely only one type of Crest toothpaste at all. But at this moment in time, I was looking for the wrong thing. Not only was I looking for the wrong thing, but it turns out that what I was imagining was “regular Crest” wasn’t even the kind the kids like anyway. So I was wrong on all counts.

I see many people who set off in a similar way on their journeys to happiness. They get a notion in their head of what it's going to take to make their lives fulfilled, and nothing will dissuade them from that search. And even when the signs start appearing that perhaps this particular item is not the key to heaven's rewards, they ignore those signs, because the idea has become so fixed in their minds. Once we invest that heavily in an idea, it's hard to let go. Even when something else that actually would make us happy comes along and starts knocking on the door, we're too busy looking elsewhere to notice it.

It turns out that this whole business of what actually makes us happy, or gives us a sense of well-being, is not so simple. There are a lot of studies out there that show that most people are pretty confused when it comes to actually knowing what makes them happy. For example, it's a basic assumption in our culture that having more material things—money and all it can buy—is fairly essential to our well-being. But every study shows that, once people are above the poverty line, changes in income level make little or no difference in reported happiness at all. And we both know this and don't know this at the same time. This was one of my favorite findings: in one national survey, Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow found that 89% of more than 2,000 participants felt that “our society is much too materialistic.” But in that same survey, 84% wished they had more money and 78% said that it was “very or fairly important” to have “a beautiful home, a new car, and other nice things.” (*The American Paradox*, David Myers, p. 139). So even when we know money can't buy us happiness, we want more of it anyway.

But it's not just money, for those of us who have our basic needs met, that doesn't necessarily make us any better off. Neither, according to these studies, does intelligence, or level of education, or even physical health or ability. In fact, objective life circumstances have much less effect on one's sense of well-being than you'd expect. I found this observation, in a book called *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, quite intriguing:

“Recent findings indicate that happiness depends not so much on life circumstances as on the way in which these are interpreted and evaluated.” (Robert Lane, p. 46)

This is not to say that there's something wrong with us if we suffer when bad things happen to us—everyone feels pain and disappointment, and it would be strange not to. When we have a major illness, or lose someone important to us, or suffer a significant economic set-back, we aren't likely to be overwhelmingly happy about it. But what these studies demonstrate is the incredible human ability to adapt to new circumstances, and the way that personality traits significantly influence how we experience the various things that life hands us.

This, then, is the challenge and the opportunity that these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe, present to us. Jewish tradition has known for over two thousand years what these psychological and sociological studies make clear: that we will be better off in our lives if we can cultivate an awareness that makes us better able to respond to the objective life circumstances that befall us. We will lose people we love—it is guaranteed. We are unlikely to leave this life as healthy as we came into it. We won't always get what we want, and there will be things outside of our control which will have a large, maybe even huge, impact, on our lives.

As the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, which we recite in tomorrow's service, says: every year it is written, and every year it is sealed—that some will live, and some will die, some will be enriched, and some impoverished, some will be fulfilled, and some left bereft—and most of those events we have little if any control over. And yet, this prayer has the audacity to declare, we have great power in one specific area: in our own response to what life hands us. This is where the real choice comes in.

The metaphor that our High Holyday liturgy uses for that choice is the image of a book—that we are written in a book at this time of year, and, with our own actions, we do the writing. This is an empowering image, to my mind. We each have a story, and we are the authors in one significant way: we are the ones who write what the protagonist says and does as each chapter unfolds.

We have to be careful, given many of the messages we receive from the culture surrounding us, not to fall into the trap of determinism. We should never be led to believe that our childhoods, our genes, our hormones, or any one event in our lives determines forever our fate, our happiness, our ability to be a whole person. On this our Jewish tradition is quite firm. There is much beyond our control, much that shapes who we are. But we can choose how we respond, and we are the ones who choose what has ultimate value in our own lives. And our tradition further teaches that if we work at making the right choices, if we are sincere in our attempts to lead our life on a path that leads to wholeness, then there is a Power of compassion and strength that accompanies us in this journey. We do not have to do it alone.

If I can give you anything this High Holydays, I would like to give you this—a little bit of faith that you can rewrite your story this year in a way that is positive for you and those around you. It may be time to completely shed an old story that you've been carrying around like a child refusing to let go of a moth-eaten blanket. The false sense of comfort really isn't worth the effort of lugging it around. Maybe you're like me, searching for the nonexistent toothpaste. You're so determined to see what your old story tells you you should expect to see, that you can't even respond to the wonderful array that life places before you. So dump the old story. Don't analyze it any more, don't try to figure out where it comes from. Don't give it one more ounce of your precious energy. Dump it. Write a new one. Today. Go home and find an empty notebook, and write in it, "Once upon a time," and imagine what the next chapter might look like if a happier you were writing it. I know that that can feel scary – we identify with our stories about ourselves; we fool ourselves into believing that we are our stories. But we're not. I promise you that you will not disappear along with your old story. On the contrary, a more fulfilling and fulfilled you will emerge, once there's space and permission to do so.

Or maybe you're not so attached to your old story, it's just that you're not quite sure that you deserve much different from what you're already got, or that it's even possible. But it is, and you do. It's just a matter of letting the universe know that you know that.

This is very important spiritual work that is not so easy to do. There is a very fine line to be drawn between putting out into the universe our valid desires, wishes, and intentions, and becoming overly attached to our notions of what it is that will make our lives better. We want to be open to what the universe has to offer us without either becoming entirely passive or, on

the other side, over-determining the outcome. My own experience has been that the universe has an interesting way of opening up to us when we are open to it.

We somehow have to let the universe know that we're ready for what's next, and that we have some healthy expectations around that, without getting overly invested in the details. This is where prayer comes in, as I understand prayer. Over these ten days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, we can make good use of our time by trying to attune ourselves a bit better to what it is that the universe has prepared for us. Each of us has gifts to give, each of us has some kind of service to perform, and we will do those things best if we are operating from a sense of wholeness and well-being. So we're allowed to ask all kinds of things from God, from the universe, from Whatever is out there that sends things our way. But we need to be wise in our asking.

Those surveys I was mentioning earlier show that most people are pretty bad at identifying specific things that make them happy. We tend to overemphasize some experiences just because they happened more recently, or we misidentify other ones completely. So don't get too specific in your prayers. It may be more helpful, for example, to ask for work that will give you a sense of fulfillment and an opportunity to share what you have to give, than to pray for a callback from that last interview. It may be more helpful to pray for the qualities that you'd like to have in a partner and the qualities you'd like to cultivate in yourself to make yourself a better companion, than to pray that that cute guy or woman from the restaurant last night will miraculously figure out your e-mail address. It is completely acceptable, and in fact is right there in our liturgy, to pray for a *parnassah tovah*, a level of economic sustenance to meet your needs, or to pray for physical and emotional healing. And it might be most helpful to pray for those qualities that you think you need to face whatever it is that life is asking from you at this moment: for strength, or insight, or wisdom, or patience, or a sense of humor.

And then once you've asked, be quiet, and listen. The answer you receive may not be exactly what you were hoping or expecting, but there will be some kind of answer. We have to learn how to ask, and we have to learn how to hear the response.

I also don't think it entirely matters Who or What, if anything, you think is listening or not listening out there. Prayer is about us, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel so beautifully taught. Prayer makes changes in us, makes us better receivers, better able to tune in. So whether you think of it as praying to a compassionate God, or as sending your intentions and desires out into the cosmic ether, or as simply reflecting on who and where you want to be in your life, I hope you will use these hours and days in a way that is most helpful to you. And, unlike me in the toothpaste aisle of the CVS, I sincerely hope you will find what you need, and recognize it when you do.

*L'shanah tovah tikkateivu*, may we all be written for a good, healthy, and abundant new year.