

## **“Why Were You Not Zusya?” Comparing Ourselves to Others**

Can I ask you a personal question? ... Are you a good person? Do you have a good life? I've caught you off guard, so I'll ask again: Are you a good person? Do you have a good life? ... If you've indulged me and started to grasp at an answer, I have a follow-up question: How do you know?

These are big questions, but the High Holy Days are the time for the biggest questions. Are you a good person? How many times this past week and tonight have we wished someone “*Shanah tovah!*”—a “good new year?” How will they know if they've had one?

I know the easy way, the way humans have tried to answer this question throughout history. We compare ourselves to other people.

In the first family on earth, the Torah tells us, Cain saw that the offerings of his brother Abel were more acceptable to God. Cain's frustration with this difference led to humankind's first murder.<sup>1</sup> The last of the Ten Commandments warns: “You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife; nor his male or female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that belongs to your neighbor.”<sup>2</sup> We have to imagine an ancient Israelite, recently freed from slavery in Egypt; she's seen the plagues of frogs and fiery hail and darkness; she walked across the parted Red Sea; every day she's kept alive by manna that falls from heaven; and yet she thinks to herself: “Reuven has two donkeys, and I only have one.” “Why does Miriam always get a tent that faces east?” “Sure, I may not be a Levite, but at least I'm not like that poor shlemiel who got stoned for gathering sticks on Shabbat.”

In the modern world, the inclination to judge our lives in comparison to those around us has only intensified. The phrase “keeping up with the Joneses” first appeared as the name of a comic strip in 1913.<sup>3</sup> I remember my great-grandmother telling me about the status symbol of having the first telephones—the party lines—in their neighborhood in Brooklyn. And I know

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 4.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:13.

<sup>3</sup> William Safire, “On Language; Up the Down Ladder.” *The New York Times* (Nov 15 1998).

<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/15/magazine/on-language-up-the-down-ladder.html?src=pm>.

how much she and her immigrant generation later on appreciated fur coats and Cadillacs, the symbols of prosperity. A century later, the rise of social media—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram—has supercharged our exposure to the lives of friends and acquaintances. Those of us who use these programs are presented unlimited opportunities to compare our lives to a never-ending stream of friends and near-strangers.

On Facebook, as you know, everyone is always returning from a fabulous vacation. Everyone's children are adorable (and willing to pose for pictures). Life is a stream of achievements: new homes and new jobs, weddings and anniversaries.

It's depressing. That's not a joke—it's literally depressing. Numerous studies have shown that use of Facebook and other social media sites is linked to negative feelings and depression.<sup>4</sup> Why is that? It's not just the fact of using the sites. If you do a lot of posting and commenting, sharing and replying, there are even mental health benefits. But if you're like me, a "lurker" who mostly just observes what other people are posting, but rarely participates, that is literally bad for your mental health. Psychologists know the reason. You're comparing yourself to other people; and when we consistently compare our lives to the lives of others, we feel worse.

When we compare ourselves to others, it's never a fair comparison. Because we know everything about ourselves, and we know only a little about anyone else. "Don't compare your insides to someone else's outsides," the common maxim says. So often we look at someone who really seems to have their life together. They have a great job, great house—nice family, time for hobbies. Then we look at ourselves—health issues, financial issues, insecurity. We can't help but feel less-than. But when you look enviously or even admiringly at someone else's life, you're just seeing the outside. We're surrounded by outsides. You're seeing what that person works very hard for you to see—we all do it.

One of the true privileges of my life and my calling as a rabbi is the invitation into the reality of people's lives. And so I often am allowed to see that the family that seems perfect from the outside struggles as much as anyone else. Their lives are touched by illness, self-doubt, failing marriages, and job insecurity. And looking from the outside, you would never suspect any of these things. Looking at them, it would be natural to envy their "easy" life. Comparing ourselves to others. It just doesn't work.

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<sup>4</sup> A good overview can be found in Steers, Wickham, and Acitelli, "Seeing Everyone Else's Highlight Reels: How Facebook Usage is Linked to Depressive Symptoms." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* (33:8), 2014. 701-731.

Facebook is a special case, where the problem of comparison is even worse. Here, people are able to control tightly the image they create. Their lives are not really a stream of beautiful meals, sunsets, and family moments—these are just the things they choose to show. People are not posting about their fights with their siblings. Or their addictions. Or layoffs. Social media allows us to present a version of ourselves where these things don't exist. I know you know it, but we forget.

Writing about the selectivity of people's online personas, data scientist Seth Stevens-Davidowitz points out that the *Atlantic* and the *National Enquirer* sell roughly the same number of magazines in the U.S. And Google searches for the *Atlantic* and *National Enquirer*, which are anonymous, of course, are pretty equal. But on Facebook, 27 times as many people like the prestigious *Atlantic* than like the questionable *Enquirer*.<sup>5</sup> Are people trying to seem more sophisticated than they are? Of course! So it's no wonder that comparing ourselves to others on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram makes us feel unsophisticated, and unaccomplished, and frankly, unattractive. We're comparing our insides to their outsides. We're comparing our day-to-day to their highlight reel.

But imagine, for a second, that it were possible to compare ourselves to those around us in an unbiased way. That *still* would not be a good measure of our success in life or as human beings. The key here is a famous teaching of a rabbi named Ben Zoma in Pirkei Avot: "Who is rich? One who is content with their portion."

This is one of Judaism's most profound teachings for personal fulfillment: "Who is rich? One who is content with their portion."

Secular society tells us, "Who is rich? The one who...is rich. The one who has the most things." But Ben Zoma says that misunderstands the meaning of richness. After all, having many possessions is no guarantee of happiness. The midrash teaches, "He who has one hundred wants two hundred."<sup>6</sup> There is no end to acquiring wealth.

But to be content with your portion? That is true richness. The Torah teaches that when the Israelites wandered in the Wilderness, God provided them with a miraculous food called manna. The manna would fall from the heavens each day, and each Israelite would have to go out and collect enough for that day's food. But another miracle occurred: no matter how much manna a person would gather, when they returned to their tent, they would find that they had

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<sup>5</sup> *Everybody Lies: Big Data, New Data, and What the Internet Can Tell Us About Who We Really Are* (Dey Street Books, 2017), pp. 150-151.

<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:34.

brought home exactly one omer, a Biblical measure a little more than two liters. You could labor in the field for hours, gathering every scrap of manna you could, piling up huge amounts in a basket; when you returned home, it would be exactly one omer. And perhaps on a difficult day you would find only scattered manna, enough to cover the bottom of your basket. That too, would turn out to be exactly one omer. This is to teach us that despite what we may perceive, we are each given in life exactly the right portion. If it seems that we are lacking, that is merely an appearance—we do still have a full portion. And if we struggle and strive to add to our allotted portion, it will do us no good. Our portion is where we are balanced and rich.<sup>7</sup>

Being happy with our portion—we might also call this self-acceptance. We are not the wealthiest, nor the most accomplished. We have failings. All this we can accept. We can be rich, but we first have to be honest. We have to be willing to look at ourselves, to see our faults, our relationships, our place in the world for what they really are, and decide that they're OK. We can make ourselves rich, not in comparison to any other, but by accepting ourselves unconditionally, because we are human. And because we have faith that God has given us a portion fitting for a being created in the divine image.

So if we've stopped comparing ourselves to others, become rich by rejoicing in what we have—does that mean there is no need for us to change? Of course not. No matter where we are in life, there is always the opportunity for us to do *teshuvah*, to make ourselves better. Our ability to improve does not depend on measuring ourselves against other people. In fact, comparing ourselves to others can prevent us from growing. Consider Noah in the Torah. The Torah tells us, "*Noah ish tzadik haya b'dorotav*" "Noah was a righteous man in his generation."<sup>8</sup> Our Sages were quick to ask, "What does the Torah mean, 'in his generation?'" Noah was righteous, they decided, but only in comparison to the people who lived just before the Flood—and they were *terrible*! If Noah had lived in the generation of Abraham, he wouldn't have been considered righteous.<sup>9</sup> According to this teaching, Noah's self-evaluation is distorted by comparing himself to others. He saw that he was more moral than those around him; but if he had an independent moral sense, he might have realized that true righteousness requires at least speaking up to protect the lives of all the people on earth.

This brings us to a famous story:

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<sup>7</sup> Based on Rabbi Pinchas Winston, *If Only I Were Wealthy*, Thirtysix.org.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 6:9.

<sup>9</sup> Rashi famously mentions this midrash in his comment on Genesis 6:9.

A rabbi named Zusya of Hanipol died and went to stand before the judgment seat of God. As he waited for God to appear, he grew nervous thinking about his life and how little he had done. He began to imagine that God was going to ask him, "Why weren't you Moses or why weren't you Solomon or why weren't you David?" But when God appeared, the rabbi was surprised. God simply asked, "Why weren't you Zusya?"<sup>10</sup>

Are you a good person? Do you have a good life? You don't have to be a hero. You don't have to compete with that woman from high school, or your friend who keeps running marathons. Were you fully yourself? Did you fulfill your potential for doing good in the world? This is when we are good, and rich.

And at Yom Kippur we know that each year we have the opportunity to improve. Why were you not Zusya? So many times this year, we failed to live up to our best selves.

Was this a good year? We've offered three steps to answer. First, don't compare yourself to anyone else. Do not judge your wealth by theirs or your happiness by theirs and certainly not your goodness. Second, practice self-acceptance. The admirable parts of you and the less admirable. They all add up to a human being, you, and you are worthy of God's image and human dignity. Be rich by finding happiness in your portion in life. And then third, from a place of acceptance, embark on change. Change not to be more like anyone else. Change to be more like yourself, the parts of yourself you most admire.

On Yom Kippur, you will not be asked why you were not like Moses. You will not be asked why you were not like Esther. You will not be asked why you were not like your best friends. You will not be asked why you were not like your neighbors. But you will be asked why you didn't live up to yourself. That is the standard. That is the mark. And every year we miss the mark, and we gather here for atonement.

May God show us mercy and grant us atonement. May we be whole, and may we be rich. And may we be inscribed for a year of goodness and blessing in the book of life.

*G'mar chatimah tovah.*

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (Schocken, 1991), p. 251.