

Rosh HaShanah 5776
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Scientists have recently discovered something fascinating about human gene expression. “Human gene expression” refers to things like the numbers of antibodies we produce, or the numbers of years our bodies can live. Each of us has a genetic potential. The choices we make, the challenges we face, and the time and place we live all influence whether or not we can reach our genetic potential.

Over the past number of years, a group of UNC and UCLA scientists have been studying how different types of emotions effects our genes, how the way we feel impacts our human gene expression. At first, the scientists focused on negative emotions like fear, anger, sadness, and guilt. Across the board, all these things led to negative human gene expression— weaker antibody systems and unhealthy histamine levels. Not surprisingly, stress can shorten our lives. But then these scientists wondered, if negative emotions could impact gene expression negatively, could positive emotions, such as happiness and joy, effect positive change in things like our immune systems? The answer is yes.

Nearly 2 million people in the United States have either heart bypass surgery or angioplasties every year. The procedures relieve chest pains for a short time, but rarely prevent heart attacks or prolong lives. Around half the time bypass grafts clog up in a few years and the angioplasties in only a few months. Occasionally this happens as a reaction to the trauma of the surgery but mostly it happens because patients do not change their lifestyles. Dr. Edward Miller, dean of the medical school and CEO of the hospital at Johns Hopkins University, states, “If you look at people after coronary artery bypass two years later, 90 percent of them have not changed their lifestyle. Even though they know they have a very bad disease and they know they should change, for whatever reason, they can't.”

Dr. Dean Ornish, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, has figured out why. Doctors had been trying to motivate patients mainly with the fear of death, he says, and that simply wasn't working. For a few weeks after a heart attack, patients were scared enough to do whatever their doctors said. But soon their denial would return and they'd go back to their old ways.

Instead of trying to motivate them with the "fear of dying," Ornish reframes the issue. He inspires a new vision of the "joy of living"—convincing them they can feel better, not just live longer. That means enjoying the things that make daily life pleasurable and living a full life without the pain caused by their disease. "Joy is a more powerful motivator than fear," he says. With that intention, Dr. Ornish took 333 patients with severely clogged arteries and put them on a rigorous program that included a special diet, twice-weekly group support sessions, and instructions in meditation, relaxation, yoga, and aerobic exercise. The program lasted for a year and always focused on the joy of living versus the fear of dying. After three years, 77 percent of his patients had stuck with their lifestyle changes, avoiding additional bypass or angioplasty surgeries. Why? The answer: they were focusing on the joy.

We can change when we focus on the joy.

Jack Nicklaus, arguably the greatest golfer ever to play the game, did this for every shot. He writes, "I never hit a shot even in practice without having a sharp, focused picture in my head. It's like a color movie. First, I "see" the ball where I want it to finish, nice and white and sitting up high on the bright green grass. Then the scene quickly changes, and I "see" the ball going there: its path, trajectory, and shape, even its behavior on landing. Then there's a sort of fade-out, and the next scene shows me making the kind of swing that will turn the previous images into reality and only at the end of this short private Hollywood spectacular do I select a club and step up to the ball."

Nicklaus and Dr. Ornish's patients were really doing the same thing. They were imagining a good outcome before they acted or changed their approach. We can do the very same thing during these next 10 days until Yom Kippur. We can imagine how much better our lives can be if we change.

Here's our life when we gossip: reputations are damaged, truth is lost, feelings are hurt and lies are perpetuated.

Here's our life when don't gossip: we use our words for goodness and kindness and we take our relationships to much deeper levels with conversations of substance and meaning.

Here's our life when we break our promises: marriages fall apart, relationships with our children suffer, and trust is lost.

Here's our life when we keep our promises: we build stronger and deeper relationships with our family, our friends, and our coworkers. We are known as someone who can be counted on, whom people trust and respect, and who knows that we show up.

Here's our life when we are envious and jealous: what we have is never good enough, which turns into we are never good enough.

Here's our life when we are not envious and jealous: the positive experiences of others opens us up to the possibilities for ourselves. We can share in other's joys thus adding to our own.

Here's our life when we are stubborn: we miss opportunities and we isolate ourselves.

Here's our life when we are not stubborn: we are open to new ideas, new people, seeing the world in a new way, and thus the potential to truly be inspired.

Here's our life when we hold grudges: time is lost and pain and frustration only festers.

Here's our life when we let them go: we reconcile with a friend or family member. We get closer to our spouse or children, and sometimes it's not about forgiving others but for us to be at peace.

Think of all the *al cheits* we read—all 44 of the sins we commit and then imagine how much more beautiful, loving, and meaningful our lives will be if we get rid of at least a few of those sins we all commit.

Jacob Rosen understands this....

"For nearly five years I did not speak to my daughter, my only child. I was a controlling, overbearing, and hypercritical father. I can admit that now. I don't remember the exact date but it was fairly soon after my wife—her mother—died that Sarah finally had enough and informed me that she wasn't going to be calling anymore and for me to please not call her. She was 23 and she was done with me. I was numb. Then the numbness turned to anger. But I was too stubborn to be sad and I wasn't going to be the one to give in. I guess she showed me.

"The years went by and I was lonely, angry, broken, and bitter. I heard from the father of a friend of Sarah's that she had recently married—a small ceremony in the rabbi's study. It was that news that finally broke me. It wasn't anger that I felt...no... it was shame and sadness. What had I done? I started to see a therapist. I guess that was the first step in admitting I had somehow failed. My initial office visit was filled with me blaming Sarah, me feeling sorry for myself, me blaming my wife for somehow not supporting me in my relationship with my daughter. How

could she do this to me? I wasn't who she thought I was! I wasn't around because I worked hard to give her the best. I was tough on her to make her tough. As the sessions continued my therapist asked questions to perhaps broaden my perspective: was I there for her school plays? Did I help with homework? Did I read to her? Did I take care of her when she was sick? Defensively I answered No! And then guiltily I answered no. No, I didn't. And when I was around, I was mean—not tough—but mean. I was wrong. I had to give up being right and now I had to make it right.

“I was able to get Sarah's number from a friend. I was so scared to call; what if she didn't answer? What if she answered and hung up? Sarah?...Yes? It's your father... hi... I'm calling to say... I am sorry...silence...yeah?...I know we haven't spoken in nearly 5 years....But I understand now that I actually missed the first 28 years of your life...I don't want to miss anymore.

“The healing comes slow, but we are healing. Turns out she too is getting counseling. We meet for walks, lunches, and ice cream. Her husband Mike is a good man. She says he's really kind and I see it in the way he looks at her. Turns out I'm going to be a grandfather, and I am going to be the best. I am not naïve to think that all will be forgiven in the blink of an eye; this will take time, but for the first time in a long time I feel light, I feel warmth, I feel hope, I feel joy.”

We are here today to change, to really look deeply into ourselves and move forward toward better lives. Together let's imagine our future full of joy rather than fear. I wish everyone a joyous Shana Tova.