

RUNNING FROM JOY:
THE “KENA HORA” SYNDROME
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Happiness is that supposedly all-desirable, all-elusive state of “being” (in the present tense) happy or feeling joy. Seemingly, people are motivated by the mere possibility of happiness. Families are generated in its honor, countries fight battles and wage war in the pursuit of it. Surely, since it is so positively associated with such prestige and joy, one would think happiness could be worn as easily as a smile; as comfortably as an old, baggy sweat-shirt and as familiarly as your favorite flannel PJs. Unfortunately, it is NOT! People fear showing the face of happiness. Families caution against the demonstration of joy. And countries are wary of the visible stability of a healthy and happy economy.

Having been raised in a NYC Jewish family of European descents in the 50’s and being a psychotherapist by profession, I have been privileged and oftentimes surprised, if not saddened to observe the reluctance, fear and resistance we humans have at the gate of what we verbally express desiring most: happiness. I call this paradoxical phenomenon, the *Kena Hora Syndrome* (actual spelling Kayn Aynhoreh- “The Joys of Yiddish” by Leo Rosten.) Named in honor of my great Aunt Fanny, who taught me that if my good feelings were visible or audible to the naked eye or ear of others, I would get a Kena Hora (i.e. evil eye; something bad would happen to me.) This syndrome is non-sexist, non-racist and it is not a socio-economic elitist phrase. It permeates time, crosses cultures and is multi-lingual. There are several antidotes.

To protect me from a Kena Hora, Aunt Fanny taught me to quickly throw salt from the shaker over my shoulder or to spit three times, quickly in succession saying “poo, poo, poo,” aloud (to alert the evil spirits that I knew I had made a terrible mistake in saying something good out loud or visibly expressing happiness) and to hope they would be scared away by my “pooing.” I preferred the salt technique to the spitting, although I loved Aunt Fanny’s dramatic preference for “pooing.” My friend Kay’s Greek family version of warding off the evil spirits came in the form of her mother’s reprimanding voice saying, “ahma zisomi os avrio,” (the phonetic

version) which meant, “If we live until tomorrow,” signifying for Kay not to test the Gods with her unbridled joy and anticipatory excitement about upcoming events. As if this warning to Kay about avoiding expected joy or pleasure was not enough, there was another family favorite that sounded like “Na mi vas ka these,” said to ward off the hex that might befall someone who had been excessive with praise.

In therapy sessions, I have witnessed people who express joy about their lives look frantically around my office to “knock on wood” three times to protect themselves from the very expression of that joy they supposedly so fervently desire. “mea culpa, mea culpa,” another audible favorite, is said while clients beat their own hearts with their fists to inhibit tangible joy and to indicate fault and blame- two more feelings not conducive to personal growth. What a conundrum!

Jeannie reported in session just this week that “a way that I handle feeling happy is to tell myself that it’s OK to feel this way because I’ll probably be dead from cancer (same as her mom) in four months!” John a client of Italian descent, was given a golden horn to decorate his neck at an early age and told that wearing this would keep the evil spirits away. Anytime he said good things about himself, expressing joy or pride or positive affection, he was warned to quickly touch the horn. I have actually seen charms that look like eyes used in the same manner. Ancient tribes used talismans, herbs or special beads similarly. These are not mere superstitious symbols acknowledging the existence of forces of light and dark, or energies of yin and yang, in the world. When they are used, worn and ascribed to as an antidote for “too much” happiness, I have seen devastating results- almost like a habitual avoidance of happiness at all costs.

This toxic vaccination appears in the fear of being “too happy, too soon” as in anticipated joy vs. the all-too-apparent and epidemic, anticipatory angst. *People fear being happy because they imagine the disappointment or pain associated with the loss of happiness would be worse if they let the feeling of joy dominate.* This is distorted reality. Once possibly true in childhood, it does not apply in adulthood where the nervous system is sturdier and emotions more differentiated. The fear of being happy too long or too openly, also associated with magnetizing envy, bad luck, personal harm or

devastation, while very much a part of the history of the Jewish, Irish, Indian, Greek and Asian cultures (to name a few) does not necessarily have to be an integral part of our present experience. Its fearful head, however, looms large in the reflected mirror of many of our habitual mages. The tribal or familial imprint of the fear of happiness can be transformed in adulthood with early recognition of the Kena Hora Syndrome, courage, awareness, discipline, sense of humor and daring and the willingness to shift from habitual family patterns to non-habitual personal choices. Did anyone ever have only *one* emotion throughout his or her life? Did anyone's emotional expression remain consistent forever? Has anyone you read about or knew personally ever really "drowned in their tears" or "happied themselves to death?" All emotions are temporary and subject to change. We might as well feel them all while we can. After all, the nature of life is the continuing process of finding the courage to live in fullness.

Embrace happiness as well as pain. They are both transient and can be used as insightful teachers of lessons, guideposts to consciousness and personal growth. Emotions are at the core of healthy human expression and healing. Happiness, joy, pleasure and even unrequited anticipatory excitement produce elements in our brain chemistry essential to our *wholing* and healing process. Research has indicated that the neurotransmitting chemicals produced in the brain during pleasurable experiences and/or thoughts are exactly the right chemistry to help us feel strong, capable, healthy, alive, in control and yes- even happy- safely. We've heard much about "Safe sex" in today's media, perhaps this article can be a step towards "Safe joy."

I do not believe that the pursuit of happiness or joy should become anyone's "Holy Grail." The "happily ever after" endings that fairy tales and Hollywood offer us are illusory and can be dangerous to us if used as a barometer of our own experiences. Inner peace, self-satisfaction and personal serenity are attainable goals, each leading to an appropriate experience of happiness. While happiness and joy are as temporary as rain, so are sadness, anger and all the other emotions necessary for our inner and outer environment homeostasis. A sign I adore hangs in my yoga teacher's studio: *Serenity is not freedom from the storm, but peace within the storm.*

As an antidote to running from joy, I offer the following: Label the Kena Hora Syndrome when you notice it in yourself. You can find it in: Your addiction to what's not OK; your persistently pessimistic view of life; your negative perceptions (i.e. seeing the glass half empty when the opposite is equally as true) and/or your behavioral aversions to joy, happiness and anticipatory excitement (i.e. Aunt Fanny's version of throwing salt or "pooing".)

Choose happiness and face your fears and habits. Have the courage to face the evil spirits if they do come and know that their arrival and your happiness are NOT necessarily intricately linked. Practice positivity in your perceptions and emotions: and with courage and humor, dare the evil spirits to steal your joy.

You may find that the Kena Hora Syndrome no longer permeates your being so thoroughly. You may find that you actually have more real troubles, but your habitual imaginary ones will surely be far fewer. You will have more fun, more joy and greater happiness in your life. You will still have problems. These are inclusive in life's nature. But ultimately, you will have that all elusive, yet most desirable commodity on life's menu- the undiluted experiences of joy and happiness that truly reside in the Kingdom of Heaven. Even Aunt Fanny wouldn't have "poo pooed" that.