

Todd Patkin and the pursuit of happiness

After battling depression, he helps others banish their demons

By Steve Maas
Advocate Editor

If Todd Patkin is as successful in his new enterprise as he was at selling auto parts, a lot more of us will be smiling.

Patkin is in the happiness business. He's literally written the book on it, "Finding Happiness: One Man's Quest to Beat Depression and Anxiety and – Finally – Let the Sunshine In."

When he gets wound up – which requires little prompting – he speaks of himself on a mission for G-d. But he's quick to dismiss notions that he's any sort of messiah. He doesn't want people to think he's nuts.

And, given his track record, first in the business world, then in the political and charitable worlds, he shouldn't worry what people think. Just the latest example: the Jewish National Fund recognized him for his contributions at its annual New England Golf Tournament.

Raised in Needham, Patkin spent the first dozen years of his career working 60-plus-hour weeks helping to build up his family's business, Autopart International. A natural showman, he put his entire body to work to pump up his sales team – and that proved to be his undoing and ultimately his remaking.

One Saturday, he was giving a pep talk to managers in a company warehouse. As dramatic flourish, he jumped onto a chair and then jumped off, his dress shoes landing with a crack on the concrete floor. He broke bones in both his feet.

The worst part of the injury was that it forced him to suspend his intense exercise routine of three-mile jogs and weight lifting. Since his childhood, exercise had been his way to escape his inner demons, his anxieties, his insecurities, his tendency to replay, like a broken record, any embarrassing or guilt-ridden moments.

Added to that, Patkin was a self-admitted hypochondriac and, despite doctors' assurances of a full recovery, envisioned himself crippled for life.

The once hyperactive overachiever suffered a nervous breakdown. Medication pulled him back from the brink – and he still takes it – but Patkin credits a new outlook on life for reviving his spirit.



Todd Patkin flanked by his wife, Yadira, and son, Josh, during the 2007 Boston Marathon.

Set for life since his family sold the business six years ago, Patkin now spends much of his time visiting schools, synagogues, civic groups – anyone who'll listen – to promote his gospel of joy.

In the book, the 46-year-old Foxborough resident talks about his life in, at times, painful detail. He also offers tips for raising kids and managing employees, concluding with a 12-week program for living a happier life. With "The Doctor Is In" boxes scattered throughout the book, clinical psychologist Howard J. Rankin provides advice and scientific background.

In an interview with *The Advocate*, Patkin talked about Judaism and guilt, the perils of perfectionism and how childhood experiences can haunt you for a lifetime.

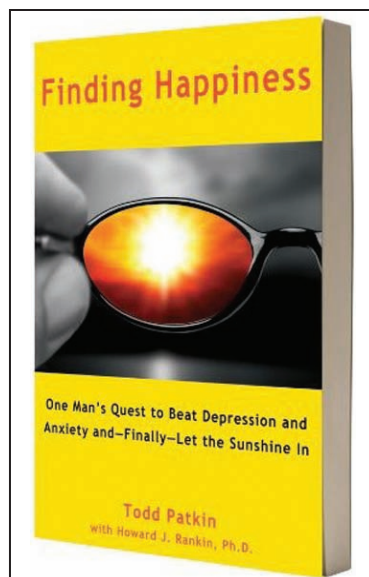
Q: Do Jews do this to themselves more than other people?

A: I always felt growing up a lot of Jewish guilt. I don't know how it is different in other religions and other cultures, but in the way we're brought up, we're told you should do well in school and that you should be good to other people and that we're held to a very high standard. I know that nowadays if you speak to immigrant families, whether Japanese or Chinese, the kids who do so well in school say we're held to such a high standard; we're supposed to be perfect.

Q: Can you recall times when you felt particularly pressured by Jewish guilt?

A: I internally felt that I needed to get straight A's. I felt when I wasn't able to stick it out in overnight camp I was compared to my brother. The idea was, why can't you stick it out, if he could stick it out.

Q: Why couldn't you stick it out?



Todd Patkin will be speaking at Temple Sinai in Sharon on Sept. 15 at 7 p.m. For details, call 781-784-6081 or email JRoseWard@temple-sinai.com.

A: Growing up, I had always had issues of being clingy when my parents went away. The minute I got on the bus to camp I was a mess, and for 72 hours I was really out of mind. I couldn't think of anything else other than, "Oh, my G-d, I just got to get home." Finally, after three days, I tried to drink paint. It wasn't because I was trying to kill myself, but to show people that they've really got to send me home or else I'm going to do something drastic. Fortunately, I was sent home.

Q: What was going through your mind?

A: I assume I just felt like I'd never see my parents again, that something would happen to them or something to me. I would look at the clock and say to myself, "How am I going to survive this?" My mother had become my security blanket. When I was around Mom, I could relax. When I was out of the house, I was a nervous kid.

Q: How do you suggest parents go about deciding whether their kids are ready for camp?

A: Among Jewish families in the Sharon-Boston area, it's kind of understood that when your kids get to be a certain age, they go to camp. I disagree with that. I think kids grow up differently emotionally. Some might be ready at 8, some might never be ready. Only if the kids want to go should you send them.

The worst thing that can happen is that someone goes too soon like me.

Q: In retrospect, what do you wish had happened at camp?

A: I had to come home. I was one of those one-out-of-25 kids who couldn't cope.

I'm OK, I've had my highs and my lows. It has affected me when I'm going on trips. Let's say I'm going to Israel and going to be away from my family for 10 days. I will be nervous because of what happened to me when I was 9 or 10. I'll go, but I'll have a pit in my stomach. A lot of earlier traumas often come back to affect us in later years.

Q: Will that pit in the stomach stay with you?

A: The minute I'm on the plane I'll start having the time of my life.

Q: How do you explain that?

A: I may still have the fear of a little kid, but I'm an adult now. I know that it's an irrational fear. I'm aware that this is a certain weakness that I have, and I just have to push through it.

Q: What techniques can people use?

A: At my age I don't get homesick when I'm away. I get nervous that I might get homesick, so I know I just have to

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Todd Patkin

push through it, and that once I'm away I'll be fine.

Q: So you get swept up in distractions?

A: Let's say I was in Israel and had absolutely nothing to do the whole day – that would make me uncomfortable.

Q: Talk about your breakdown.

A: I'm convinced that the reason I had a breakdown was because I had become addicted to exercise. I made a motivational speech and broke both my feet when I jumped down, and I couldn't exercise. Three months later we had a personal tragedy. Normally, I would have been able to work through that because I would have gone to a gym. But because I couldn't exercise, I couldn't pull myself out. That led to my demise.

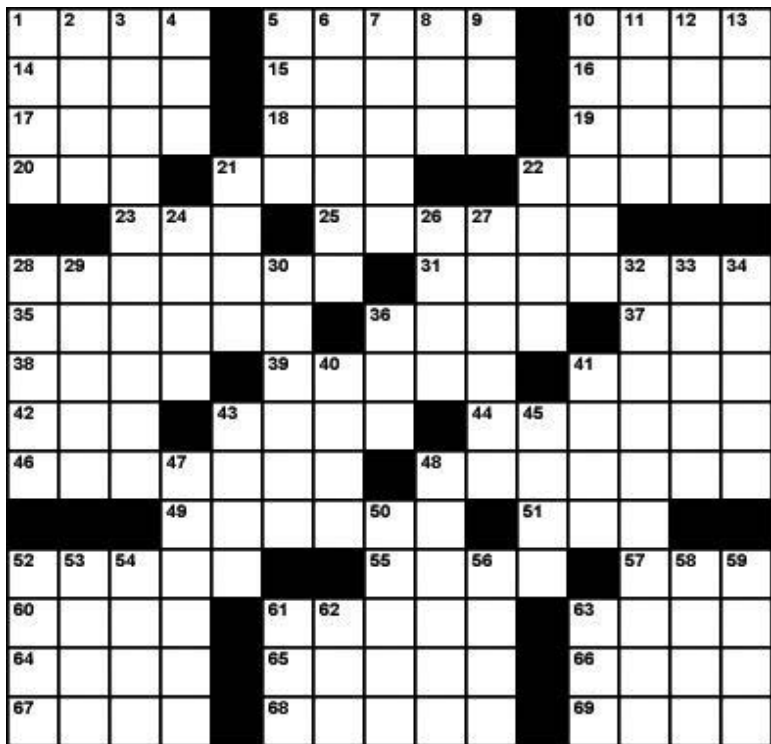
Q: What was key in bringing you back?

A: Medicine. 100 percent. If you have a breakdown, you have to take medicine because of the neurons in your brain. I think the exercise had been a great anti-depressant. The greatest gift for me was that I lost my ability to exercise, because if I hadn't I would never have gotten so low that I would have said, "Todd, you've got to change the way you're living your life." It was the breakdown that got me to the point where I finally said I'm no longer going to ruin my life by beating myself up for every wrong thing I do, by being a perfectionist, by making myself crazy.

Q: You talk about how difficult you've made your life by being a perfectionist. But after reading the book, I'm left wondering whether you're still a perfectionist, as you keep emphasizing the importance of people being the best that they can be?

A: Yes I want to do the best I can, but it doesn't affect me when I make a mistake anymore. I believe that I'm a very good honest person who tries to do the best he can. It's an

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- Across**
- 11. __ Hashanah
 - 5. Prayed for
 - 10. Israeli city
 - 14. Israeli city
 - 15. JPSA founder, Cyrus
 - 16. Nizer bargain?
 - 17. Kill biblically
 - 18. False witnesses
 - 19. Mark Roth target
 - 20. Native American Shalom?
 - 21. "Founders and Sons," author
 - 22. Abraham had only one
 - 23. Kvetch (Eng)
 - 25. Eden
 - 28. Cossacks attacks
 - 31. "Secret" Jew
 - 35. Imitate Bar Kochba
 - 36. Emcee _ Parks
 - 37. Rachel to Joseph
 - 38. Tzedakah purpose
 - 39. Landers sisters
 - 41. Bris star
 - 42. Noodge (Eng)
 - 43. Zim carrier
 - 44. "Catch-22" author
 - 46. Home for Rothschild?
 - 48. Gompers and Goldwyn
 - 49. Simeon to brothers
 - 51. Screech
 - 52. Balaam's boss?
 - 55. Jack Kirby creation
 - 57. Mt Hermon feature?
 - 60. Solomon's digs
 - 61. Tent for Abraham
 - 63. Remain
 - 64. Italian Shalom
 - 65. Zohar author
 - 66. "Abba" to Marceau
 - 67. "Blazing Saddles," actress
 - 68. "The Bridal Canopy," writer

- 69. Cleo killers
- Down**
- 1. Hurry
 - 2. Accords city
 - 3. New York Met
 - 4. Dreidel letter
 - 5. Allen film, Annie __
 - 6. Like Haman or Amalek
 - 7. Tu B'Shvat activity
 - 8. Ever to Bialik
 - 9. Salk and Sabin
 - 10. Emerge
 - 11. 152
 - 12. Larson's Broadway musical
 - 13. Seder manner
 - 21. Freud inventions
 - 22. Schmutz (Eng)
 - 24. Negev climate
 - 26. Joseph's dream
 - 27. Weekly sedrah
 - 28. Face (Yid)
 - 29. Roberta Peters genre
 - 30. Lee Strasberg acting style
 - 32. Biblical enemies
 - 33. Agnon and Sachs prize
 - 34. Measurements
 - 36. Marceau character
 - 40. Seder drink
 - 41. Magen David hue
 - 43. Fabric
 - 45. Valley (Heb.)
 - 47. Add za'atar
 - 48. Chagall's workshop
 - 50. Like Samson's hair
 - 52. "Fiddler" composer
 - 53. Richard Tucker solo
 - 54. Laban's eldest
 - 56. Seder position
 - 58. Gefilte Fish?
 - 59. Soul windows
 - 61. __ Carte
 - 62. Mossad activity?
 - 63. Ein Gedi



Patkin, here visiting Israel, is a board member of the Jewish National Fund.

Philanthropist makes happiness his mission

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exercise. I work at saying, "Let it go, Todd." Instead, I think about all the good things I do for people.

Q: Did you have any particular moments of epiphany during your recovery?

A: It was as simple as me saying, "Todd you have more money than just about anyone you know. You have a beautiful wife, a wonderful son. You're healthy and you brought yourself to the point where for a day or two you literally wanted to kill yourself. What happened? Why not just break free and enjoy yourself? Somehow I was able to do it.

Q: What made you write the book?

A: I truly believe that G-d put me on this earth to make a difference. I've always felt this way. ... I just love people, even people I haven't met yet. I believe in my heart that G-d chose me to have a very difficult young life. I realize that it's nothing He did, but it's the American culture and the way that we're made to be really hard on ourselves and make ourselves miserable that brought me to a breakdown. And now He wants me to spread the message that until you learn to love and accept yourself for who you are, you'll never be happy. And most of us still feel that we're not as good as we should be.

Q. You talk about the importance of having a well-rounded life, yet you were putting in these ridiculous hours?

A. Growing up I knew that because my self-esteem was so low that I needed to marry



A standout athlete from his youth, Patkin said he became addicted to exercise.

someone who would like an old-fashioned marriage. I realized internally that I'm going to need to work all the time to satisfy my ego. So I needed a wife who would want to stay home and take care of the house and baby. And here G-d gave me the perfect woman.

When we first got married, I had just taken over the [auto parts] chain. It's amazing my dad asked me to run the 18 stores at such a young age. I worked six days a week. I killed myself. Loved it. It was exciting. And then because my wife is all about family, when the company started to become very successful, she started to feel bad. She said, "Todd, I don't understand. Don't you love me and Josh? I understood before when you first took over the chain, the company wasn't making any money. You

were afraid. Now it's so good, you don't need to be doing this."

But I was more comfortable. My next book might be on workaholics. I believe it is easier for men to go to work, get promoted, get raises, say "I'm a hero." When you're at home, you can't really judge: Am I an A dad, a B dad? – and get that satisfaction.

What's success? Let's say there is a guy who builds a company from scratch and sells it for a billion dollars. Now, he's 80 years old and realizes he never knew his kids; he never had a lot of friends. And he was stressed out his entire life and never was really satisfied.

Conversely, there's another guy who was a gym teacher, who was happy his whole life and has all these kids who say he changed their lives.

The problem is most young Americans would say, of course, the more successful person is the billion dollar guy.

But who is really successful?

Q. Do you ever get push back from people about what's so important about happiness?

A. No, I think everybody wants to be happy.

Q. But isn't there more to life than being happy?

A. No, that's the whole thing about guilt. I have "12 Weeks to Living a Happier Life" on my Web site [findinghappinessthebook.com]. I'll talk about exercise, reading books. At the end of each segment, I say to the adult watching, please remember to make your own happiness your No. 1 priority this week, for your kids' sake, because your kids will always be like you.

Solution to this week's crossword puzzle

