



Shabbat Table Discussions

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A businessman on vacation once passed a fisherman who was packing up his equipment in the middle of the afternoon. The businessman asked the fisherman why he stopped so early to which the fisherman responded "I caught enough fish for the day. Now I can go home, relax and spend time with my family." The businessman told him that he can be much more successful if he worked harder and started to outline a fifteen year plan for the fisherman to expand his business into a multimillion dollar fishing company. The fisherman then asked "What happens when I own a multimillion dollar fishing company?" The businessman responded "You can sell the company, retire, sleep late, spend part of your day fishing on the beach and the rest of the day relaxing with your family," to which the fisherman responded "Isn't that what I do now?"

Every morning, Eli rushes his siblings out of the house so that he can get to school a few minutes early. One morning, halfway to school, his sister realized that she left an important homework assignment at home and asked if they can turn around and pick up the assignment. Without hesitating, Eli said to his mother "Even though getting to school early is very important to me, don't let that affect your decision."

We are sometimes presented with opportunities that can have a major impact on our lives and those who are close to us. The decision to pursue that opportunity will often factor in whether we are content with our current situation and whether the new opportunity will bring greater satisfaction. Let's look at the following scenarios:

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CASE ONE

Chana and her brother, Michael, have been running a small but successful camp for the past few summers. Michael would like to allocate more of their budget towards advertising and marketing the camp to make sure that their enrollment stays the same or increases. Chana doesn't want to increase enrollment, even if it means making more money. She also thinks that Michael is being pessimistic when he says that if they don't advertise, enrollment will drop. What guidance can we give them to work out their conflict?

CASE TWO

While Steven is very happy with his current job, he was just offered an exciting new job opportunity. The one drawback of this new position is that he will have to do a lot more travelling to other cities. He would like to include his children in the decision process. What issues can they focus on?

CASE THREE

Jill and Tova are very good friends and both entered a national scholarship contest. They both made it to the semi-final round and Jill ultimately won. Jill's parents would like to hold a small reception for Jill to commemorate her achievement. How might Jill approach Tova to invite her to the reception? How might Tova be advised to respond?

Examining the sources

We may be familiar with the words of the Mishna in Pirkei Avot (4:1) that states “Who is wealthy? One who is happy with one’s lot (איזהו עשיר השמח בחלקו).” On the surface, the Mishna seems to be teaching us that we shouldn’t pursue advancement and we should be happy with whatever we have. The true measurement of wealth is not based on one’s assets, but based on one’s satisfaction. However, understanding the Mishna this way presents a number of difficulties:

Question for the Table

- Why does the Mishna use the term “wealthy” to describe someone who is happy with what they have? Wouldn’t a term such as “satisfied” be more accurate?
- If the purpose of the Mishna is to teach us not to pursue wealth and advancement, why doesn’t it say so explicitly?

A comment of Rambam, where he discusses wealth as being a prerequisite for prophecy (*Shabbat* 92a), sheds light on the meaning of the Mishna:

“Wealthy” is a positive character trait. What I mean by this is the trait of satisfaction because our rabbis called someone who is satisfied with their lot a wealthy person and they said in defining wealthy, “Who is wealthy? One who is happy with one’s lot.” This means that one is satisfied with one’s current situation and does not despair over what one has not received.

Rambam, Introduction to Avot, Chapter 7

ועשיר היא ממעלות המידות, רצוני לומר: ההסתפקות, לפי שהם יקראו המסתפק בחלקו עשיר, והוא אומרם בגדר העשיר: "אי זה הוא עשיר, השמח בחלקו", כלומר שהוא מסתפק במה שהמציא לו הזמן, ואינו מצטער על מה שלא המציא לו.

שמונה פרקים להרמב"ם פרק ז'

According to Rambam, “wealthy” is not an actual status but a character trait. Like other character traits such as being calm or kind, being “wealthy” is a trait most closely associated with being satisfied or happy.

By classifying “wealthy” as a character trait, one must then apply Rambam’s general rule regarding character traits. According to Rambam, Introduction to Avot (*Shemoneh Perakim*), chapter 4 (and *Hilchot Dei’ot*, chapter 1), all character traits have different levels of extremity and one should always find the proper balance for one’s traits. For example, one shouldn’t be so calm as to not react to an emergency. One must be able to act calmly in situations where it is beneficial and less calm in situations where it is not. How would one apply this to the trait of “wealth” or satisfaction? When is satisfaction beneficial and when is it not? Rambam provides us with the answer to this question:

Satisfaction lies between the extremes of love of material possessions and laziness.

Rambam, Introduction to Avot (Shemoneh Perakim), Chapter 4

וההסתפקות, ממוצעת בין אהבת הממון והעצלות.

שמונה פרקים להרמב"ם פרק ד'

Questions for the Table

- Why does Rambam consider laziness to be the opposite of love of material possessions? Should it not be that the two extremes are rejection of material possessions and love of material possessions? Why is satisfaction the perfect balance between the two extremes?
- In case #1, in which we discuss the expanding of the camp, how might we determine the validity of Chana's claim? What questions could we ask Michael?

The Talmud presents a number of opinions regarding the question of "who is wealthy?" While R. Meir's answer seems to be very similar to the answer in the Mishna, the opinion of R. Tarfon seems to be the exact opposite:

Our rabbis taught: Who is wealthy? Anyone who is content with their wealth. These are the words of R. Meir ... R. Tarfon said: Anyone who has one hundred vineyards and one hundred fields and one hundred servants working them.

Shabbat 25b

תנו רבנן איזה עשיר כל שיש לו נחת רוח בעשרו דברי רבי מאיר ... רבי טרפון אומר כל שיש לו מאה כרמים ומאה שדות ומאה עבדים שעובדין בהן.
שבת כה:

R. Avraham Y. Kook in his commentary on this Talmudic passage explains the opinion of R. Meir:

"Our rabbis taught: Who is wealthy? Anyone who is content with their wealth. These are the words of R. Meir," because everyone pursues wealth and most people are internally driven towards it. Therefore, one must define its true concept by asking what purpose it serves in the world. Being wealthy can be a cause of satisfaction and tranquility through which one can occupy oneself with the intellectual pursuit of Torah and wisdom and other good things. Therefore, the ultimate purpose of wealth is the tranquility that accompanies it. However, if wealth brings one to commotion, busyness, and scattering of the mind, one is not fulfilling its purpose because wealth is not the end goal, but the means of achieving a state of tranquility and the satisfaction that results from it.

Ain Ayah, Shabbat 25b

ת"ר איזהו עשיר כל שיש לו נחת רוח בעושרו דברי ר"מ מפני שהכל רצין אחר העושר ויש לזה נטיה פנימית אצל רוב בני"א, ע"כ צריך להגדיר את המושג האמיתי של העושר לאיזה מטרה טובה הוא נמצא בעולם. והנה עצם מציאות העושר היא סיבה להרחבת הדעת ושלות הנפש שעל ידן יוכל האדם לעסוק במושכלות, בתורה וחכמה וכל טוב א"כ המגמה האמיתית של העושר היא שלות הנפש הנמצאת על ידו אבל אם יהיה העושר מביא את האדם ידי מהומה וטרדא ופיזור הנפש, אין זאת המטרה של העושר, שהרי עצם העושר אינו המטרה כ"א התולדה של מעמד הנפש השקט והדעה המתרחבת היוצא ממנו.
עין אי"ה שבת כה:

R. Kook continues his explanation by stating that R. Tarfon doesn't disagree with R. Meir regarding the ultimate purpose of wealth. However, he adds that there is another benefit to wealth: to be able to help others. R. Tarfon specifically chose material possessions that are suitable for helping others, including the ability to employ other people

Questions for the Table

- How does R. Kook's approach differ from Rambam's?
- In case #2, what questions could Steven and his family ask that relate to our discussion?

Our sense of satisfaction is not only based on an objective perspective on our own lives, but also where we stand relative to others. Being content with our own lot in life prevents us from feeling deprived when we hear about the success of someone else. Let's illustrate this with the comments of the Midrash that teaches about how Moshe and Aharon reacted to Moshe's appointment as leader of the Jewish people:

When God told Moshe to go on his mission to Pharaoh and Moshe responded (Shemot 4:13) "send whoever you will send," you might think that Moshe was hesitant and didn't want to go. This is not true. Rather, Moshe was honoring Aharon. Moshe said "Until I was appointed, my brother Aharon was prophesying for them in Egypt for eighty years ... All of those years, my brother Aharon was the prophet and now I should enter my brother's domain and cause him agony?" For this reason, Moshe didn't want to go. God told Moshe "Aharon is not bothered by this. Not only is he not agonizing, he is happy. Know that God said to Moshe (Shemot 4:14) "Behold, he is going out to greet you and he will see you and be happy in his heart." It does not say "[he will put on a] happy face" or "he will [appear to] be happy, but rather "he will be happy in his heart (i.e. truly happy)."

Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Shemot no. 27

בשעה שאמר הקב"ה למשה שילך בשליחותו אצל פרעה וא"ל שלח נא ביד תשלח את סבור שמא עכב משה שלא רצה לילך, אינו כן אלא כמכבד לאהרן, אמר משה עד שלא עמדתי היה אהרן אחי מתנבא להם במצרים שמונים שנה ... כל השנים האלו היה אהרן אחי מתנבא ועכשיו אני נכנס בתחומי של אחי ויהיה מיצר לכך לא היה רוצה לילך, אמר ליה הקב"ה למשה לא אכפת לאהרן בדבר זה לא די שאינו מיצר אלא עוד שמח תדע לך שאמר ליה וגם הנה הוא יוצא לקראתך וראך ושמח בלבו אינו אומר ושמח בפיו או ושמח בלבד אלא ושמח בלבו.
מדרש תנחומא, פרשת שמות ס' כז

Questions for the Table

- In what ways is the story of Moshe and Aharon similar to case #3 (the reception for Jill winning the national scholarship contest)? In what ways is it different?
- Why do you think the Midrash stresses the fact that Aharon's joy was authentic? If he wasn't happy for Moshe, should he have faked it?

The Maharal of Prague tells us why Aharon was happy about Moshe's appointment:

This teaches about Aharon that he was not jealous [even] when it would have been reasonable for him to be jealous and agonize about the promotion of his brother being that Aharon was older than Moshe. Nevertheless, he had no jealousy in his heart, for if Aharon had any jealousy at all, he would not have been able to be joyous and the fact that he was joyous teaches that he didn't feel any deficiency.

Chiddushei Agadot Maharal, Shabbat 139b

דבר זה מורה על אהרן שהרי לא היה מקנא במקום שראוי להיות מקנא ומצטער על גדולת אחיו משום שאהרן היה גדול ממנו עם כל זה לא היה לו קנאה בלב שאלו היה לאהרן שום קנאה בלב לכל הפחות לא היה לו שמחה אבל מפני שהיה לו השמחה מורה כי לבו הוסר מכל חסרון.
חידושי אגדות מהר"ל, שבת קלט:

Questions for the Table

- How can being satisfied with one's own lot help us be happy for other people's success?
- How would you apply the discussion about Moshe and Aharon to case #3 (with Jill and Tova)? How could Jill approach the situation? How could Tova?

Our rabbis redefined wealth to teach us that we can achieve satisfaction, simply by changing our perspective. From 2005-2006, Gallup conducted a survey of 136,000 people on the relationship between satisfaction and happiness.¹ The lead researcher, Dr. Ed Diener summarized the results: “The public always wonders: Does money make you happy? This study shows that it all depends on how you define happiness because, if you look at life satisfaction, how you evaluate your life as a whole, you see a pretty strong correlation around the world between income and happiness. On the other hand, it's pretty shocking how small the correlation is with positive feelings and enjoying yourself.”² While our rabbis redefined wealthy as someone who is satisfied, now, it seems that our definition of satisfaction also requires redefinition.

In order to reap the positive benefits of satisfaction, we should try to find the right balance between excessive pursuit of materials goods and trying to find an easy way out; rejoice in the success of others; and make sure that when we are presented with opportunities that we consider the ultimate goals of these opportunities. Like the fisherman, we should look beyond the enticements of these opportunities and ask ourselves how they will contribute to true satisfaction. By doing so, we can infuse our lives and the lives of our family with meaning and purpose and feel fulfilled by all of our endeavors.

In Kohelet (6:7) it states: וגם הנפש לא תמלא, the soul will never be satisfied. We have an inner drive to always do more and look for opportunities to improve our lives. That inner drive does not inhibit us from achieving satisfaction, it contributes to it. When we pursue opportunities that contribute to growth and peace of mind, we can feel satisfied even as we try to grow higher.

Compiled by Rabbi Josh Flug, Director of Torah Research, Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

R. Moshe ben Maimon (also known as Rambam and Maimonides, 1138-1204) is one of the most famous rabbis in Jewish history. His works on Jewish law and Jewish philosophy are extremely influential and are studied regularly by students of Jewish law and philosophy. He began his life in Cordoba, Spain but eventually settled in Egypt.

R. Avraham I. Kook (1865-1935) was the chief Ashkenazi rabbi of Israel under the British Mandate. He studied in the Volozhin Yeshiva and after assuming a few rabbinic posts in Lithuania, he moved to Israel in 1904, while it was under Ottoman rule. He is widely regarded as one of the most influential leaders of Religious Zionism.

R. Yehuda Loew (also known as Maharal of Prague, c. 1520-1609) spent most of his career as the rabbi of Prague, Czech Republic. His writings on Torah, Talmud, Jewish philosophy and mysticism are considered influential works.

Dr. Ed Diener is also known as “Dr. Happiness” for his extensive research on the psychology of well-being. He is currently a senior scientist at Gallup and professor emeritus of Psychology at the University of Illinois.

¹ Ed Diener, et al, “Wealth and happiness across the world: Material prosperity predicts life evaluation, whereas psychosocial prosperity predicts positive feeling,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2010): 52-61. Abstract available at: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20565185>.

² Diana Yates, “Can money buy happiness? Gallup poll asks, and the world answers,” University of Illinois press release, July, 2010, available at: <http://news.illinois.edu/news/10/0701happiness.html>.