

Jewish Happiness

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Today, the average person is wealthier by far than at any other time in human history. Inventions have made life easier and more convenient than ever before. Man is able to control his environment and has more options in life than previous generations ever dreamed of. With numerous inventions that are all time-savers, people enjoy much more leisure time than ever before. And yet, many, if not most, people do not perceive themselves as happy. Seminars to teach unhappy people how to be happy proliferate, and hundreds of books that have sold millions of copies have been written about achieving happiness and sales continue to be brisk. The most popular course in all of Harvard University (in 2006) was a course by Dr. Tal ben Shachar entitled "Positive Psychology," which is a course teaching students how to be happy. Why, then, are people not happy? What is happiness – can it be defined? And, once defined, how is it obtained?

DEFINING HAPPINESS IN THE NON-JEWISH WORLD

Although it is truly a subjective term, probably the best definition of the concept of happiness is "a mental or emotional state of well-being characterized by positive or pleasant emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy." Happiness is not synonymous with pleasure, as people who have had many pleasurable experiences (repeated trips to amusement parks, many one night stands, repeated eating of delicious food are some examples) are often or usually not happy. The feeling of happiness is closer to the feeling of contentment, over a long period of time. One person defined happiness as "overall life satisfaction." But how is this feeling attained and why is it so difficult for most people in the twenty-first century to feel happy, despite having a higher standard of living and much richer lifestyle than any previous generation?

March 20th each year has been designated the "International Day of Happiness." Each year, based on a detailed survey measuring overall life satisfaction, a list of countries that are the most and least happy is published. It is interesting that the country of Israel places near the top each year (number 11 out of over 150 countries in 2016), ahead of the United States, even though Israelis have a lower standard of living than the United States, and Israel has never had one day of peace with its Arab neighbors since its creation. What, then, explains the happiness of Israelis and what determines individual happiness?

A number of studies have focused on what makes people happy. Various analyses have indeed confirmed that it is not about any physical pleasure. Some studies have found that happiness is a function of staying connected to others, and maintaining strong relationships. Others have found that happiness is tied to a sense of purpose as part of a community, that has overall goals. Yet other studies have found that giving to others makes people happy, such as activism and volunteer work. Harvard University has examined the same people over 75 years (!) to determine what causes happiness (268 Harvard students from the graduating class of 1940). This study found that those most satisfied in their social relationships were the happiest.

What all these studies have in common is that happiness is achieved through “spiritual,” non-physical satisfaction. Long before these studies were undertaken, Judaism came to a similar conclusion.

THE HEBREW WORD FOR HAPPINESS

As noted above, people very often associate happiness with “fun” and “having a good time”. But these particular concepts are alien to Jewish thought. There is no word for fun in modern or ancient Hebrew. Thus, Israelis have borrowed an Arabic word, “*kef*,” to express fun. Even the term “having a good time” is unheard of in Hebrew. Thus, Israelis use an idiom, “*La’asot Chaim* - to make life,” to express this idea, because no legitimate expression exists. Obviously, these concepts cannot be the definition of Jewish happiness.

There is another Hebrew word often mistranslated as the Hebrew equivalent of happy - *simcha*. While this may possibly be a close approximation, this is really not the true definition of Jewish happiness. The mitzvah-commandment in the Torah to have *simcha* is most pronounced for one Jewish holiday in the Torah, the holiday of Sukkot.¹ Can these verses possibly command the Jew to be happy only on these seven days of Sukkot? First, how can a person be commanded to feel any abstract emotion such as happiness? Second, why would the holiday of Sukkot, of all other Jewish holidays, be singled out for happiness? Therefore, this Hebrew term cannot mean happy either.

What, then, is the meaning of the word *simcha*? The well-known dictum from Ethics of the Fathers² says that the person who is truly rich is he who is *same’ach* with whatever he possesses. Many mistranslate this as he who is happy with what he has, but it is clear that it really means he who is satisfied with whatever he possesses. Therefore, the word *same’ach* translates (most of the time) as a term of satisfaction or appreciation. This is something G-d can command: to appreciate what you have, to be satisfied with what G-d has given you. The truly rich person, in Jewish terms, is the person who appreciates what he has, no matter how much or how little it is. Then it makes sense to command this specifically on the holiday of Sukkot. This is the holiday after most grain (almost all of the wealth in an agrarian society) was just harvested. It is the time of the year when people can become self-indulged in their physical accomplishments and tend to forget about G-d. It is also a time when some people might be frustrated because they did not receive a larger crop or more wealth. Thus, G-d commands man to be satisfied with what he has. Furthermore, it is on this holiday that G-d also commands man to leave his comfortable home and live in a temporary sukkah in order to truly appreciate what he or she possesses and what G-d has given. He must remember that it could always have been less. As will be shown later on, being satisfied and appreciative can lead to Jewish happiness, but it is not the definition of happiness.

A further investigation into this term, *simcha*, shows that in five distinct places in the book of Deuteronomy, the Jew is commanded to be *same-ach* (full of *simcha*) before G-d³, referring to the Temple. This command seems to make no sense unless we use the definition of “appreciate what you have” to define *simcha*. When one stands before the Creator of the universe and realizes how little one has control of one’s life, only then can a person begin to truly appreciate everything that G-d has given him or her.

¹ Leviticus 23:40 and Deuteronomy 16:14-15

² Avot 4:1

³ Deuteronomy 12:12, 12:18, 14:26, 16:11, 26:7

If there is no Hebrew word for fun and the word *simcha* is not happiness, what, then, is the Hebrew word that most approximates happiness? The word seems to be *osher* (spelled with an *Aleph*, not an *Ayin*, which means wealth), which signifies a sense of what we would call happiness. How does one achieve the *osher* type of happiness? The Bible gives us numerous clues through its verses. Those who hold onto the Tree of Life, that is, the Torah, are called happy (*me-ushar*).⁴ The first verse in the Psalms says that he who does not follow the advice of evildoers and does not go down the path of sinners will be happy.⁵ One who keeps the Sabbath and does not violate it is called happy.⁶ He who sits in the house of G-d (referring either to Torah learning in a Beit Midrash-House of Jewish learning or praying in a synagogue) will be happy.⁷ A person who does righteousness and justice will also achieve happiness.⁸

Any individual who follows the actions prescribed in all these quoted sources does not seem to be a particularly happy person as perceived by most people's standards in today's society. The common thread running through all these verses is that each relates to a spiritual activity, not a physical one. Judaism believes that only through spiritual actions can happiness be achieved.⁹ It seems clear that any physical activity alone cannot bring true happiness. Why not? All physical desires of man such as wealth, pleasure, and power are never totally satisfying. It is man's nature that once these are achieved and these needs are satisfied, a person wants more of the same and in greater intensity. Therefore, as a person desires more and more, he or she will be less and less satisfied and happy. The rabbis said¹⁰ that a person always dies with less than half of his desires fulfilled. How did the rabbis know this to be true and for every person? They explain that no matter how much a person owns or does not have, he or she desires at least double that amount, thinking (at that moment) that if achieved, that will be satisfying. Of course, as soon as double that amount is achieved, the person's new desire is for double of **that** new amount. If, for example, it is monetary wealth that a person thinks will bring happiness, then this person will always be frustrated. There will always be someone who has more money and wealth, and, thus, will cause frustration to everyone who has less (and the person who has the most wealth will never be happy, always worried that he will lose that top spot to someone else). That is part of human nature. True satisfaction in the physical realm, therefore, can never be achieved. Thus, physical pleasure can never lead to true happiness.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL PLEASURES

How do we know that spiritual pleasure is greater than physical pleasure? Other than an innate sense of what really brings contentment and what is really true and false in the world, is there a Jewish source that shows that spiritual pleasure exceeds physical pleasure? The Mishna¹¹ says that if we were to be able to squeeze all physical pleasures experienced by each person in the world living today into one minute, and then to squeeze all those minutes into one ultimate minute of physical pleasure, and then combine all the minutes of all the generations of physical pleasures into one super-intense minute of pleasure (equal to all the physical pleasure that has ever been experienced by man in history), that pleasure would not equal one moment of spiritual pleasure from the World to Come. It is true that in the World to Come, the pleasure will be only spiritual and that we

⁴ Proverbs 3:18

⁵ Psalms 1:1

⁶ Isaiah 56:2

⁷ Psalms 84:5

⁸ Psalms 106:3

⁹ Michtav Mei-Eliyahu, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Eliyahu Dessler, 1978), p. 3

¹⁰ Kohelet Rabbah 1:32

¹¹ Avot 4:17

cannot truly comprehend what that will feel like. But in this world, we can experience both physical and spiritual pleasure. The Mishna is telling us, then, that spiritual pleasure is qualitatively superior to physical pleasure.

This concept is reinforced by a very interesting statement in the Talmud.¹² The passage calls attention to the difference between man and G-d's capacity for pleasure. A human being who is empty of pleasure can be filled up with pleasurable experiences. But once filled with (physical) pleasure, that person can no longer experience more. G-d (spiritual pleasure), on the other hand, even if completely filled with (spiritual) pleasure, can continue to experience more of it. But for a person is completely devoid of (spiritual) pleasure, that individual will feel nothing when such an experience is presented. We know this to be true in the physical world. Once a person's stomach is completely satiated with food, he or she cannot ingest any more, even if the food is the greatest in the world. The desire for this pleasure simply disappears. So, too, it is with sexual pleasure or any other physical pleasure that is experienced again and again. Once a human being reaches his or her limit, the desire and capacity for physical pleasure is gone. But with spiritual pleasures, there is no limit. The ability to love someone else does not dissipate by showing more love, or by receiving more and more. So, too, with every spiritual pleasure in life. There is no limit. That is why the prayer says regarding Shabbat, the day that symbolizes spiritual pleasure. In the Friday night service, Jews recite that the spiritual rest on Shabbat provides them "with holiness and they are saturated with (spiritual) pleasure-oneg,"¹³ another Hebrew name for spiritual pleasure. Jews can be saturated with this physical pleasure and still have a capacity for more.

That is essentially why physical pleasure can never lead to true happiness. All physical pleasure, by its nature, is transitory and is experienced for a short period of time. After a brief period of absence, it is craved once again, but usually in greater doses, as mentioned above. It is true that the memory of a physical pleasure also gives some pleasure, but never as much as the physical pleasure itself. A spiritual experience, on the other hand, also causes pleasure, but that pleasure is much more long-lived, a rich pleasure that does not easily recede over time. Even the memory of a spiritual pleasure can last for a long time and have strong intensity. This type of pleasure can bring happiness in the proper context. A spiritual pleasure need not be religious in nature, but cannot be derived only from the physical experience. Some of these examples of spiritual pleasures are similar to those quoted in the studies above: friendship, personal achievement, music, interaction with one's children, or an especially meaningful book or experience of personal growth.

Based upon this new understanding, the verses previously cited about *osher* now make sense. Each shows an example by which a person can feel happy through a spiritual pleasure. A Torah way of life, for example, if lived properly, gives a person an inner feeling of well-being and satisfaction. A Shabbat, properly experienced, brings feelings that can last well beyond the one day. In fact, the rabbis tell us that the Shabbat experience often continues even until Tuesday, which is the last day to make the concluding blessing to the Sabbath, the Havdalah, if one has not yet done so.¹⁴ By not following the advice of sinners, but, rather, associating with and following the path of righteous people, an individual can experience a spiritual feeling between people who care about each other. The good feelings associated with helping others and doing what is right are also part of this inner spiritual feeling that will help lead a person to a happy life. Finally, learning Torah or praying with

¹² Sukkot 46a

¹³ Friday evening service, in "Magen Avot" prayer

¹⁴ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 299:6

proper devotion gives a person a feeling of accomplishment and spirituality that can change a person's entire attitude about life.

This difference between spiritual and physical happiness helps us to understand a quotation in the Talmud that explains a contradiction. The Talmud¹⁵ asks how can Ecclesiastes in one verse¹⁶ say that *simcha* is worthless and then in another verse¹⁷ say the *simcha* is to be praised. The answer given is that if the *simcha* derives from a mitzvah, then it is to be praised, but if it is not, it is worthless. What does this signify? If we interpret this passage to separate between physical and spiritual "happiness" or satisfaction, then it is understood. If the satisfaction is only in physical terms, then it ultimately is worthless. If it is spiritual satisfaction leading to happiness, then it is to be praised.

HAPPINESS IS A STATE OF MIND

Spiritual activities make a person view life differently, and this change of attitude goes a long way toward bringing about happiness. Happiness is not really a single, isolated feeling. It is a feeling achieved through a range of attitudes and experiences, and a state of being brought about through these activities. The Mishna,¹⁸ for example, says that a person should learn Torah with bread and water. This does not mean that this is the ideal Jewish existence. But if a Jew were able to learn this way and were willing to do so, if need be, he or she could then achieve happiness. Once a person has attained the full understanding that the physical pleasures are less important than the spiritual, happiness is possible. A person's attitude toward life affects all of his or her activities and how they are perceived. So, for example, the Talmud¹⁹ records an individual who said that when he was in love with his wife, he could sleep on a bed of nails and feel comfortable. Now that he is no longer in love with her, a bed with many mattresses is uncomfortable. How we feel about life's events in general profoundly affects how we perceive all our experiences. Two people who have the same encounter can react in opposite ways because of the difference in their attitudes to begin with. Whether it is a tour of a foreign country or a hospital stay, the "happy" person will react positively to all details and events, and will have had a wonderful time, appreciating everything. The "unhappy" person will always find fault and will look for the things that went wrong and that hampered any positive outcome.

How does one achieve the positive attitude that causes happiness? One way is to be constantly involved in spiritual activity. The Talmud²⁰ records that once Rav Bruna prayed especially well and was smiling the entire day. Thus, a truly spiritual experience can have impact on one's general attitude for an entire day or even a week and may involve even the most mundane activities. People who are involved in charity work or who volunteer in hospitals often become uplifted and so appreciative of everything they have that daily activity thereafter becomes a joyous experience. Spiritual activities can put one's life and all the non-spiritual activities life entails into proper perspective, leading to a much happier existence. This explains how poll after poll confirms that devoutly religious people are generally happier with their lives than people who are totally secular. This is one interpretation of the popular Chassidic song written by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov: *Mitzvah Gedolah Lihiyot BeSimcha Tamid*. It is a "commandment" to be appreciative at all times. Spiritual action causing a true appreciation does lead to happiness.

¹⁵ *Shabbat 30b*

¹⁶ *Ecclesiastes 2:2*

¹⁷ *Ecclesiastes 8:15*

¹⁸ *Avot 6:4*

¹⁹ *Sanhedrin 7a*

²⁰ *Berachot 9b*

Another way in which one can achieve happiness is by not setting one's expectations too high. If a person has *simcha* with whatever he or she achieves, then then that person can have *osher*, spiritual happiness. The greatest frustration develops when one expects something and does not attain it. If a person does not expect too much, then that person can't become too upset or disappointed when it is not achieved or received. This should not be interpreted that a person should not try to maximize his efforts. But the highest results should not be expected. Thus, being satisfied with one's lot, whatever it is, is not only the way to define Jewish wealth but also a way to achieve Jewish happiness. This duality of trying one's hardest but not expecting too much is expressed in the Mishna,²¹ which says that a person should not expect to complete a task (get a grade of 100 percent), but neither does this person have a right to get up and walk away without trying to complete it.

The happiest man in the Talmud was Nachum Ish Gamzu. Whatever happened to him, he would always say "*Gam Zu Le'tovah*—This, too, happened for a good reason".²² His attitude made him the happiest man in the Talmud, despite his not having arms and legs. He was able to appreciate what he did have and not set his expectations too high. He also was a very spiritual person (for example, he lost his limbs when he demanded that G-d cut them off after he did not help a poor man quickly enough and then the man died). Nachum thus epitomizes the happy man, in Jewish terms.

These ideas seem to coincide with numerous secular authors who analyze and describe happiness as quoted above. Another author notes that some of the traits of happy people are self-esteem (i.e. happy people like themselves), personal control (i.e. happy people believe they choose their destinies), optimism (i.e. happy people are hope-filled), and extraversion (i.e. happy people are outgoing).²³ All of these ideas either coincide or reinforce the Jewish view of happiness described above.

WE CAN'T JUDGE WHO IS HAPPY

People often form opinions as to what constitutes happiness by looking at others whom they perceive to be happy. The poor think that all rich people are happy. Many believe that famous people are happy, but autobiographical books by famous people demonstrate that those admired are no more happy than anyone else. Often, it is the very wealth and notoriety **themselves** that is the cause of great unhappiness. In reality, there are many poor people who are very happy and many rich people who are unhappy. This notion is expressed in the Grace after Meals based on a verse in the Psalms,²⁴ when it says "I never saw a righteous man who felt forsaken." How can it be said that no one ever saw a forsaken righteous man? The answer is that if we were to ask any righteous person if he feels forsaken, he would surely say he is not. Thus, happy or unhappy should not be judged by how it appears, but rather by speaking to a person asking how he or she actually feels.

ELIMINATE PHYSICAL DESIRES

Rabbi Dessler²⁵ writes that one can achieve happiness based on the Mishna²⁶ that states that the three physical emotions of jealousy, lust and glory remove a person from this world. He says that each is an example of desires that can never be satisfied. Jealousy causes

²¹ Avot 2:16

²² Taanit 21a

²³ "The Pursuit of Happiness," David G. Myers, Avon Books, pp. 108-121.

²⁴ Psalms 37:25

²⁵ Eliyahu Dessler, Michtav Mei-Eliyahu, p. 2

²⁶ Avot 4:21

a person to want more and more in the physical world and to get frustrated because he or she can never get all he or she wants. Similarly, lust and greed heighten a person's desire to acquire physical things, which outstrips the ability to attain them. Finally, glory or power is a want that can also lead a person to deep frustration. If a person can work on himself or herself to minimize these desires, he or she can possibly attain happiness.

Thus, the keys to Jewish happiness are fourfold: (1) Appreciate what you have. This appreciation can lead to happiness, as the proof text for the statement of "Who is wealthy? He who appreciates what he has been given" is a verse²⁷ that describes spiritual happiness (*osher*);²⁸ (2) Become involved in spiritual activities that will help to achieve appreciation and change one's attitude about life and lead to happiness; (3) Try, as much as possible, to minimize the physical desires for pleasure and power; (4) Aim in life very high goals, but expect to attain little. This will eliminate much frustration and lead to a more contented and happier life.

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²⁷ Psalms 128:2

²⁸ Avot 4:1