
JUDAISM AND BEING HAPPY

Happiness is a universal human longing, yet so many people are unhappy. The Torah teaches that it is a mitzvah to be happy, and therefore it must be possible to achieve. Judaism has a number of practical approaches to being genuinely happy. These approaches are not the hedonism and self-indulgence that are so popular in the West, but rather they are grounded in an appreciation of the opportunities within life itself, knowing that each moment can be infused with meaning and utilized to move closer to building a relationship with God and realizing our goals in life.

An indication of the importance that Judaism attaches to joy is seen by the fact that biblical Hebrew contains close to ten synonyms for happiness.

This class will examine the following questions:

- ~ With all the material wealth people have, why are they not happier?
- ~ Does Judaism offer anything to add happiness to my life?
- ~ What is the connection between the meaning of life and happiness?
- ~ Are there practical exercises to help one become happier?
- ~ How can the mitzvot contribute to a person's happiness?
- ~ How can one avoid obstacles to happiness such as worry and jealousy?

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SECTION I. THE LONGING FOR HAPPINESS

PART A. WE WANT HAPPINESS, YET IT IS ELUSIVE

Happiness is a universal longing, yet so many people are unhappy.

1. **American Psychological Association, Online: Consumerism and its Discontents, by Tori DeAngelis – The happiness promised by advances in material comfort over the last 40 years have not been delivered.**

Compared with Americans in 1957, today we own twice as many cars per person, eat out twice as often and enjoy endless other commodities that weren't around then – big-screen TVs, microwave ovens, SUVs and handheld wireless devices, to name a few.

But are we any happier?

“Compared with their grandparents, today's young adults have grown up with much more affluence, slightly less happiness and much greater risk of depression and assorted social pathology,” notes Hope College psychologist David G. Myers, PhD. “Our becoming much better off over the last four decades has not been accompanied by one iota of increased subjective well-being.”

People with strong materialistic values appear to have goal orientations that may lead to poorer well-being, adds Knox College psychologist Tim Kasser, PhD. Kasser describes his and others' research showing that when people organize their lives around extrinsic goals such as product acquisition, they report greater unhappiness in relationships, poorer moods and more psychological problems.

2. **Wikipedia.org, Suicide – So desperate is the world for happiness that more people lose their lives through suicide than those murdered or killed in war.**

A 2006 report by the World Health Organization (WHO) states that nearly a million people take their own lives every year, more than those murdered or killed in war. WHO figures show a suicide takes place somewhere in the world every 40 seconds. In 1998, the World Health Organization ranked suicide as the twelfth leading cause of death worldwide.

In most countries the incidence of suicides is higher than the incidence of intentional homicides.

Approximately 30,000 people die by suicide each year in the United States. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, suicide contagion is a serious problem, especially for young people.

3. **Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, Da'as Chochmah U'Mussar, Vol. II, p. 139 – Many people are needlessly unhappy because they think that it is normal to be miserable.**

People become so used to being unhappy they are unaware of the needless misery they cause themselves. They imprison themselves by filling their minds with thoughts of resentment, hatred, envy and desires. It is amazing how they tolerate such a life! ... They mistakenly think it is impossible for life to be any different.

PART B. LACK OF FORMAL TRAINING TO ACHIEVE HAPPINESS

1. **David Brooks, Columnist for The New York Times, Advice for High School Graduates, June 2009 – There is no formal training for the most critical decisions determining our happiness in life.**

I used to believe life got better as you got older, but now I realize this is untrue ... At the moment, I'm thinking of talking about the chief way our society is messed up. That is to say, it is structured to distract people from the decisions that have a huge impact on happiness in order to focus attention on the decisions that have a marginal impact on happiness.

The most important decision any of us make is who we marry. Yet there are no courses on how to choose a spouse. There's no graduate department in spouse selection studies. Institutions of higher learning devote more resources to semiotics than love.

The most important talent any person can possess is the ability to make and keep friends. And yet here too there is no curriculum for this.

The most important skill a person can possess is the ability to control one's impulses. Here too, we're pretty much on our own.

These are all things with a provable relationship to human happiness. Instead, society is busy preparing us for all the decisions that have a marginal effect on human happiness. There are guidance offices to help people in the monumental task of selecting a college. There are business schools offering lavish career placement services. There is a vast media apparatus offering minute advice on how to furnish your home or expand your deck.

To get information on private affairs, you have to go down-market to Oprah or Dr. Phil. Why are they the ones who have access to information on meeting life's vital needs?

SECTION II. JUDAISM'S APPROACH TO HAPPINESS

PART A. MEANINGFUL ACTIVITIES AND GOALS ENGENDER HAPPINESS

Achieving happiness is viewed in the context of the meaning one derives from the pursuit of any given activity, goal or experience.

1. **Rabbi Akiva Tatz, Happiness: A Torah Approach, audio class – Correctly pursuing a meaningful goal, even if it involves effort, is what generates true happiness.**

The real definition of happiness is the response you feel when you are:

1. Moving toward a meaningful destination
2. Along a correct path
3. Against resistance, and
4. You are making progress.

In fact, this is a universal truth amongst all of humanity:

2. **John D. Rockefeller, American industrialist and philanthropist – Happiness is generated by pursuing a goal with all one's energy.**

The road to happiness lies in two simple principles; find what interests you and that you can do well, and put your whole soul into it – every bit of energy and ambition and natural ability you have.

And the opposite – a life without any meaningful goals – can be a source not only of unhappiness, but also of mental illness:

3. **Mishnah, Ketubot 5:4 – Living without any goals breeds instability.**

Idleness leads to mental illness.

שהבטלה מביאה לידי שיעמום

Ideally, a person's goals in life should be meaningful, and the more meaningful those goals are, the more happiness their pursuit will generate:

4. **Victor Frankl, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning*, p. 29 – The drive for meaning may ultimately be man's strongest drive.**

Man is always reaching out for meaning, always setting out on his search for meaning; in other words, what I call the "will to meaning" is even to be regarded as man's primary concern ...

5. **Judith Mishell, *Beyond Your Ego*, pp. 283, 285 – An unfulfilled drive for meaning can make life not worth living for.**

The major activity of human beings is to extract meaning from their encounters with the world ... In his book *The Unheard Cry For Meaning*, Frankl quotes a study of sixty students at an American university who had attempted suicide. The reason given for the suicide attempt of eighty-five percent of the students was that "life seemed meaningless."

PART B. IDENTIFYING AND STRIVING FOR THE GREATEST SOURCE OF HAPPINESS

Keenly aware of the importance of happiness in life, Judaism's perspective on joy is grounded in the spiritual goals for which we are created. Authentic happiness is that which is connected to the greatest Source of meaning – the Infinite God.

1. **Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel (Slabodka), *Ohr HaTzafon*, Vol. III, p.84 – Man was created to derive pleasure from his Creator, and thus a person's experiences have the potential to give him happiness without end.**

"Man was created to derive pleasure from the Almighty" (*Mesillat Yesharim*, Ch. 1). This pleasure does not refer only to the Next World, but also to this world. Every person is surrounded by limitless potential for pleasure and enjoyment. The world and all its details is a source of pleasure. A person's experiences in physical and spiritual areas give him the potential for happiness without end.

2. **Rabbi Noach Weinberg, *Way #31 Seek the Ultimate Pleasure* (www.aish.com) – Although the pursuit of money, love and power provide temporary satisfaction, nothing is as satisfying as pursuing a relationship with the Infinite.**

Next to love of God, all other pleasures are insignificant. We can have delicious pizza, lots of money,

love, and power. But humans yearn to transcend the mundane side of daily life. That's why mystery, magic, and miracles capture our imaginations.

When all is said and done, no human being can be truly satisfied unless he reaches out and connects with the infinite transcendent dimension. We all seek to connect with that which encompasses all pleasures. Because nothing finite, nothing bound up in this world, can compare to the infinite.

3. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 6:4-5 – “God is One” means that He the source of all existence, and that a relationship with Him can be sought anywhere and at any time.**

Hear, O Israel, God, our Lord, God is One. And you should love God, your Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and will your resources.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד. וְאַהֲבַתְּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ.

4. **Divrei HaYamim (Chronicles) I, 16:11 – The search for God *itself* is a source of constant joy.**

Be glad of heart, you who seek God!

ישמחה לב מבקשי ה'.

5. **Rabbi Yaakov B. Friedman, Shteigen, p. 303 – A clear goal of self-improvement in order to be closer to God provides a life-time of meaning and fulfillment.**

Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein was a legendary figure who spent his entire life delving into the areas of Torah that stress character refinement and the assertion of one's divine soul over his physical instincts. He was a man who made do with a bare minimum in material needs while making constant, ceaseless demands on himself and his students.

The cornerstone of his development was laid when he heard a talk by Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz who emphasized the need for profound work on one's personality in accordance with Torah ideals.

“When I heard that talk,” Rabbi Levenstein later recounted, “I realized that I was spiritually ill, and had to do something about it.”

“From that moment and onward,” said Rabbi Levenstein, “the road was always clearly mapped out before me. I have viewed my entire life since then as a ladder toward self-improvement. I have never had a moment of sadness, never had a moment without a clear goal, without a mission. I have never had a moment in which I felt empty. Everything has been alive and full and bright.”

In this section, we took a macro view of the world and saw that moving toward a meaningful goal, and specifically toward a relationship with God generates happiness and fulfillment in life. We will now look at the micro level. What are the building blocks to create a happy individual, family, community, and even nation?

SECTION III. THE JOY OF PERFORMING MITZVOT – BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

The performance of each of the 613 mitzvot has the ability to bring us meaning and happiness by our connecting to God and spirituality.

PART A. THE MITZVOT CONNECT US TO GOD AND SPIRITUALITY

1. Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene, Set in Stone, p. 31, Targum – Each mitzvah we fulfill intrinsically connects us with God.

Judaism is not as much a religion as it is a relationship. It is only through mitzvah observance that man can build a deep, enduring, and meaningful relationship with God ...

That a mitzvah is the very process of forging the bond [with God] is contained within the very word מצוה, “commandment,” closely related to the word צוותא, meaning a connection or a binding.

2. Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Mesillat Yesharim, Ch. 1 – The ultimate perfection, pleasure, and meaning is closeness to God. This relationship is achieved through the performance of mitzvot, and thus every action in life can be directed at creating an eternal bond with God.

Man was created for the sole purpose of deriving pleasure from closeness to God and enjoying the splendor of His Presence; for this is the truest delight and the greatest pleasure that can be conceived of ... The setting for this pleasure to be fully actualized is in the next world ...

True perfection is only that of being close to God ... and only this is true goodness, while everything else people think is goodness is worthlessness and futility ...

In order for an individual to reach this perfection, it is appropriate that he earn it through the fruit of his labors. This means that that he should make the attempt to cleave to God through actions which further that end ... These actions are the mitzvot.

האדם לא נברא אלא להתענג על ה' וליהנות מזיו שכינתו, שזהו התענוג האמיתי והעידון הגדול מכל העידונים שיכולים להמצא...ומקום העידון הזה באמת הוא העולם הבא...

השלימות האמיתית היא רק הדביקות בו ית'...כי רק זה הוא הטוב, וכל זולת זה שיחשבוהו בני האדם לטוב אינו אלא הבל ושוא נתעה...

אמנם לשיזוכה האדם לטובה הזאת, ראוי שיעמול ראשונה וישתדל ביגיעו לקנותה. והיינו, שישתדל לדבק בו יתברך בכח מעשים שתולדתם זה הענין והם הם המצוות.

3. Tehillim (Psalms) 100:2 – Serving God and building a relationship with Him through the performance of mitzvot is a joyful experience.

Serve the Eternal with gladness; come before Him with joyous singing.

עבדו את ה' בשמחה ובואו לפניו ברננה.

4. **Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Gateway to Happiness, p. 25 – The happiness that comes with performing mitzvot is readily apparent to one who is new to Judaism, like a convert. The challenge is to maintain this freshness one's whole life.**

A convert to Judaism wrote: "Being Jewish has given me happiness, not the ephemeral, momentary kind that comes with money and sports and cars, and which passes swiftly, leaving an empty feeling. The happiness that comes with Jewish living has to do with serenity of the soul, wholeness and satisfaction at the deepest level." (S. bat Avraham, The Jewish Woman's Outlook, Vol. II, #1)

Taking joy in serving God is not just a privilege, but it is also an obligation:

5. **Rambam (Maimonides), Hilchot Lulav (The Laws of Lulav) 8:15-16 – One must allow oneself to feel happiness when doing mitzvot. One who holds back will be held accountable for his lack of joy.**

The happiness that comes from performing mitzvot, and the love of God, Who commanded us to do the mitzvot, are great forms of service to God. Anyone who holds himself back from feeling this happiness over Divine service could be held accountable, as it is written, "Since you did not serve God, your Master, with happiness and a good heart, you will serve your enemies" (Devarim 28:47) ... The only real greatness and honor is that of being happy in one's service of God.

השמחה שישמח אדם בעשיית המצוות ובאהבת האל שציווה בהן, עבודה גדולה היא; וכל המונע עצמו משמחה זו, ראוי להיפרע ממנו, שנאמר "תחת, אשר לא עבדת את ה' אלוהיך, בשמחה, ובטוב לבב". ... ואין הגדולה והכבוד אלא לשמוח לפני ה'.

6. **Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 4:2 and Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura ibid. – The happiness that one feels when doing a mitzvah is itself a mitzvah!**

"The reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah" – This means that when a person finds the performance of a mitzvah rewarding and enjoyable, that itself is considered a separate mitzvah. He will therefore be rewarded for both the mitzvah as well as the pleasure he experienced in doing the mitzvah. [Thus read it as follows: "The reward – pleasure – of a mitzvah is itself a mitzvah."]

ששכר מצוה מצוה - פירוש, שכל מה שאדם משתכר ומתענג בעשיית המצוה נחשב לו למצוה בפני עצמה, ונוטל שכר על המצוה שעשה ועל העונג וההנאה שנהנה בעשייתה.

7. **Rabbi Elazar Ezkari, Sefer Chareidim, Preface – Happiness in the performance of a mitzvah can propel a person to the highest levels of spirituality.**

The Ari [Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, the greatest Kabbalist of the past thousand years] revealed to his confidant that everything he achieved in Torah, all the gates of wisdom that were opened to him, and the Divine Inspiration he received were all in the merit of the great happiness that he had when he performed a mitzvah.

והאריז"ל גילה לאיש סודו שכל מה שהשיג שנפתחו לו שערי חכמה ורוח הקודש היה בשכר שהיה שמח בעשיית כל מצוה שמחה גדולה לאין תכלית.

PART B. HOW TO FEEL THE JOY OF MITZVOT

How can we develop joy and happiness in performing mitzvot?

1. **Rabbi Menachem Schlanger, The Joy Of Servitude, p. 5 – Recognize that the mitzvot are designed by God to enhance our lives.**

God's very first overture to Avraham (Abraham), the father of the Jewish people, emphasized this point [that the mitzvot are for our benefit]: "*lech lecha*" (Bereishit/Genesis 12:1) – literally, "Go for yourself." As Rashi explains, this means, "**for your own benefit and good.**" Everything that happened to or was done by Avraham is embedded in the roots of the Jewish people's journey through history; thus God's first words to our forefather are the paradigm of the relationship He wishes to establish with us, as well. God clearly considers it very important that we instill within ourselves the awareness that His mitzvot are specifically designed for our good – so important that He introduced this concept at the very inception of the Jewish people.

2. **Rabbi Alexander Ziskind, Yesod V'Shoreh Ha'Avodah, Introduction – Take advantage of the blessing before a mitzvah to feel the happiness of the special relationship we have with God.**

Whenever you do a mitzvah, you should express deep gratitude to God for having given you that mitzvah. In addition, fulfilling a mitzvah is a time to feel great joy at your relationship with God. This is because each mitzvah is a sign of our covenant with God. This is why we recite a blessing before performing a mitzvah, a blessing that expresses praise to God for having sanctified us with fulfilling His commandments, and for having chosen us to be His special nation ...

איך מה ראוי לאדם ליתן הודאה עצומה בשמחה רבה ולשמוח מאד באלקותו יתברך... בכל עת ובכל שעה שמקיים איזה מצוה מן המצוות שצוה לו הבורא ית' כי אות הוא בינו ובין בני ישראל שהם עם סגולתו. וראו על ככה אנשי כנסת הגדולה לתקן שכל המצוות מברך עליהן עובר לעשייתן, ברכה ותהלה לבוראנו... על זה שקידש אותנו בקיום מצותיו ובחר בנו להיות לו לעם סגולה...

3. **Rabbi Chaim Vital, Sha'ar HaMitzvot – Each time you perform a mitzvah imagine that are you are receiving unlimited payment for it.**

When one performs a mitzvah he should not view the mitzvah as a burden which he is rushing to get rid of. Rather, he should imagine that for performing that mitzvah he would receive millions and millions of dollars. He should rejoice with boundless joy, as if he were literally receiving millions of dollars for doing the mitzvah!

בעשיית המצוה אל יחשוב שהיא עליו כמושא וממהר להסירה מעליו, אבל יחשוב בשכלו כאילו בעשותו אותה המצוה ירויח אלף אלפים דינרי זהב, ויהיה שמח בעשותו אותה המצוה בשמחה שאין לה קץ מלב ונפש, ובחשק גדול כאילו ממש בפועל נותנים לו אלף אלפים דינרי זהב אם יעשה אותה מצוה.

4. **Ramchal, Mesillat Yesharim, Ch. 7 (adapted) – An external act of enthusiasm has an effect on our inner feelings of joy.**

If a person finds that he lacks inner drive and zeal, a technique that he can use that will generate this inner feeling is to behave externally in such a manner *as if* he already feels enthusiasm. *Our external actions have an effect on our inner feelings.* We have more control over our actions than our emotions, and if we utilize what is in our power, we will eventually acquire what is not as much in our power. One will then have an inner joy and a strong will and desire for spiritual growth that will come from his external enthusiasm.

5. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Ma'amarei Yemei HaRatzon p. 242 –The essential attitude behind all mitzvot: we were created to derive pleasure from God!**

What is the point of contention between the world of Torah and the world of secularism? It would seem that the difference is between belief in God or lack thereof, observance of the commandments or lack thereof.

But upon closer inspection, it seems that the point of divergence is this: How to enjoy life. It is in this area that we have a quarrel with the secular world. We are “saturated with delight” [a phrase from the Shabbat prayers] from holiness, from Shabbat, from prayer. It is pleasure of this sort that we seek and it is a life of these pleasures that we see as real life. The secular world, on the other hand, looks toward physical pleasures as a goal ...

So this must be our attitude toward Torah study and service of God: that man was created to derive pleasure from God. This attitude should accompany us in all of our mitzvah performance, as well as Torah study.

מהי המחלוקת בינינו לבין העולם החילוני? לכאורה שהם אינם מאמינים ואנחנו מאמינים, אנו מקיימים מצוות והם אינם מקיימים מצוות.

אולם בשורש הדבר נראה שהמחלוקת היא בנקודה אחרת: כיצד ליהנות מהחיים... כאן טמונה המחלוקת העיקרית בינינו לבין העולם החילוני. אנחנו מדושני עונג מהנאות של קדושה, שבת, תפילה, לזאת אנו שואפים ובחיים של תענוגים אלה אנו רואים את צורת העולם והחיים. והם דולגים בתענוגים והנאות של הגוף...

זה צריך להיות המבט על תורה ועל עבודת ה'... שהאדם לא נברא אלה להתענג על ה' וליהנות מזיו שכינתו ומבט זה צריך ללוות אותנו בכל המצוות ובכל מה שאנו עוסקים בתורה הקדושה...

6. **Rabbi Moshe Feinstein – It is beautiful and uplifting to be a Jew!**

During the first half of the twentieth century, many meticulously observant Jewish immigrants to the United States were greatly anguished by their children's choice to abandon mitzvah observance. They could not understand why their children turned their back on the heritage they had so desperately attempted to hand down. The truth is that one of the primary causes was an attitude expressed by a popular saying during those times: “*Es is shver tzu zayn a Yid*,” “It is hard to be Jewish.” This is wrong! We should communicate to our children the true and proper attitude: “It is beautiful and fulfilling to be Jewish!”

7. **Seventh Marriage Blessing, Siddur – A great expression of happiness is found in the fusing of two lives blessed by ten descriptions of joy created by God.**

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who created joy and gladness, groom and bride, mirth, glad song, pleasure, delight, love, brotherhood, peace and companionship...

ברוך אתה ה' אלוקינו מלך העולם אשר ברא ששון ושמחה חתן וכלה גילה רנה דיצה וחדוה אהבה ואחוה ושלוה ורעות...

SECTION IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF “FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND FAITH” IN BUILDING HAPPINESS

1. **Dr. David Pelcovitz, Director of Psychology at North Shore University Hospital, NYU Medical School (Lecture in Jerusalem, Jan. 2005) – The three F’s: family, friends, and faith.**

Research has shown that happiness is largely determined by the three F’s: family, friends, and faith.

In this section we will show that the wisdom of the Torah is substantiated by modern psychological research. Those factors psychology sees as central to happiness are also emphasized in the Torah lifestyle:

PART A. FAMILY

1. **Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim (Guide for the Perplexed) 3:42 – Family is an important Jewish value.**

The Torah greatly encourages showing closeness and kindness to one’s family members ... The Sages strongly praise one who “shows closeness to his relatives” ... This [strengthening of family ties] is one of the most important objectives of the Torah ...

זאת המידה תשמרה ותחזקה זאת התורה מאד, רצוני לומר נשיאת פנים פני הקרובים והטיב להם... וחכמים ז"ל משבחים מאד מדת האדם שיהיה מקרב את קרוביו.... והיא אחת מכוונות התורה הגדולות...

2. **Rabbi Menachem Schlanger, Ohel Yaakov VeLeah, p. 157 – Family is a means for a sense of personal and collective identity.**

From the earliest age, a child sees himself as a part of a greater family. Through this, when he matures, he feels a connection to the rest of the Jewish people. Parents should also involve their children in the spiritual and ethical content that distinguishes their particular family, as well as the Jewish people in general.

מינקותו רואה הילד את עצמו כחלק ממשפחה מורחבת, וכשהוא מתגבר הוא מרגיש השתייכות לעם ישראל. ההורים צריכים לשייך אותו גם לתוכן הרוחני המייחד את המשפחה ואת העם.

The Torah encourages warm family bonds. Family provides an emotional, social and spiritual framework in which children are raised and grow up.

PART B. FRIENDS

1. **Pirkei Avot 1:6, Rabbi Ovadia Bartenura, Rabbeinu Yonah ibid. – A close friend is a necessity for getting advice and helping one grow.**

Acquire a friend for yourself!

Rabbi Ovadia Bartenura: [Why do the Sages use the word, “acquire”? To teach that] Even if you must spend money on him, it is worth it in order to get yourself a friend!

וקנה לך חבר

רבנו עובדיה: אפילו אתה צריך לקנותו בדמים יקרים ולפזר עליו ממוון כדי שתקנה אהבתו.

Rabbeinu Yonah: One needs a good friend for several purposes ... One benefit is that of receiving sound advice. When one has a good friend he is able to take counsel with him and seek assistance in all areas. A friend also serves as a confidant ...

רבינו יונה: לשלשה דברים צריך האדם אל החבר הטוב...השלישי לענין העצה שיקחנו להיות לו מעיר לעזור לו בכל עניניו ולקחת ממנו עצה טובה ולהיות בן סודו...

PART C. FAITH

1. **Chazon Ish, Emunah U'Bitachon (Faith and Trust) 2:9 – Clear knowledge of God's existence generates happiness.**

Once a person's intellect reaches a clear recognition of the truth of God's existence, he is immediately filled with a boundless, ecstatic joy ...

כאשר זכה שכל האדם לראות אמיתת מציאותו ית', מיד נכנס בו שמחת גיל אין קץ...

Although the Chazon Ish refers to a high level of intellectual recognition of God's existence as the omnipotent and benevolent Creator, any such level brings a measure of joy with it.

SECTION V. OBSTACLES TO HAPPINESS AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM

There are a number of obstacles and mistaken ideas that stand in the way of being happy.

PART A. FOCUSING ON YOUR GIFTS, AND NOT ON WHAT YOU ARE MISSING

As the Talmud teaches, "Who is the wealthy person? The one who is happy with his portion!" (Pirkei Avot 4:1).

1. **Rabbi Noach Weinberg, Happiness (www.aish.com) – Master the art of noticing, appreciating and consciously enjoying what you already have, then you will always be happy.**

Happiness is a universal longing, yet so many people are unhappy. Why?

Western society commonly perceives happiness as the outcome of what you achieve and acquire.

- "My whole life would improve if I had a new car ..."
- "I just need a better job and then I can relax and be happy ..."
- "If only I could meet the right girl ..."

You get the car and what happens? For a whole week you're walking on air. Then you go right back to being unhappy. Sound familiar?

Happiness is not something that happens from the outside. Happiness is a state of mind. You can have everything in the world and still be miserable. Or you can have relatively little and feel unbounded joy.

The Talmud says: "Who is rich? The one who appreciates what he has." (Pirkei Avot 4:1)

That's why the morning prayers begin with a series of blessings thanking God for the simple and obvious:

- "Thank you, God, for giving me life."
- "Thank God, I can see."
- "Thank God, I can use my hands and feet."
- "Thank God, I can think."

Once you master the art of noticing, appreciating and consciously enjoying what you already have, then you will always be happy.

2. **Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi, Sefer HaKuzari 3:11 – It is a mitzvah to be happy with what we have in life.**

There is a specific mitzvah that obligates us to rejoice with what we have, and that is the verse that states, "And you shall rejoice with all of the good that God has given you" (Devarim 26:11).

...מצות השמחה בחלקו, שנצטוונו עליה במאמר
ושמחת בכל הטוב אשר נתן לך ה' אלקיך...

3. **Rabbi Chaim Vital, Sha'arei Kedushah 1:2 – Rejoicing with what one has and knowing that God only acts for our benefit is the medicine against depression.**

The fourth category of negative character traits is that of depression and sadness ... The opposite of these is the trait of rejoicing with what one has, because everything that God does is for the good.

כל המידות הרעות נחלקות לארבעה מינים וזה פרטם
... מידת העצבות בכל פרטיו... והפכם ... והשמחה
התדירית בחלקו, כי כל מאי דעבדין מן שמיא לטב.

The next few sources highlight the importance of developing an appreciation for the special gifts around us, both large and small, that help make our world all the more happier.

4. **Rabbi Avigdor Miller, Sing You Righteous, pp. 17-18 – Daily life is filled with uncountable details and aspects to take pleasure in. Yet most people only realize what they have when they are about to lose it.**

Life is full of intense pleasures which are available to all people, but many fail to appreciate them ... the air, water, sunlight, wind, rain, trees and gardens, the mountains and the seas, the moon and the stars, fire, heat and cold, the snow and the dew, the use of our limbs, the ability to see and hear and smell and taste and feel, the faculty of speech, the faculty of thought and memory, the variety of food of every taste and color, the marvel of the body's secretions and all of its magnificent chemistry ...

The universal benefits which all men possess are ignored ... It is only when one is about to leave the world that he looks back with regret, too late, at all that he possessed but failed to enjoy.

5. **Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz, Jerusalem – Appreciating the world's beauty and the wisdom behind its creation is part of loving God.**

God created a beautiful world, and wants us to appreciate it. Part of loving God is appreciating the world He created and taking joy from it.

6. **Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, Da'as Chochmah U'Mussar, Vol. III, p. 67 – Don't even take your socks for granted!**

When putting on your clothes, give thought to all the benefits you gain from your clothing.

7. **Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Gateway to Happiness – Value the very air you breathe, and don't let the negativity of others diminish your appreciation of life's simple pleasures.**

A family member once walked into the home of Rabbi Avigdor Miller in New York City, and was startled to find the sage standing with his head submerged in water in the kitchen sink. After Rabbi Miller had finished his bizarre activity, he was asked to explain, which he promptly did.

"I was walking outside when my companion complained about the air pollution here in the city. I was concerned that his negativity would put a damper on my appreciation for the great gift of oxygen and breathing. As soon as I got home, I dunked my head into water and went without breathing for a long minute. Now my appreciation for breathing has returned!"

8. **Rabbi Noach Weinberg, Happiness (www.aish.com) – A practical exercise to help you appreciate what you have and increase your happiness.**

Step 1: Spend one hour writing down everything for which you are grateful. (For example: fingers, music, water, friends etc.) Most people fly through the first 15 minutes. The next 15 minutes the pen moves more slowly. The next 15 minutes get even tougher, but you can pull through if you include your eyebrows and socks ... The last 15 minutes are excruciating. Once the list is compiled ...

Step 2: Add one new blessing each day. The power of this exercise is clear: You must be conscious of all your existing blessings, in order to appreciate a new blessing that comes your way. To really hone your skills and become an "appreciation expert" ...

Step 3: Prioritize your list. Re-write your list ordered from that which gives you the most pleasure, to that which gives you the least. Which is more valuable: your hands or your feet? Your eyes or ears? Your sense of taste or sense of touch? Comparing each pleasure forces you to qualify the subtle aspects of each pleasure. And to quantify how much each respective pleasure gives you.

Follow this course and work at it daily. Your gratitude will continue to grow, building a solid foundation for a lifetime of happiness.

PART B. JEALOUSY

1. **Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu – Jealousy, material desire, and status-seeking take away our happiness.**

What is the epidemic disease of world proportions that robs us of all happiness in life?

Our Sages have already told us the answer. It says in the Mishnah, "Jealousy, unrelenting material desire and status-seeking remove a person from the world" (Pirkei Avot 4:27).

The world, as God made it, is a happy one. It is we who have removed ourselves from the world

דבר זה מפורש הוא בדברי החכמים האמיתיים,
חכמי התורה. מפורש הוא המשנה: הקנאה והתאוה
והכבוד מוציאים את האדם מן העולם.

העולם כאשר בראו השי"ת עולם מאושר הוא, אלא
אנו אשר יצאנו מעולם האושר אל עולם הסבל ע"

of happiness to the world of suffering with these three desires. We need to run away from jealousy, material desire and status-seeking in order to transform the world into one brimming over with happiness.

שלשת הכחות הללו אשר הוציאנו ממנו. ואם אדם יברח מן הקנאה והתאוה והכבוד- היינו שיגרשם מלבם-יתקן את עולמו ויהיה עולם מלא אושר מן הקצה אל הקצה.

2. **Rabbi Michel Berenbaum, Sichot Mussar, cited in Gateway to Happiness, p. 322 – Jealousy robs us of our peace of mind.**

Jealousy destroys peace of mind and happiness. A jealous person's life is full of suffering and resentment. He is never happy with what he himself has. There are many people who could really enjoy life, but they have one major problem. When they see that others are wealthier (happier, more successful, more attractive, more popular, etc.) they lose their peace of mind.

Apart from the destructive nature of jealousy, the last of the Ten Commandments warns us to stay away from coveting what belongs to another (“Do not be envious of your fellow’s house ... his wife ... his servant ...” (Shemot/Exodus 20:13)). There are a number of tools to avoid jealousy:

3. **Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Gateway To Happiness, p. 323 – In the grand scheme of things it’s a waste of time to be jealous of another.**

Our lives are so fleetingly short that it is not worthwhile to waste our time feeling envious of anyone else about any matter.

An important tool for overcoming jealousy is the development of true care and concern for others:

4. **Rambam, Hilchot De’ot (The Laws of Conduct) 6:4 – “Loving your fellow” means being happy over another’s success.**

It is incumbent upon each person to love every member of the Jewish people as himself, as it written, “You shall love your fellow as yourself” (Vayikra/Leviticus 19:18). Therefore, one should speak favorably about another person and be careful with another’s possessions, just as he would be concerned over his own possessions and reputation.

מצוה על כל אדם לאהוב את כל אחד ואחד מישראל כגופו, שנאמר “ואהבת לרעך כמוך”. לפיכך צריך שישפר בשבחיו ולחוס על ממונו, כמו שהוא חס על ממונו עצמו ורוצה בכבוד עצמו.

5. **Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz, Jerusalem (heard in person) – With a creative change of attitude the success of others can feel like your own success.**

One summer our neighbors decided to expand their apartment. Work began. There was noise from morning to night, everything was a mess, the workers were all over the place, and my family was at risk of beginning to become irritated. I realized I had to do something to protect myself from having a critical eye.

I gathered my family members together and told everyone, “We’re taking on this project as if it were our own. We are going to approach it as if it were our own. addition that was being built. We’re going to get excited over each new step!”

And do you know what? It worked! None of the kids became resentful, even when a heavy wooden door came crashing through our window into the living room (thank goodness no one was in there!). They were all truly excited for our neighbors.

PART C. UNRELENTING MATERIAL DESIRE

1. **Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Gateway To Happiness, p. 344 – Demanding things you cannot obtain will make you miserable. There is a difference between “needing” and “wanting” something.**

You can only be certain you will always be happy if you give up your desires for things that you are unable to obtain.

Many people have their own way of making themselves miserable from time to time by demanding something they are unable to obtain. The next time you feel irritated or frustrated because you cannot obtain something, ask yourself if that something is really a necessity.

2. **Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz, Jerusalem (heard in person) – We cannot make our happiness dependent on things we don't have.**

We do not have the right to make our happiness dependent on anything outside of ourselves. We may not say to ourselves, “I'm only going to be happy if I get *that* thing.”

PART D. WORRY

1. **Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Gateway to Happiness, p. 154 – Just as you would want to rid yourself of someone who seeks your life, so too we should rid ourselves of worry, which destroys our happiness.**

Worrying destroys one's life (Keter Chochmah 12:16). A life filled with worry is a miserable existence. Regardless of how much good fortune you have in your life, you will be oblivious to it if you fill your mind with worrisome thoughts. You would hate someone for trying to destroy your life. If you constantly worry, you are destroying your own life. Your top priority is changing your thinking habits, which will benefit you in many ways.

The most effective tool to fight worry is that of genuine trust in God:

2. **Chazon Ish, Emunah U'Bitachon (Faith and Trust), Ch. 2 – Trusting God means knowing that nothing happens by chance.**

The concept of trusting in God is the awareness that nothing happens randomly, and that everything that happens on earth is the result of God's decision.

ענין הבטחון הוא האמונה כי אין מקרה בעולם, וכל הנעשה תחת השמש בהכרזה מאתו ית'...

When man realizes that he is in God's Hands, his natural anxiety and fears recede. Prayer is a natural outgrowth of this awareness:

3. **Chazon Ish, Letters, 3:151 – Speaking to God about one’s worries as one speaks to a friend provides relief.**

How wonderful is the fact that a human being can speak about his worries before the Master of the Universe, just as he would speak to a friend ... Prayer during a time of difficulty, beside being an obligation, is man’s helpmate and constant balm; it gladdens the heart and gives him direction.

ומה נפלא הדבר כי ביכולת האדם להשיח דאגותיו לפני אדון עולם ית', כאשר הוא משיח לרעהו...ותפילה בעת צרה שהאדם נצטוו עליה, היא לו לעזר ותרופה מתמודת משמחת לב ומאירת עינים.

There are also a number of mistaken ideas that prevent a person from being happy. The first mistaken idea is that being happy does not require any effort:

PART E. IT REQUIRES EFFORT TO EMPLOY THE TOOLS TO BE HAPPY

1. **Rabbi Noach Weinberg, Happiness (www.aish.com) – It requires effort to practice the techniques to be happy and to change one’s habits.**

Misconception: “Once I know the tools for being happy, then it will work like magic.”

Don’t expect the results to come automatically. It is possible to intellectually understand how to attain happiness, yet not put it into practice.

In fact, many people might actually prefer to be comfortable and unhappy, rather than endure the discomfort of changing their habits.

Just as learning any new skill requires effort, you have to be willing to invest serious effort to achieve real happiness.

2. **Rabbi Ze’ev Leff, Rabbi of Matityahu, Israel – The expectation of quick and easy results from our hi-tech generation is not applicable to achieving happiness.**

Achieving happiness is not like Googling for data. This works for a person until they reach around five or six years old; and then they are informed it’s a mitzvah to wait six hours after eating meat until the ice cream. Anything of value in life takes great patience and hard work.

PART F. BEING HAPPY IS AN OBLIGATION WE HAVE TO OTHERS

1. **Rabbi Noach Weinberg, Happiness (www.aish.com). – Being happy is part of being considerate to others, and therefore not optional.**

Misconception: “Happiness is optional. If I want to be depressed, that’s my own prerogative.”

A beautiful Sunday afternoon. You’re at the park having a picnic with your friends.

Suddenly the air is pierced by one person complaining: “Who forgot the forks? It’s too hot for volleyball. I want to go home already.”

You have an obligation to be happy when your mood is negatively affecting others. Don’t spoil the fun. We all try to put on a happy face when we’re at a party. But what about when we are at home, with

our kids? Or when we trudge into the office on Monday morning?

Like an open pit in the middle of the road, a sour puss is a public menace. Being happy is part of being considerate to people around us.

SECTION VI. GIVING TO OTHERS AND SHARING YOUR HAPPINESS

Finally, we conclude with the obvious – helping others generates happiness and is one of the ways of emulating God.

1. **Rabbi Binyomin Pruzansky, Stories for the Jewish Heart: Book 2, p. 118 (adapted) – By giving of himself to others even while he was sick, Rabbi Pam was able to regain his happiness.**

In the last days of his life, Rav Avraham Pam lay ill in his hospital bed, isolated from his beloved Yeshivah Torah Vodaas in New York.

Despite the effort to remove Rav Pam from the day-to-day cares of his yeshivah and his fellow Jews, his advice was still sorely needed. One day, the principal of Torah Vodaas, Rabbi Sekula, arrived at the hospital bearing a list of pressing issues he needed to discuss with the Rosh Yeshivah. He turned to leave because a sign on the door informed visitors they would not be admitted, but Rebbtzin Pam emerged from the room with a hopeful smile on her face. “Please come inside and see if you can perhaps cheer up Rav Pam. He’s been down and withdrawn for the past few days. He’s just not himself.”

As Rav Sekula launched into his agenda, a remarkable reawakening occurred before his eyes. Little by little, the color returned to Rav Pam’s face.

His eyes became expressive; his voice became clearer and stronger. He offered his advice on all the issues that Rav Sekula raised. Then the two men exchanged brief words of Torah study, much to the obvious delight of both. Finally, after about a half-hour the meeting was finished.

Rav Pam then commented, “People think that I can’t have visitors because I am feeling weak. But the opposite is true. It is because I don’t have visitors that I am feeling so weak. As long as a person is alive in this world, he has a purpose.

“Here I am sitting in the hospital and no one is coming to me for advice or for blessings, or anything! From now on, let visitors come in so that I can help them. This is the only thing that will make me happy!”

2. **Talmud Bavli, Ketubot 111b – A smile gives more to a person than a glass of milk.**

Rabbi Yochanan said: One who shows the white of his teeth [in a smile] to another is better than one who gives him a glass of milk.

אמר ר' יוחנן טוב המלבין שיניים לחבירו יותר ממשקהו
חלב שנאמר ולבן שנים מחלב אל תקרי לבן שיניים
אלא לבון שיניים.

3. **Likutei Eitzot, Simchah, # 38 – Our happiness can bring another person “back to life.”**

When a person is happy he can bring life to other people. Most people are full of worries and troubles ... and when someone comes along with a beaming countenance he can literally revive him, and this is a very great thing.

על ידי שאדם שמח, על ידי זה הוא יכול להחיות אדם אחר שהוא דבר גדול מאד לשמח לבב בני ישראל, כי רוב בני אדם מלאים יסורים ודאגות וצרות...וכשבא אדם עם פנים שוחקות יכול להחיות אותם ממש והוא דבר גדול מאד.

4. **Rabbi Yisroel Besser, Reb Shlomo: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld, p. 85 – Lifting another’s spirits is a way to be like God.**

The Torah commands us to emulate God’s actions. About God it is written, “And you give life to every living creature” (Nechemiah 9:6). We have a mandate to emulate His ways. We can do that by attempting to use our words to inject life into everyone whom we encounter.