

Happiness IS a Jewish Virtue
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I'd like to begin with a little survey. How many of you moved to this area after you had children or because you were contemplating having children? How many of you chose these zip codes because of the excellent schools? How many of you put, or are putting, effort into your child's education so they will get into a "good" college? Me too.

So imagine, if you will, the following scenario. You move to 10580 or 10573 or 10528 or 06830 or any other local zip code. Your child is well adjusted, gets excellent grades, plays varsity sports, is involved with clubs and his synagogue youth group and applies to college.

One day the letter arrives. The return address is Cambridge, MA. You've hit the mother load. Your child is accepted to Harvard. Life is good. You are happy.

Your son leaves for Harvard and posts on Facebook his class list from most satisfactory to least. The number one class is called, "Psych 1504, Positive Psychology." Hmm, you think. Sounds interesting. You google it. You realize that your bubbele is taking a class known colloquially as [Happiness 101](#). And you notice that this class is the most popular class at Harvard. What is going on? You are spending \$50,000 a year for Harvard and they are taking a class on happiness? Where did you go wrong?

A recent survey of college students gives an insight. They were surveyed to determine if they felt stressed or overwhelmed. The results were staggering. 80% said they felt overwhelmed. 45% reported feeling depressed to the point of not functioning.

The documentary "[Race to Nowhere](#)" highlights the stresses that middle and high school students face. Six hours or more of homework a night on top of other extra curricular commitments is not uncommon. High schoolers constantly ask how each new activity will look on their college resume. The pressure they feel to succeed can be overwhelming. I know. They tell me.

For us adults, it isn't much better. The [2012 World Happiness report](#) points out that affluent societies suffer from their own malaise. We suffer from the loss of community, the decline of social trust, and rising anxieties associated with the vagaries of the modern globalized economy, including the threats of unemployment or episodes of illness not covered by health insurance. We worry about threats associated with climate change, the lack of civility and the seemingly senseless hatred of political parties on both sides of the aisle. As Jews we worry about a growing Islamic presence in the Middle East and of course, a nuclear Iran that must be stopped. These are, as so many say, challenging - and I would add - stressful times.

Years ago, our rabbi Emeritus, Rabbi Rothman gave a sermon on this topic of happiness. He talked about being a chaplain at a narcotics hospital in Lexington, Kentucky and what the patients wanted out of life. Invariably, the answer was "happiness." The same was true for

confirmation students, couples about to be married and those he counseled. Isn't this what most of us say we want for our children, that they should be happy?

What would make you happier, right now? More money? Our culture promotes this idea. Here's the truth. Higher average incomes do not necessarily improve average well being. Since 1960, U.S. GNP per capita has risen by a factor of three, while measures of average happiness have remained essentially unchanged. So while we have done massive environmental damage to acquire more stuff, we haven't necessarily become happier in the process.

The paradox is that at any particular time richer individuals are happier than poorer ones, but over time the society did not become happier as it became richer. The larger irony is happiness, or what one might call a sense of inner well-being, does not increase proportionately with increased wealth. A person making \$5000 a year who suddenly makes \$50,000 a year will experience a high degree of increased happiness because his basic needs are now met. On the other hand, if that person went from making \$50,000 a year to \$50 million a year, the increase in that person's sense of inner well-being is only marginal. Sure, a little more would always be nice but don't fool yourself into thinking that greater wealth will bring greater happiness. As my financial planner reminds me, the only thing more money brings is more choices.

For decades countries have assessed their overall well being based on GNP. [Robert Kennedy challenged this in 1968](#) when he said, "Our gross domestic product... counts air pollution and cigarette advertising and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them... Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. Our GDP does not measure our wit, courage, wisdom, learning or compassion." Kennedy ended his famous speech by saying, "GDP measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."

Recently, economists and national leaders have started talking about measuring a country's status with metrics other than GDP. Some even suggest using a squishy-seeming concept like "happiness." In fact, a decade ago, the tiny kingdom of Bhutan switched its economic indicators from GDP to [GNH, Gross National Happiness](#). According to proponents, a measure of happiness could help assess the success or failure of a range of government policies. It could gauge the virtues of a health benefit or establish whether education has more value than simply higher incomes. It might also detect extremes of inequality or imbalances in how people divide their time between work and leisure.

And the interest in studying happiness has also grown in the disciplines of psychology and neuro-science. Here are some amazing things they have found.

One. According to [Sonja Lyubomirsky](#), a leading professor of positive psychology at UC Riverside, 50% of happiness is determined by your genes. It is how you are hard wired. Your circumstances - your job, your health, your financial well-being - things we are told are important, only account for 10% of our well-being. The remaining 40% of our well-being is determined by intentional behaviors, things we can do.

Two: When you do what you love, which can even include work, your brain releases dopamine. Dopamine is a chemical produced by neuro-transmitters in the brain that fill you with a sense of personal satisfaction. Some refer to this “high” as Flow. Athletes experience it regularly. It is the sensation where nothing else matters. You forget yourself, you forget your problems, it builds confidence. It might come through playing an instrument, dancing, cooking, gardening, learning. Psychologists teach that those who experience flow on a regular basis are happier than those who don’t.

And third, rewards can be divided into two categories, intrinsic and extrinsic. Extrinsic rewards are things like money, image, status. Intrinsic rewards refer to things like personal growth, relationships, a desire to help. Studies found that those who focused their energies on material items felt more depressed, more anxious, less vital and less energized. Those who focused on intrinsic goals felt the opposite. So when you feel the need to spend money, try this, pay for experiences instead of objects. It can boost your self-worth much the same way finding yourself in the right relationship can.

Judaism understands well the importance of seeking, finding and achieving happiness.

Our tradition is focussed on finding and creating joy in life. We say “l’chaim, to life” when we raise a glass. Moses reminded us this morning u’vecharta chaim, choose life. He told us to LIVE, to find blessings and joy as we journey on the path between cradle and grave.

Various Jewish holidays are given nicknames but only one Jewish holiday is called chag simchateinu, “the festival of our happiness.” Chag simchateinu refers to the holiday of Sukkot which commemorates forty years of a difficult wandering; a journey during which we experienced a lack of food and water; a journey which took far too much time to complete. Based on this history, Sukkot seems an unlikely candidate for the title of “festival of our happiness.” yet there it is: chag simchateinu, The fact that we link this holiday with happiness speaks volumes about Jewish resilience and joy in the midst of adversity.

Even what we read on Sukkot, the book of Ecclesiastes, is an unexpected commentary on the nature of Jewish happiness. The author is the man who had everything: gold, silver, houses, women, vineyards, gardens, parks, servants - yet it all added up to him having a sense that all these things were meaningless. In fact the book begins, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” But read it closely and you discover that s-m-ch, rejoice, is a key word – it occurs 17 times in the book. The ultimate message is that joy is to be found in simple things: love, work, marriage, doing good works. That is a very Jewish message. The sources of happiness are not remote or aspirational. They lie all around us.

Remember Blue Laws? There was a time when everything was closed on Sundays. I don’t remember Sundays being a lot of fun. There wasn’t a lot to do.

If you go looking for “blue law” behavior in Judaism, you’ll be hard pressed to find it. Even if you look at the most Orthodox Jewish Shabbat, there isn’t much that is essentially “blue” about it. Our brothers and sisters may not drive on Shabbat, may not turn on lights or go to a movie, but, of all things, listen to the words of the song they sing just the way we sing it.

“Yismichu v’ malchut’ cha shomray Shabbat... Those who keep Shabbat rejoice in Shabbat. Those who sanctify the seventh day find joy.” It’s true. Anyone who has ever had the opportunity to observe Shabbat in its entirety, with food, song, family, friends, a walk and a good Shabbes nap has entered the week happier. And if you haven’t, here’s a challenge. Try it. Just one Shabbat. Take Twenty four hours to detach, unplug and stop the motor. See how you feel. I bet you’ll feel better, more refreshed. If not, next week’s challah is on me.

When a couple stands under a huppah, we shower them with seven blessings known as the sheva berachot. Author [Anita Diamant](#), calls the ten synonyms for happiness in the final blessing, "an orgy of words, a mantra of the varieties of human joy." Words like joy, gladness, delight, laughter, gaiety, pleasure, merriment, glee, mirth, and exultation rain down on the couple. The enumeration of good feelings that ends the ceremony is an incitement for the guests to live up to their responsibility to entertain and rejoice with the bride and groom.

And what Jewish event is complete without dancing to what might be called the national anthem of Jewishness. That simple niggun, composed in the Ukrainian shtetl’s where life was anything but joyous; that unpretentious tune sung by early kibbutznikim that Harry Belafonte made a standard part of his repertoire. I am talking about [Hava Nagilah](#). Yes, that old Jewish stand-by that moves us to dance and makes us feel happy inside. That over recorded song whose words mean, let’s sing and be happy, let’s rejoice and be happy. Hava Nagilah captures so much of what Judaism is all about. That no matter what, no matter where, no matter how, we should be joyful because we are alive, because we exist, because God has brought us to this day.

Yet just because we sit in a sukkah or observe Shabbat or celebrate with a wedding couple or dance a hora to Hava Nagilah, there is no assurance we will be happy. The potential is out there. It is we who have to do concrete things to tap into that potential. As Ben Franklin sagely put it over 200 years ago, “The constitution only guarantees the American people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself.”

Thankfully there are things we can all do to increase our sense of happiness. Positive psychologists identify [ten actions](#). I want to focus on four and show how these actions are inherently Jewish. You see, the key to living a Jewish life is not to become a better Jew. The key to living a Jewish life is to become a better human being. We have lenses to put onto life that have been test marketed for 4000 years. Doing certain things, through a Jewish lens can help us become better human beings. They can help answer the most important questions of life: How can I be fulfilled? How can I live a life that matters? How can I be happy?

Dr. Andrew Weil once said that if he could teach only one thing to people to improve health, it would be to breath properly. The first thing you can do on your road to happiness then, is to breathe. This means breathing deeply, into the belly. For some this might mean adopting a practice of contemplative meditation where you sit in silence for a specific period of time each day. For others it is as simple as taking three deep breaths multiple times in a day. When you are stopped at a red light, take three deep breaths. When you are waiting on a subway platform or riding an elevator, three deep breaths. Don’t see waiting for something as a waste of time, view it instead as an opportunity, as a mini-recovery.

Studies were done with tibetan monks who practice contemplative meditation. They agreed to have their brains scanned in an MRI. While in the machine they began to meditate. The results were astounding. The left side of their brains, the part of the prefrontal cortex that lights up when we are enjoying life was lit up like a menorah.

Other people who meditated as little as fifteen minutes a day were shown to have decreased anxiety, stronger immune systems, happier moods, and transformed brains. Yes, you can change the makeup of your brain by just sitting quietly and concentrating on your breathing for no more than fifteen minutes a day.

Jewish tradition has long understood the connection between breathing, meditation, spirituality and prayer. The word for prayer is t'fillah. It comes from the verb l'hitpalel which means to judge oneself. The purpose of prayer is to spend time in deep introspection and contemplation which starts with breathing and quieting ourselves down.

The word for soul is Neshamah. The word for breath is Neshimah. The word for spirit and wind are the same: Ruach. Breath and spirit are intertwined. When you meditate, when you pray, when you breath deeply you touch your own soul. And don't just pray and meditate on your own. Judaism understands the power of communal prayer. Praying with others allows us to share our sorrows AND our joys. I believe as David Mamet does, "We human beings are happiest in mutual devotion." Praying with another allows you to reflect on the experience with another and, as Pirke Avot reminds us, when two or more engage in prayer and study, the divine presence rests between them.

Two: Exercise. We all know this. It is something some of us are obsessed with. For some, exercise is their religion. The exercise I am talking about is not the hedonistic Greco-Roman type where the goal is to craft the body into a temple. That is idolatry. I am talking about exercise where we care for this vessel that was given to us as a gift. As I see it, this body is God's present to me. It is a long term lease. I have to care for it and return it, with normal wear and tear, when its term ends.

I don't need to remind you of the benefits of exercise to your health. We know that regular exercise reduces stress, which is the enemy of contentment and well-being. What taking care of our bodies also does, is to connect us with the divine. It reminds us that we are part of something much larger than ourselves. Each morning we say the following: "Praised are You, our Eternal God, who with wisdom fashioned the human body, creating openings, arteries, glands and organs, marvelous in structure, intricate in design. Should but one of them, by being blocked or opened, fail to function, it would be impossible to exist. Praised are You, Eternal One, healer of all flesh who sustains our bodies in wondrous ways."

Such a prayer acknowledges God's role in fashioning this incredibly holy vessel and acknowledges how much more we are able to sing God's praises when this body is functioning as God intended. To ignore our bodies is to ignore a great gift, and to reject the One who presented it to us. And exercise releases dopamine, that neuro-chemical God created that makes us feel happier, naturally.

Third: Practice Altruism. From childhood we are taught that selfishness is bad. Looking at it another way, one of the most selfish things you can do is to help others. Volunteer at a homeless shelter, a food bank, as a reading tutor or for your synagogue. You might not eradicate homelessness, lift the scourge of hunger, cure illiteracy or save the Jewish people, but you will almost surely help yourself.

Judaism is predicated on the notion of helping others. Some in our society promote social darwinism - each person for themselves. Judaism counsels survival of the unfittest. We are called to be our brother's and sister's keepers. The Torah reminds us over and over to care for the weak and the powerless AND to ensure their dignity. Being altruistic is woven into the fabric of what it means to be Jewish. One might say that it is woven into the fabric of all religions.

Now, we know that not all religious people are happy and not all religions are happy and people do some very callous and hateful things in the name of religion but by and large, religion promotes the core spiritual values of compassion, caring and gratitude. When you cultivate these values, you become happier. When you do acts of kindness, when you practice gratitude, when you cooperate with others, when you connect to something greater than yourself, you are acting in a religious way.

Our son Elijah became bar mitzvah last May. The outpouring of love from so many of you was palpable. It lifted us up and carried us through the day and continues to. One thing we did to give back was collect books for low income students in Port Chester. But we wanted to go beyond just having a collection, we wanted to involve Elijah's friends in the process. I went to Ikea and bought eight bookcases. During the kids party we turned off the music. We told the kids they were going to build bookcases and fill them for other kids who not only lack books, but also lack the furniture to house them. We split the kids into teams and told them to get busy building. There they were, spread out in the lobby of the synagogue, girls in skirts and heels, boys in khakis and dress shoes, building bookcases. These kids dove into this project with abandon. They were laughing and talking and feeling incredibly productive. That feeling of doing something for someone else filled them with joy. As one said, "This is so cool! It is really nice to do something for someone else because so often we only care about ourselves." Case closed.

So volunteer, donate, and practice gratitude. At your Shabbat table, go around and ask each person to say one thing they are grateful for that week, or before you go to bed, ask your kids to tell you one thing that was fun from their day. Practice an attitude of gratitude. It will make you more caring, more compassionate, more loving. It will make you richer in soul.

Fourth and most importantly, nurture your social connections. This is what synagogues are all about. Often a synagogue is referred to as a [Kehilah Kedosha](#), a sacred or holy community. The word Kehilah, congregation, comes from the Hebrew root, Kahal, meaning group. The difference between the two words are two small letters, Yud and Heh. Put together they spell Yah, one of God's names. A kahal is merely a group of people. A Kehilah is a group that comes together for a sacred purpose. This is why we are more than a club or a fee-for-service organization. We exist for people to pursue happiness, for people to grow emotionally and

spiritually. Our mission is to foster the creation of sacred relationships of meaning. This starts with listening to each others stories. It means being a part of each other's lives.

Once the Gerer Rebbe decided to question one of his students, "How is Moshe Yaakov doing?" The student didn't know.

"What!" shouted the Rebbe. "You don't know!?! How can you not know!?"

You pray under the same roof. You study the same texts. You serve the same God. You sing the same songs and yet you dare to tell me that you don't know whether Moshe Yaakov is in good health, whether he needs help, advice or comforting?"

We are a hopelessly communal people. Stories are at the heart of who and what we are. Our religion is practiced best... in the kitchen, with lots of people around, where stories of how bubbe used to make her matza balls might be shared. There are no Jewish hermits. We require a minyan, a quorum to pray because we know the importance and power of community.

[Martin Seligman](#)—the "father" of positive psychology noticed one thing that truly happy people have in common: they're extremely social. Each of them is in a deep relationship—a spouse, a partner, a child, a friend. Each has a rich repertoire of friends, of communities of which they consider themselves an essential part. In fact, the daily activities most associated with happiness are sex, socializing after work, and having dinner with others.

It is not easy to be in relationship; to love someone deeply is to open yourself up to hurt and to heartbreak. Yet it is so vitally important to our overall well being. According to one study, joining a group that meets even just once a month produces the same happiness gain as doubling your income. Once a month, friends. DOUBLING your income. All I can say is that we celebrate Shabbat, together, every single week. You're invited. And you do the math. Community Synagogue really does offer you the opportunity to create the kind of relationships that actually leads to happiness. Just think of our name... Community! The founders of this congregation had our happiness in mind when they founded this congregation almost 65 years ago.

Now I know that doing these simple things: meditating and praying, exercising, practicing altruism and nurturing social connections all sound like homilies from your grandmother. Well, your grandmother was smart. And you know what is also great about doing these things that lead to greater happiness? They are free!

Today is Yom HaDin, the day of Judgment. As we read the Unetaneh Tokef, the image of the Heavenly Court is put before us. Each of us, we read, will pass before God the Judge, a rehearsal, in some ways—for the day of our final judgment. Our rabbis spent a lot of time imagining this day. They imagined what God might ask, what we might expect. Among the many questions they imagine God posing in the world to come, at least one surrounds the way we enjoyed our lives. The rabbis imagine God asking us to make an [accounting for every LEGITIMATE pleasure we denied ourselves](#) - and they were not talking about that new watch, that fancy car or those new killer shoes They were talking about how we denied ourselves the opportunity to enjoy good food, good wine, good friends, the opportunity for physical fitness and the opportunities to give back. The Jewish concept of happiness includes learning and experiencing new things, activities where we grow in soul, all within a sacred framework.

Judaism is not ascetic. Our tradition doesn't tell us we can't have THINGS. But our tradition also knows that it is about more than things that ultimately make us happy.

At the end of the day, the trick to happiness is not a Harvard education or a new yacht or a bigger house. The trick to a life of happiness is to be authentically you. To do the things you love to do, not only the things you have to do. When you appreciate life, the happiness in you appreciates. When you don't, it depreciates. It's that simple. Do what you love. Sing, dance, breathe, play, connect. Grow in love and make for yourself a meaningful life.