

THE PATH TO HAPPINESS

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“May you have a happy new year!” In our traditional greeting of the holiday, happiness appears as the most desirable blessing of all. We all want to have a happy life. The question we must face, however, is how do we make such a wish come true? Will prayer be sufficient? Or do we have to engage in a special way of life to find the serenity and peace of mind we all strive for?

In the Yellow Pages of the New York phone book, you will find a firm known as "Happiness Inc." whose business it is to provide all the services “which will make you a happy person,” says the advertisement. They will write letters for you, make arrangements for a dinner-party, shop for a birthday present, call your parents or your friends to inquire about their health and send a bouquet of roses to them on their birthday. In short, they will do anything that may bring you pleasure and satisfaction. It would appear then that all

you need to find ‘happiness’, is the means to afford the services of this firm.

Despite the amenities that such organizations might offer you, however, many of us are unable to find true peace of mind, let alone the exaltation of happiness. As a consequence, they seek to overcome the boredom of daily routine by engaging in easy fun and instant kicks. Some take a ride to the Atlantic City casinos or some other gaming place around the city. Some prefer to fly to Las Vegas to get some of the fun it promises you. Some indulge in drinking, the use of recreational drugs or in watching blue movies.

It remains, however, that true happiness continues to elude them, because it is not a merchandise that can be purchased at any price, for happiness is a state of mind, a profound feeling of serenity we experience when we do what is right, when we abide by the dictates of our conscience and we fulfill the tasks that life expects of us. When we achieve the goals that we have set for ourselves, when we bring to fruition a creative project we had conceived, when we express our love

to the members of our family and our friends, our heart is filled with happiness. The Psalmist says:

“When you eat the fruit of your labor, how good and how happy you will be.” (Psalm 128:2)

No amount of material wealth can provide this feeling of joy and satisfaction. You cannot find it at Nieman-Marcus or at Harrods in London. You cannot ask for a pound of happiness, for it cannot be purchased at any price. At best, the experts on recreational wonders, will offer you a weekend at the Ritz Hotel in Paris and a chauffeured drive through the city at two in the morning, as they did to Princess Diana... but true happiness will still elude you.

Eastern Mystics tell the story of a young man who came once to a sage and asked:

"Master, what should I do to find happiness?"

“That is quite simple, my son," said the sage "all you have to do is wear the shirt of a happy man. Go and look for one and ask him for his shirt.”

The advice seemed reasonable and our young man set out to look for the shirt of a happy man with great anticipation. He went from town to town and from door to door in his search for such a person. After a long journey, he finally learned that on the outskirts of a village, there lived a 'happy man'. The village people told him that he was singing all day long to express his joy for life. Our young man got very excited at the thought of meeting such a person.

As he approached the house, however, he was quite disappointed when he discovered that the 'happy man' was wearing no shirt at all...

We all know that affluence cannot provide happiness. Even though Marilyn Monroe had virtually all the advantages that most people desire - beauty, glamor, fortune, she was unhappy. One of the richest men in the world, Paul Getty, had a miserable life; he failed in numerous marriages, he was hated by his children and had few friends. Henry Ford was equally unhappy despite his huge fortune, and so were many famous people who seemed to have had everything to be happy.

On the other hand, Dr. Albert Schweitzer was quite happy treating lepers in the African jungle. Mother Teresa was satisfied taking care of the sick and the dying in India. The Baal Shem Tov was happy teaching others how to transcend misery by practicing love and compassion.

Where do we find happiness, then?

In the first place, we cannot find it through direct pursuit. We experience it after we realize specific projects that have meaning in our eyes. Our Sages taught us long ago:

“Who is rich? He who is satisfied with his lot [and is not torn by envy and jealousy.] (Pirkei Avot 4:1)

We can be happy with little and miserable with many possessions.

Some people never seem to be satisfied with what they have; they always want more, because they think that others are more privileged than they are.

The French philosopher Montesquieu observed:

“If we only wanted to be happy, it would be one thing; but we often want to be happier than other people, because we think that they are more happy than they really are.”

The Spanish Jewish poet Solomon Ibn Gabirol described that same situation in these terms:

“Contentment has the power to make poor people feel rich and discontent makes rich people feel poor. The wise knows that an obsessive search for happiness can become a main cause of unhappiness.”

Assuredly, the happiest people in the world do not always have what they desire, but they make the best of what they have. They will accept hardships, if they are convinced that they will lead to some important achievement; they will engage in a difficult route if they can see some light at the end of the tunnel. They may even endure some pain and suffering if they know that it is for a worthy cause. Indeed, a positive attitude will help us attain our goals more easily than a negative one. Without it, no amount of ephemeral pleasure will be able to dissipate the sense of inner-emptiness that may result from our lack of a meaningful purpose in life...

Professor Viktor Frankl of Vienna, the author of the classic book *“Man’s Search for Meaning”* asserted that happiness

cannot be pursued but can only ensue from the fulfillment of a meaningful goal(s) in life. A distraction will only give us a temporary feeling of pleasure, but it will not change our state of mind, our sense of self-esteem. It behooves us to fulfill the ideals and aspirations we cherish. If we do not endeavor to fulfill our destiny, we may soon experience a certain vacuum in our life, a sense of inner emptiness and existential anxiety, as happened to the unfortunate man in this story.

A deeply depressed man came to consult a psychiatrist in Rome, Italy, looking for a cure for his chronic depression. He poured out his heart in the presence of the physician.

“My friend,” said the psychiatrist, “you desperately need some cheering up, you need to relax and laugh. I suggest that you see the show of the great comedian Carlini at the Grand Theater. He will surely make you forget your sadness.”

“You don't understand me at all, Doctor” replied the patient with tears in his eyes, “I am Carlini.”

On the other hand, there was a nurse at Shaare Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem, Schwester Selma Mayer, who worked till her death, well up in her nineties. She was an orphan from

Hamburg who came to Shaare Tzedek in 1916 and nursed the sick with her heart and soul for nearly sixty five years. She never married though she adopted and raised two orphan girls. Her favorite maxim was contained in a poem by Rabindranath Tagore, the distinguished Bengali poet, and indeed, it summed up her philosophy of life:

I slept and dreamt that life was joy.

I awoke and saw that life was duty.

I acted and behold: duty was joy!

By helping others, Schwester Mayer was deriving satisfaction and joy. When we transcend our self-centered disposition and endeavor to reach out to others and are kind and loving to them, then, without realizing it, we are uplifted to a higher rung on the ladder of spirituality and we are overwhelmed with a sense of happiness.

What shall we do then, to attain this level of fulfillment?

We should use all the gifts and talents with which we have been endowed, to perform acts of benevolence and deeds of

loving-kindness even if they are not explicitly mentioned in our Scriptures. Our Sages never taught that we should blindly obey the commandments of the Torah, but that we should go beyond the letter of the law and be guided by its spirit. They enjoined us to reach out to the heart and soul of our fellow human beings in sensitive ways that we alone can devise and no one else.

Our Sages taught that the Mitzvot were meant to purify our heart so that we may give expression to the good inclinations that are in us. Beyond the specific rules of conduct which are meant to protect the rights and dignity of our fellow human beings, the Torah enjoins us to be kind and compassionate toward them in ways that are not necessarily mentioned explicitly. When we take upon ourselves to follow that path, we liberate the sparks of goodness and holiness that are found in us - and in our fellow human beings - for these sparks are always there, even when we go through unfortunate times.

That is why our Sages say in the Mishnah:

"One is duty-bound to praise God for the bad days as well as for the good." (Mishna Ber. 33b)

Puzzled by this rule, a student asked the Maggid of Mezeritch:

"How can we praise God for the bad days in our life?"

"You raise an important question," replied the Maggid. "I advise you to go to the town of Anapole and find Reb Zusia, a man who has suffered much in his life and he will give you the correct answer to your question."

So the disciple went to Anapole and asked for Reb Zusia. He was told that on the outskirts of town, there lived a poor man by that name. The disciple went to the place and found Reb Zusia living with his wife in one room. Their clothing was shabby and their furniture broken, and the only food on the table was some stale bread and some apples. Nevertheless, Reb Zusia welcomed his guest and invited him to have supper with him and his wife.

"No, thank you," said the visitor. "My teacher sent me to you because he said you could explain to me the meaning of the rabbis' teaching, that we must thank God for our bad days as well as for the good."

Reb Zusia seemed quite surprised.

“I can't understand why your teacher sent you to me for that purpose, because I never had a bad day in my life. I am grateful to the Creator for every day I live, no matter what it brings. Every day offers me a new opportunity to celebrate life and give thanks to God, the Author of Life.”

A modern writer Edmund Ward has given us a similar advice (in *'The Main Chance.'*) He writes:

“Drink champagne for defeats as well as for victories. It tastes the same and you need it more.”

We should drink champagne for defeats because no defeat is final and every defeat can teach us an important lesson that will make us better human beings.

My friends, when we are able to liberate the sparks of goodness and love that are in us and in our fellow human beings, we are participating in the holy task of redeeming the world in which we live, and by doing so we will experience a sense of overwhelming happiness in our heart.

In this spirit, I would like to wish you all a Happy New Year!
Le-shanah Tovah Tikatevu!

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