Happiness, Happiness, You Shall Pursue

Sing: “Don’t Worry Be Happy”

Here’s a little song I wrote
You might want to sing it note for note
Don't worry, be happy

In every life we have some trouble
But when you worry, you make it double
Don't worry, be happy
Don't worry, be happy now

Ooh-ooh-hoo-hoo-ooh hoo-hoo-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh
Don't worry
Woo-ooh-woo-ooh-woo-ooh-ooh
Be happy
Woo-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh
Don't worry, be happy

Are we all feeling happy now?

It’s the New Year. We are alive and celebrating the birth of the world. Our community is healthy and strong. We’ll be in our new home tomorrow morning. Life is good. But are we happy? Ask yourselves right now. Think about it. Are you happy?

According to a recent Harris Poll[1], 31% of Americans are “very happy.” And this is down from previous years. 31%! This suggests that roughly 69% of us in this room are not very happy with our lives. After feeling happy just a moment ago, doesn’t this make you feel a bit sad?

I was shocked to read this figure. After all, we carry mini computers in our pockets that can access any information we want at any time. We use video phones, not unlike the ones in “The Jetsons.” Our cars are just about to drive themselves. New medicines and technological breakthroughs happen all the time. Life expectancy in our country is still on the rise. And most of ourFacebook and Instagram posts are happy posts, such as pictures of our feet at the beach, and our smiling children. Yet, true happiness seems to be elusive to so many of us.

This is baffling considering that to many of the greatest minds ever, achieving happiness is of the utmost importance. More important than wealth, fame, and even health. And we

[1] http://www.theharrispoll.com/health-and-life/American-Happiness-at-All-Time-Low.html

are failing at it. Aristotle wrote that happiness is the ultimate goal at which all humans aim.[2]

A few years later in ancient Greece, Epicurus reasoned that we all desire happiness as an end in itself, and all other things are desired as a means for producing happiness.

John Locke coined the phrase “pursuit of happiness,” in his book “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.” Thomas Jefferson took this phrase from Locke and incorporated it into his famous statement of a peoples' inalienable right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" in the Declaration of Independence.

Assistant clinical psychologist at Harvard, Nancy Etcoff[3], said in a 2004 TED Talk, “We are wired to pursue happiness, not only to enjoy it, but to want more and more of it.”

The irony is that while we want it and crave it, we don’t know how to actually get it, and thus we see such staggering low numbers of people who are actually happy. Walk into any bookstore and you will see numerous self-help books on attaining happiness. Surf Amazon and there are thousands of titles of books, each with their own secrets to being happy.

Perhaps Auschwitz survivor, Viktor Frankl, explained this problem best in his seminal work, “Man’s Search for Meaning.” He writes, “…it is a characteristic of the American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to 'be happy.' But happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue…and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen... you have to let it happen by not caring about it.”[4]

And this is the paradox: it’s the very pursuit of happiness that keeps us from actually attaining happiness. And the more we try to become happy, the further from actual happiness we get.

In a fascinating article in *The Atlantic*, “There’s more to life than being happy”[5], Emily Smith argues something that we all understand. The pursuit of happiness may result in a relatively shallow, self-absorbed, and even selfish life.

In other words, pursuing happiness is superficial, but pursuing meaning is profound. This is what Judaism teaches. To pursue a life of meaning is what enriches our lives.

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[2] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book 1.

[3] https://www.ted.com/speakers/nancy_etcoff

[4] Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon, 2006. pp. xiv-xv; 138

[5] Smith, Smith, ‘There’s more to life than being happy’, The Atlantic, 9 Jan. 2013.

In *parashat kedoshim*, which we'll be reading next week, we are commanded, *kedoshim tih'yu*, "you shall be holy." With the verb in the imperfect, it means, you shall strive towards holiness. You won't ever become holy like God, but that is the path your life should take. And according to our Mussar rabbis, this is the point of life. We must work on our attributes so we can be the best version of ourselves possible—so we can be a community of *mensches*.

And a little bit further in the Torah, we are commanded, *tzedek tzedek tirdof*, "Justice, justice you shall pursue." (This is the unofficial tag line of Reform Judaism.) We should venture towards holiness and seek justice in the world.

Judaism, it seems, is more concerned with living a life of meaning and engagement than a life of happiness and pleasure, for the latter are fleeting, but the former can be spiritual.

But is the Torah at such odds with Jefferson's famous words? Should we not also pursue happiness?

In *parashat re'eh,* for example, we read two times, "you shall rejoice" and "you shall have nothing but joy." These phrases come near the end of the portion where we are commanded to celebrate Shavuot and Sukkot. The Psalms tell us many times to serve God with joy as well. We are expected to celebrate and worship God with happiness, with *simchah*. This is at the heart of Hasidic Judaism. In fact, in the early stages of the Hasidic movement, one of the temporary names used to refer to hasidim was *di freilicha*, meaning, "the happy ones."

Viktor Frankl suggested that one cannot pursue happiness. It just happens. To force this feeling will only drive us further away from it. However, the Harvard Study of Adult Development might suggest otherwise. They conducted what may be the longest study of adult life that's ever been done. For 78 years, they tracked the lives of 724 men, year after year, asking about their work, their home lives, and their health.

The goal, of course, was not to just observe their lives unfold over time, but to see what keeps them happy.

Since 1938, the study has tracked the lives of two groups of men. The first group started in the study when they were sophomores at Harvard College. And the second group were also teenage boys from Boston's poorest neighborhoods, boys who were chosen for the study specifically because they were from some of the most troubled and disadvantaged families in Boston. Most lived in tenements, many without running water.

According to the study's leader, Dr. Robert Waldinger, a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and clinical professor at Harvard Medical School, as well as Zen priest, "these teenagers grew up into adults who entered all walks of life. They became factory workers and lawyers and bricklayers and doctors, one President of the United States. Some devel-

oped alcoholism. A few developed schizophrenia. Some climbed the social ladder from the bottom all the way to the very top, and some made that journey in the opposite direction."

And what has the study learned most clearly? "Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period."

It turns out that the people who are more socially connected to family, to friends, to community, are happier. They live longer lives and in better health. Loneliness, according to the study, is quite toxic. A lonely person's brain function declines more rapidly and earlier in life. Their life spans are shorter and their overall happiness is not even close.

One doesn't need a lot of friends to be happy, just good friends. And good family relationships. It's about quality, not quantity.

Dr. Waldinger wanted to look back on the subjects lives and see if he could predict who was going to be happy in their latter years. And what his team found was that a man's happiness in his old age was determined not by his health but by how satisfied he was in his relationships in his middle-aged years. In other words, a 50 year old man with close relationships ended up happier than one who may have been in better health, but who had less solid friendships and connections with loved ones.

The other cause of happiness, aside from cultivating loving relationships, is the frequency that one expresses gratitude. Think about it: a grateful person is a joyful person. Becoming happy will not cause you to be grateful. It's actually the other way around. And as we know, the Hebrew word for Judaism, *yahadut*, means "gratitude." We are supposed to be a grateful people.

One other tip for developing a happy perspective comes from Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Rabbis. We are taught to "greet every person with a smile!" Moshe Chayim Luzzato, an Italian Rabbi of the 1700s, teaches us that our external state arouses our inner one. Simply smiling will help us be happier and it might even rub off on someone else.

As much as I respect Viktor Frankl, it does seem that one can in fact pursue happiness and succeed. The Harvard study shouldn't, however, lead us to believe that if we have close relationships and express what we are grateful for daily that we will always be happy.

A nineteenth century Hasidic Rabbi, Hanokh of Aleksandrov explained this through a Talmudic parable: A man came to an inn in Warsaw. In the evening, he heard sounds of music and dancing coming from the next house.

"They must be celebrating a wedding," he thought to himself.

But the next evening he heard the same sounds, and again the evening after that.

"How can there be so many weddings in one family?" the man asked the innkeeper.

"That house is a wedding hall," answered the innkeeper. "Today one family holds a wedding there, tomorrow another."

"It's the same with this world," said the Rabbi. "People are always enjoying themselves. But some days it's one person and the other days it's another. No single person is happy all the time."[6]

One of the greatest gifts of being a rabbi is having the opportunity to visit with people when they are close to death. It's a tremendous honor to be present with men and women, whether they are conscious or not, as their passing from this world to the unknown fast approaches. When I am able to have a conversation with them, I try to ask two questions. The first: Are you afraid of dying? And the second: Do you have any regrets?

Most people, when so close to death, are not afraid of dying. They are sad to depart their family, but they are not afraid. Some are even ready to meet up again with their deceased relatives! And as for regrets, the one answer I get more than any other, next to "I have no regrets" is "I regret not being happier in life."

My friends, leading a life of meaning, of purpose, and structure is the Jewish recipe for a well-lived life and one that will transcend through the generations. At the same time, seeking happiness, nurturing relationships, expressing gratitude and even smiling on occasion, is yet another and, I would argue, equally important Jewish formula for getting the most out of this precious gift we have all been given.

As we welcome a New Year together, I'd like to suggest we make every effort to heed the following:

S*imchah simchah tirdof*. Happiness, happiness you shall pursue.

May 5777 be a joyful year for you and your loved ones.

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[6] Telushkin, Joseph. *Jewish Wisdom*. New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc. 1994. p.219