

Sparks
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How Happy is Happy Hour?

And you shall be happy in all that the Lord your G-d has given you (Deut. 26:11)

The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. --- Anne Frank

Many people have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification, but through fidelity to a worthy purpose. --- Hellen Keller

Money can't buy you happiness, but it does bring you a more pleasant form of misery. ---- Spike Milligan

King Solomon said in his famous book Ecclesiastes, “I praise happiness,” and yet he also concluded “What does happiness accomplish?”

Is happiness praiseworthy or worthless?

The Talmud explains that King Solomon was referring to two types of happiness. The happiness derived from doing a *mitzvah* – fulfilling G-d’s command -- is praiseworthy. However when happiness comes from some other source—it is worthless.

We read in the book of Psalms “man is born a wild ass.” However, Torah teaches that all our natural innate inclinations have a divine purpose. Our task is to transform our wild drives into uniquely human powers by properly nurturing and directing them towards achieving the ideals for which they were created. Otherwise rather than bringing blessing to a person and the world, these drives destroy him.

A person may look at these drives in their primitive and gross form and conclude that they must be uprooted. But that approach will never succeed. Others may decide that since these drives are intrinsic to human nature then they should simply be allowed free reign and expression. This attitude is irresponsible and dangerous. Torah teaches us to harness the power of these drives and elevate them towards their higher intended purpose.

Urges, inclinations and tendencies are translated in Hebrew as “netiot”. This same word also means young saplings. Therefore the successful fruition of these young saplings—man’s primitive urges-- is that they be planted in the right ground to bear delicious and nourishing fruits. This is one of the goals of a life of Torah and Commandments -- to direct and harness mankind’s wild animalistic drives and use them to accomplish divine ideals befitting the greatness of a human being created in the image of G-d.

It is basic human nature to want to be happy. However, the urge for happiness in its primitive form can be satisfied through lusts and cravings. We feel good when we eat a steak, drink wine, win the game, indulge in sex, etc..

But transient pleasures do not fulfill our soul. Ultimately the life of lust leaves our inner-self empty and depressed. Of course this does not mean we should give up our hopes for happiness. We just have to realize that deep and lasting happiness comes from serving G-d to make manifest in this world divine ideals and values. When we do good ---we feel good. The Torah claims that only good and meaningful acts access for us mature and real happiness. This is the type of happiness that King Solomon praises.

When we satisfy our lusts then our egos and bodies are fulfilled but not our souls. But even so, lust has a short life because as soon as a lust is fulfilled it dies. It is only the pleasures of the soul that last forever. This is what the prophet Habakkuk teaches us, "I will rejoice *in* G-d." In other words, when I make G-d the context of my life and my frame of reference then I am happy.

The Talmud teaches that the presence of G-d, referred to as the *Shechina*, does not inspire a person when they are lazy, sad, wildly laughing, flippant, chattering or idly talking. The *Shechina* inspires us only when we are happy serving G-d purpose -doing a mitzvah.

At such times a person experiences the divine magnificent of her soul—the eternal godliness of her true "I am-ness" because she sees herself as part of the divine universal soul, that is manifest in all of creation, giving it life and directing it towards its ultimate purpose. This is the meaning of the verse in the Psalms, "G-d You make me happy in all that You do."

In other words, we feel truly happy when we experience what we are doing as the doings of G-d, that G-d is actually working through us and we are divine instruments. The artist feels ecstasy when he no longer feels that he is the painter but rather the paintbrush in the hand of the one and only true Artist. The philosopher Nietzsche once said, "Unless you feel that an infinite whole is working through you your life has no meaning." Torah would add that you would also never experience true happiness.

We are inspired with the *Shechina* and achieve true happiness when we perceive ourselves as participating in the universal spirit and power of G-d. There is profound joy in experiencing ourselves as G-d's tools bringing divine love and goodness to the world. This is the real meaning of serving G-d.

Therefore when you are, so to speak, plugged into G-d and experience I contact with the Ultimate I you feel energized by the divine spirit that is inhere in all of creation. You feel vibrant, alive and happy-- not sluggish, lazy and sad. When the *Shechina* inspires you your actions are directed and not flippant. You speak articulate words, filled with content--- not excessive chatter and idle talk.

But if you are not plugged in then you have to fake it until you make it. Jump out of bed even though you don't feel like it. Meditate and contemplate the awesome spirit of life that is not yours but G-d's. Envision yourself as part of the great divine light that is manifest in this miraculous universe. Do good and you will feel good.

It is not enough to get busy and active. You have to get directed and be effective. Sure you could feel happy if you put on some funk music and start to boogie but that will not plug your soul into the *Shechina*. It won't deliver the real happiness that lasts. Yes, you could go see a hysterically funny comedy and laugh your guts out. But no movie runs forever. You could go play some basketball, work up a good sweat. But even if you win the game you can still feel like a loser. Engage a friend in a meaningful conversation, do a mitzvah, share words of wisdom from the Torah.

The Torah teaches, "Vitality and joy are in His place." When you realize that G-d is the all-embracing context of your life and act in concert then you will be filled with vitality and joy.

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