



JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

MODULE I
SOURCE AND DISCUSSION SHEET



QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

The following questions are included for further contemplation and discussion, and although each one is not answered directly, one should be able to answer them after going through the learning module.

Q: Is happiness a byproduct of achieving or getting the things that you want in life – or can you get it another way?

Q: Can we be happy while those around us aren't?

Q: Can we be happy when things go really bad for us?

INTERESTING OBSERVATION ABOUT WHAT PEOPLE WANT OUT OF LIFE

Ask yourself the following question:

Q: Which would you rather be rich or happy? (If you could only choose one).

Almost everyone chooses to be happy.

OBSERVATION

Yet, most if not all of us invest great amounts of time, energy and even money trying to become rich, yet very few work at being happy!?

At least two fascinating popularly held beliefs emerge from this interesting observation:

1. Even though people pursue wealth, what they really are looking for is happiness.
2. People assume that happiness can't be attained directly; it is a byproduct of acquiring all the things they want and/or achieving all of their goals.

HAPPINESS IS COMPLEX.

In reality the subject of happiness is indeed complicated and there are a number of factors which all together create an outlook, which will enable a person to find happiness in life. These include some other good Jewish values like:

- Having a sense of meaning and purpose.
- Understanding that everything in life is a gift.
- Being humble.
- Being a giver.
- Trusting in G-d, or put another way **believing that things are moving in a positive direction even if we can't always see it.**

FIRST THE MISCONCEPTION

Our happiness and unhappiness are produced by the circumstances in which we find ourselves-from the external circumstances of our lives. If we get a compliment, win the game, get a raise, buy a new car, we are happy. If our boss criticizes us, we break a leg or get a parking ticket we're unhappy.

Q: Isn't this how most of us lead our lives? What are the downsides of this approach?

This view makes us feel insecure, out of control...

VICTIMS OF LIFE

When our happiness is based upon life circumstances, we become victims to life's vagaries, and seek in varying degrees to manipulate our external circumstances, expecting happiness to follow. Yet, since not even the best "control freak among us" cannot manipulate life circumstances perfectly, happiness is fleeting if attained at all, and pursuing it creates greater stress and anxiety often outweighing the gain.

ORAL LAW SOURCE FOR HAPPINESS

A Solution:

The Rabbi's in the Mishna (Torah's Oral Law) give us the key to finding happiness with the following question and answer:

Who is the rich person? (Pirkei Avos 4:1)

Q: Who do you think is the rich person? Isn't this a simple self-evident question?

The Mishna gives a very interesting answer:

Who is the rich person? The one who is happy with what he has.
(Pirkei Avos 4:1)

Q: In the Mishna, is happiness based upon circumstances? What's it based upon?

You see, many people seek happiness from the outside in; If we get the raise, the new relationship, the great job (all outside circumstances) we will be happy.

The Mishna is sharing with us a profound secret; **happiness is not based upon circumstances, but how we "view" our circumstances. Really, it's all about attitude.**

Attitude change: We think the rich man is the one who has "a lot of things". Really, he is poor if the things that he has doesn't make him happy. It's like having his wealth in a safe deposit box that he doesn't know about. He's really rich, but he's emotionally poor.

Controlling happiness seems to have more to do with **wanting what we have (which is an attitude) than having what we want**. If we cultivate this attitude regarding what we really do have in life, every additional thing we get will make us indeed richer.

The Dali Lama says: Happiness is determined more by the state of one's mind than by one's external conditions, circumstances, or events, at least once basic survival needs are met?

Q: The Torah and the Dali Lama seem to be pointing to the same line of thought. How does this approach to happiness resonate with you?

TWO EXAMPLES OF ATTITUDE CONTROLLING HAPPINESS

A. Rich Man, Poor Man.

Do you recognize the following scenario?

Children can have a basement filled with wall-to-wall toys and can actually have the audacity to suggest to their parents that they are bored! On the other hand, if a new friend comes to the house to play and he enters that basement and sees the toys, all of a sudden, he is rich! Amazing. Yet, the kid who owns the toys is poor because they don't make him happy any more (he's used to them). **It seems it's not the toys that make the difference, but the attitude of their owner.**

B. Feeling like a Queen.

Queen Victoria of England in the 19th century was the richest person in the world, yet in real terms was poorer than any low-income person in America today.

Q: Yet, whom do you think "feels richer," the Queen or the low-income person?

CONCLUSION

Wealth is all about attitude. "Wanting what you have" promotes happiness, now and in the future, no matter how much or how little one actually has, while needing to **"have what you want"** is a recipe for frustration and disappointment.

GETTING OFF THE TREADMILL

If controlling happiness is about attitude, no longer do we have to be victims of life circumstances beyond our control. We can stop trying to endlessly manipulate life hoping to find happiness, while always falling short of the mark. We can take control of our lives, because we are free to develop an attitude that will produce happiness.

This doesn't mean that we should become passive or complacent with what we have; we can always strive for more in many areas of our life. Judaism encourages striving and growing in all areas of life – both in material and spiritual terms.

Actually, if you cultivate the **proper attitude, every acquisition and achievement will make you happier and richer**, because you feel it emotionally through appreciation.

Q: You might be wondering: But what about the bad stuff happening in my life....How can I be happy in the face of that?

Story which provides perspective:

Rabbi Noach Weinberg (founder of Aish Hatorah) tells a story of a man who is blind. He is at the top of the Empire State Building about to jump off. Imagine you were that man. You have lost all your wealth, your family has left you, you feel broken. Suddenly: You have eyesight. You can see. You've never seen before! Would you still jump?

Of course not! You would be excited to see all the things you've never seen before.

- Your parents
- Your family and friends.
- The beautiful world around you.
- Yourself

You would be enthralled looking at and taking in all the things you've never seen before! Eventually though you might be right back up there about to jump!

Q: Why would you jump after you got your eyesight back?

You stopped appreciating your eyes! As long as we appreciate what we have we are excited about it. We see it as a gift. Once we get used to it, expect it, we no longer appreciate it; and then all we see and focus upon is the pain.

LET'S GET PRACTICAL

How do we start appreciating? It takes habituating ourselves to focus upon all the things we really have, which for many of us is a brand new direction. You see, we've built up a default mechanism to see our happiness as linked to what's to come in the future rather than the here and now, and to believe that we have no control over it. We need to rewire ourselves in a way that is conducive to happiness.

THE FIRST STEP

The way to break a bad habit is to attack it in a way that will generate the least resistance. To that end, consider the following exercise.

1. Make a list of 30 pleasures that you have in life. Each day take 5 minutes to write in a journal all about the pleasure. Examples: morning coffee, oranges, hot showers...
2. Once a week, review the journal entries for that week. A good time for reviewing this is Shabbat.

THE GOAL

The exercise is aimed at awakening the “gratitude taste buds” to all the great things in your life. Gradually, you will become more aware of other pleasures in your life, appreciating life more and becoming happier. This will become your default outlook on life and that is the goal! We have been habituated to take things for granted. This exercise will help to re-habituate ourselves to appreciate, all the pleasures in life – those which are obvious, those less obvious and even the pain or struggles we sometimes go through.

Action for our kids: You can do this with young children to help their positive thinking by discussing “gratitudes” with them at night at bedtime. Ask them to share with you three things that they are grateful for each night. If they have trouble responding, help them; I am grateful for having the best mommy in the entire world!