

The Secret to Happiness

One of the great folk singers of our time is Leonard Cohen. I've become one of his Hasidim.

A couple years back he gave a concert in London attended by many, many thousands of people. I've heard the recording many times. It seems to me that the entire audience was hanging on every one of his words. That night, Leonard Cohen was not only a folk singer; he was a rebbe – a teacher of teachers.

Before each song, he would say a couple of words. Each comment precipitated a frenzied reaction. One of them remains with me. In his deep voice, he slowly said, “[in recent years,] I've...studied deeply in the philosophies of the religions...but cheerfulness kept breaking through.”

That line evoked tremendous laughter, but I've been thinking seriously about it. Is this true relative to Judaism? Is Judaism supposed to be a religion that is sullen, weighted and burdensome, or is the mission of Judaism to bring happiness into our lives and the lives of all of the Jewish people and for that matter, the entire world?

And that's what I'd like to talk about. I'd like to talk about simcha. It's an especially appropriate topic just a few days before Purim, as Purim is so associated with joy, with happiness, with simcha – all in the spirit of *mi'shenichnas Adar marbim be'simcha* - “When the month of Adar enters, one should increase joy and happiness.”

So here is my thesis this morning. Relative to happiness, Judaism parts company with what I believe is the pervasive culture of America. For most Americans, the goal in life is happiness, a feeling that is achieved by “taking” as much as one can for oneself. So much of our society is about drugs, sex, and alcohol. You can see it in the endless advertisements on TV during the Super Bowl or Academy Awards that very much reflect what Americans buy into. In too many circles, what counts most is self-indulgence – self indulgence equals happiness.

Judaism sees it differently. The goal of Judaism is not happiness. Rather, it is a commitment to the performance of good deeds. It is spelled out clearly in the Torah, where God, in just a few words, lays out the mission of Judaism, *ve'asita ha-yashar ve-ha-tov b'inei Hashem* – “and you shall do that which is upright and good in the eyes of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 6:18).

There you have it. The goal of Judaism is not to be happy, but to do that which is upright and good. But – and this is the key – from living a life of uprightness, from living a life of goodness and good deeds, from leading a life of serving others, of reaching out rather than reaching in, happiness flows. In Torah, happiness is not the goal of life, but the result of leading a good life.

Here in the United States, our communities have subconsciously adopted the American attitude. An example are the Rosh Hashana cards we send to each other. They proclaim, “shana tova,” which we translate as “happy new year.” Well, shana tova doesn’t mean happy new year – in fact, not everything that is happy is good. Rather, it means, have a good year. The goal is goodness, from which happiness ultimately evolves.

A good example of how this goal is realized is found in the halachot of Purim. Aside from reading and hearing the Megillah, the primary mitzvot of Purim are seudat Purim, the Purim meal; shalach manot, sending of food gifts to others; and matanot l’evyonim, giving charity to the poor. It is here that Rambam codifies that the greatest emphasis should be placed on giving money to the poor. Here are his words:

מוטב לאדם להרבות במתנות אביונים מלהרבות בסעודתו ובשלוח מנות לרעיו
שאין שם שמחה גדולה ומפוארה אלא לשמח לב עניים ויתומים ואלמנות וגרים
שהמשמח לב האמללים האלו דומה לשכינה שנאמר להחיות רוח שפלים ולהחיות
לב נדכאים.

It is better for a person to be liberal with his or her donations to the poor (*matanot la'evyonim*) than to be lavish with the Purim feast (*se'udat Purim*) or in sending portions to friends (*mishloa manot*).

For the greatest joy is to bring happiness to the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows and the strangers.

For one who brings happiness to the hearts of these unfortunate individuals resembles the Divine Presence, as it says, “who revives the spirit of the lowly and the brokenhearted” (Isaiah 57:15).¹

Here, Purim echoes the Torah’s formula of how to be happy on holidays. In those cases, happiness is always linked to assuming responsibility for the stranger, the orphan and the widow. In the words of the Torah – *ve-samachta be-chagecha* – “you shall be happy on your holidays” *atah, u’vincha u’vitecha...ve-ha’ger ve-ha’yatom ve-ha’almana asher bi’she’arecha* – “you and your son and your daughter...and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who is in your midst.” (Deuteronomy 16:14)

¹ Maimonides, *Code*, Laws of Megilla 2:17. Translation by Rabbi Eliyahu Tauger.

In this spirit, the essence of Purim is not about lavish meals, with all of its drinking – and beware of drinking as it is a serious, serious problem in our community. And Purim is not about sending lavish shalach manot to our neighbors. Rather, it is about matanot l'evyonim and all that it symbolizes; it's about giving and being there for those in need – being there for those who are most vulnerable. That's the key to simcha. From the doing comes happiness.

This, I believe, is the unique Jewish approach to happiness. Happiness is an emotion, a feeling. We cannot be commanded to have a feeling as feelings come from our deepest core and often cannot be controlled. They are neither right nor wrong, they just are. A feeling cannot be commanded, but an action can be commanded – and from the action, feelings come.

A story of a rather glum, withdrawn woman. She seemed distant, uninvolved, unable to communicate, unable to see the beauty of the world – yes, unable to smile, unable to be happy. Somehow, she took a bone marrow test and was found to be a match for somebody in need.

We sat for many hours talking and talking and talking more. She was reticent to donate. It was for her, just too much of a sacrifice. In time, however, she softened. And then, she took the leap, and donated. It was not simple – this

woman spent the whole day in the hospital going through this process – and she needed some time to recuperate.

Now open your hearts: *Be'einai ra'iti* – with my own eyes I witnessed when a year or two later she met the recipient of her bone marrow, she met the person whose life she saved. Never will I forget her sheer joy, her happiness. For the first time I saw her smile. It was a smile and a happiness that was real and enduring, because it came from giving.

This is the message of Purim. Purim is not a day of unbridled joy and carefreeness. It is not a day of actively seeking out cheerfulness, a cheerfulness that “breaks through.” Rather, it is a day of actively seeking to do that which is good.

As the important logotherapist Viktor Frankl argues – what inspires people most is the inner call to find meaning in life. And there is no greater meaning than imitating God by doing, by giving, by serving. It's from there that happiness comes.

A Freilichen Purim - Purim Sameach.