

HAPPINESS SERMON
ROSH HASHANAH 5772
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

Among the resolutions you made for this new year, is one of them: I want to be happier next year? Even if you didn't make this resolution, wouldn't you like to be happier? If so, you are in luck because there is a whole new field of study called happiness research and positive psychology. As a first step, try the following test. Listen to the stories of two very different people and decide which person you would rather be.

Bob is an ambitious 35-year-old white, single male who earns \$100,000 a year, and lives in sunny Southern California. He's healthy and athletic, and lives alone in a house. He spends his free time reading and going to museums.

Mary is a 65-year old black woman who lives with her husband in snowy Buffalo, New York.

Together, they earn \$40,000 a year.

Mary is overweight and not particularly attractive.

She is on regular dialysis.

She spends most of her free time involved in church activities.¹

You know that this has got to be a trick question.

Even so, you may be surprised to find out that, while "Bob seems to have it all," and most of us might prefer to trade places with Bob, Mary is probably happier.

This is the conclusion drawn by psychology professor Jonathan Haidt, who features these two stories in his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*.²

Haidt is involved in the field of happiness research.

Here are some of his unexpected findings:³

"Men are no happier than women, and people in sunny areas are no happier than people in chillier climates.

¹ Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis* p. 87.

² Haidt, p. 87.

³ From Haidt, via Nicholas Kristoff, NY Times, January 16, 2010, "Our Basic Human Pleasures: Food, Sex and Giving."

The evidence on health is complex,
but even chronic health problems -- like those requiring dialysis --
may have surprisingly little long-term effect on happiness,
because we adjust to them.
Beautiful people aren't happier than ugly people,
although cosmetic surgery does seem to leave patients feeling brighter.
Whites are happier than blacks, but only very slightly.
And young people are actually a bit less happy than older folks,
at least up to age 65."

So what does account for happiness?
Essentially, a positive outlook on life.
You can accumulate riches, accolades and accomplishments,
but they will not make you feel better.
Just ask King Solomon who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes,
calling all of this "vanity of vanities."
Rather, riches, accolades and accomplishments
will just raise your expectations and leave you striving for more.
It doesn't matter so much what happens to you.
What matters most is how you interpret the events in your life.⁴

Take the example of two nuns featured in Martin Seligman's book,
Authentic Happiness.

Nun #1, Cecilia O'Payne, took her final vows in 1932.

Here is what she wrote about the occasion:

"God started my life off well by bestowing upon me grace of inestimable value...

The past year which I spent as a candidate studying at Notre Dame
has been a very happy one.

Now I look forward with eager joy
to receiving the Holy Habit of Our Lady
and to a life of union with Love Divine."

Nun #2, Marguerite Donnelly, took her vows that same year and wrote:

"I was born September 26, 1909, the eldest of seven children,
five girls and two boys...My candidate year was spent in the motherhouse,
teaching chemistry and second year Latin at Notre Dame Institute.
With God's grace, I intend to do my best for our Order,
for the spread of religion and for my personal sanctification.

These responses were part of a happiness and longevity study of 178 nuns.
The first nun, Cecilia, who used words like "very happy" and "eager joy,"
was still alive at 98.

The second nun, Marguerite, who expressed no positive feelings,

⁴ Haidt, p. 86.

died of a stroke at age 59.

The study's researchers found that 90 percent of the most cheerful nuns were alive at 85, versus 34 percent of the least cheerful.

The research showed that only the amount of positive feeling made a difference, not how devout they were or how much they looked toward the future.⁵

Now, you may ask, how do I develop a positive attitude?

Happiness researcher Jonathan Haidt tells us that, for the most part, people are hard-wired "to experience positive or negative emotions."⁶

In other words, it's mostly genetic.

So, if you are hard-wired to be a pessimist, are you doomed to be unhappy?

Or is there something you can do to become more of an optimist?

The good news is that the answer is: Yes.

The bad news is that you need to work really hard at changing your thoughts from negative to positive ones.

How might this be accomplished?

Well, there are three methods that are pretty effective: meditation, cognitive therapy and, this won't come to you as a shock, anti-depressant drugs such as Prozac.

Meditation helps you to detach from your desire for the world to conform to your expectations.

After all, if you can let go of your expectations, you have a much smaller chance of being disappointed, frustrated, angry.

Then, if your friends and family come through, you will be pleasantly surprised.

Cognitive therapy trains you to catch your negative thoughts, breaking the "feedback loop" that generates more negativity.⁷

Our Religious School children sing: "Mitzvah goreret mitzvah, averah goreret averah" – "one good deed leads to another, and one transgression leads to another."

By the same token, the more generous thoughts you can conjure up, the more you will have generous thoughts.

The more bitter feelings you harbor, the more bitter you will feel.

And anti-depressants rebalance your brain chemistry, ensuring that the brain has sufficient serotonin to keep you from being depressed.

⁵ Seligman, pp. 3-5.

⁶ Haidt, p. 33.

⁷ Haidt, 38.

These are all worthwhile remedies, of course, but positive psychology and the Jewish tradition can also be of great benefit. You might be amazed to hear that our tradition can help us become happier. Maybe you are thinking: Our tradition certainly helps us be more ethical, more socially responsible. But happier? In fact, Bible professor, Dr. Tamara Eskenazi, wondered whether happiness is even a Jewish value. After all, she noted that the word “ashrei,” “happy,” appears only a couple of times in the Torah, and not very many more times in the rest of the Bible. She spent a good deal of time probing Jewish texts and wisdom, before she concluded that happiness is, after all, Jewish. And I would agree with her.

Take, for example, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, a famous Chassidic rabbi, who emphasized how important it is to be uplifted. “It is a great mitzvah to be happy always,” he said. Rabbi Nachman developed various techniques to amplify our ability to experience joy. One such technique is *hitbodedut*, whereby one spends an hour alone each day talking aloud to God in one’s own words, as if “talking to a good friend.” Rabbi Nachman suggests that you use arguments, words of longing and supplication, even regret and repentance, asking God to draw near to you.

The purpose of this practice is to break open your heart and bare your soul to God. If you do this at a set time every day, for one hour, you can spend the rest of the day being joyous. Rabbi Nachman also urged people to seek out their own and others' good points. He said that, if you can’t find any “good points” in yourself, then search your deeds and your actions. If you find that your deeds were driven by ulterior motives or improper thoughts, then try and find the positive aspects within them. And if you cannot find any good points, you should at least be happy that you are a Jew.⁸

“Depression does tremendous damage,” Rabbi Nachman maintained. “Use every ploy you can think of to bring yourself to joy.” He admitted that, “Finding true joy is the hardest of all spiritual tasks. [So,] if the only way to make yourself happy is by doing something silly, do it.”

⁸ Wikipedia.

Or even, “If you don’t feel happy, pretend to be.
Even if you are downright depressed, put on a smile.
Act happy. Genuine joy will follow.”
In addition, he recommends: “Get into the habit of singing a tune.
It will give you new life and fill you with joy.”⁹

Our tradition also tells us that we should be happy with who we are,
and that we should work from our own strengths and talents,
rather than envying those of others.

The Chasidic story of Zuschya captures this.

When he was about to die and on his deathbed,

Zuschya’s students came to be with him.

They found him trembling with fear.

“Why do you fear, Teacher? You are a pious man!” they asked.

Zuschya answered, “I fear my answer to God’s only question in Heaven.”

“Are you afraid God will ask why you were not more like Moses,
leading your people out of slavery?” they asked.

“No,” he answered, “Moses was a prophet and none could be like him.”

“Are you afraid God will ask why you were not more like Solomon,
seeking justice for your people?” “No,” he answered again,

“Solomon was a great master of law and none could be like him.”

“Then what will the question be that frightens you so?” his students asked.

Zuschya answered, “God will ask, ‘Why were you not more like Zuschya?’”

Now, believe it or not, practicing mitzvot -- our commandments --
can help us develop a positive attitude as well.

After all, our mitzvot are meant to make us more aware of every moment,
so that we can express gratitude for the source of our blessings.

And gratitude is essential if you want to see the glass as half full
rather than half empty.

You could, for example, be upset because you don’t have a better car –
a Mercedes, a BMW, or whatever.

OR, you could be grateful that you actually have any kind of vehicle
when most people in the world have only their feet – often shoeless—
to take them from one place to another.

The mitzvot help us to focus on every one of the gifts
we are so fortunate to receive.

That’s why we say the Kiddush, the blessing before drinking wine:

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam,

borei pri ha-gafen – Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe,
who creates the fruit of the vine.

And that’s why we say HaMotzi, the blessing before eating bread:

⁹ Quotes from: www.rabbidebra.com/rules-for-joy.html

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam,
ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz -- Blessed are you, Adonai our God,
Ruler of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.
Think about the kosher laws – they help us to discern one kind of meat or
fish from another, so that we pay attention to what we eat.
Without these blessings and these rules,
we would probably take food and drink for granted.

If being grateful helps us appreciate the things we have in our lives,
the converse is also true: a complaining, bitter, negative attitude,
will only make us unhappy.

As happiness expert Martin Seligman tells us,
“insufficient appreciation and savoring of good events in your past and overemphasis of the
bad ones are the two culprits that undermine serenity, contentment, and satisfaction...
The only way to change your emotions is by rewriting your past:
forgiving, forgetting...Forgiving transforms bitterness into neutrality...
You can't hurt the perpetrator by not forgiving,
but you can set yourself free by forgiving.”¹⁰
Indeed, forgiveness and renewal is what the High Holy Days
are all about.

The rabbis of our tradition wisely understood
that forgiveness frees us from those bitter, angry feelings
that cause us heartache and misery.
You might think that expressing your anger is what frees you from it.
You might think that expressing your anger will prevent a heart attack
because you are not suppressing your rage.
But actually, Dr. Seligman tells us that the opposite is true.
“Dwelling on trespass and the expression of anger
produces more cardiac disease and more anger.”¹¹
I'm sure we can all think of many examples of people
who hold onto feelings of hurt, disappointment, and betrayal,
remaining enraged many years after the sparking incident occurred.

Brothers and sisters cut off relations with one another,
and often, they don't even remember why they are no longer speaking.
People who hold onto anger tend to be pessimists.
They view their past, as well as their future,
as filled with setbacks and frustrations that they see
as “permanent, pervasive, and personal.”
A pessimist perceives slights and insults in almost every interaction with others.

¹⁰ P. 70, 75.

¹¹ P. 69.

A pessimist feels that he is constantly treated unjustly,
never given a decent break.

The result?

“Pessimists...are up to eight times more likely
to become depressed when bad events happen;
they do worse at school, sports and most jobs
than their talents augur...they have rockier interpersonal relations.”¹²

Optimists, on the other hand, interpret setbacks as
“surmountable, particular to a single problem,
and resulting from temporary circumstances or other people...”

This allows them to “bounce back from troubles briskly,
and get on a roll easily when they succeed once.”¹³

At the very core of the optimist’s perspective is hope,
faith that the future will be better than the past or the present.
We can develop and nurture hope by believing in Judaism’s primary message.
After all, the Exodus, our central story,
tells us that things do not have to remain the same,
that it is possible to be redeemed, to be freed from the chains of oppression,
whether we are being oppressed by outside forces, or by internal demons.

So the research on happiness, as well as our Jewish tradition,
agree that to develop a positive attitude, we need to work on gratitude,
forgiveness, and hope. But my friend, Dr. Eskenazi,
who was trying to find out whether happiness is Jewish,
discovered another key to happiness when she searched the Bible.
Though she did not find many occurrences of the word “happy,”
she noted that it is the first word in the first verse of the first Psalm.
The verse reads: “Happy is the man who has not followed
the counsel of the wicked” and the Psalm goes on to say:
“He is like a tree planted beside streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades,
and whatever it produces thrives.”
And what is a tree that yields fruit but a giving tree --
one that offers gifts to others.

Remember the profiles I offered at the beginning of this sermon?
Mary, the black church-going woman and Bob,
the athletic guy from Southern California?
Remember I said that Mary was probably happier than Bob?
One of the big differences between Mary and Bob

¹² p. 24.

¹³ Seligman, p. 93.

is that Mary is involved in a web of relationships and gives to others -- through her church group.

Bob, on the other hand, spends his time alone and indulges his own interests and pleasures.

In a New York Times column, Nicholas Kristof reports that, "Brain scans by neuroscientists confirm that altruism carries its own rewards. [Researchers] found that when a...subject was encouraged to think of giving money to a charity, parts of the brain lit up that are normally associated with selfish pleasures like eating or sex...The implication is that we are hard-wired to be altruistic. To put it another way, it's difficult for humans to be truly selfless, for generosity feels so good."

Kristof also quotes the co-founder of Smile Train which helps tens of thousands of children each year who are born with cleft lips and cleft palates.

Says Brian Mullaney:

"The most selfish thing you can do is to help other people.'

Mr. Mullaney was a successful advertising executive, driving a Porsche and taking dates to the Four Seasons, when he felt something was missing and began volunteering for good causes. He ended up leaving the business world to help kids smile again — and all that makes him smile, too."¹⁴

So, if you want to be happier next year, try thinking positive thoughts, be grateful for what you have, and reach out to others. It'll make you smile.

¹⁴ Kristof.