

Are You “Pretty Happy” or “Very Happy”?

Category: Emor, Vayikra

The Wall Street Journal did a survey of happiness. Guess what they discovered...

What’s My Level of Happiness

America is experiencing a growing sense of discontent. The Wall Street Journal recently conducted its annual survey on the level of happiness among Americans, with over a thousand individuals taking part. Participants were asked to categorize their happiness level as either “not so happy,” “pretty happy,” or “very happy.” The results revealed that 30% of respondents classified themselves as “not so happy,” while 56% expressed being “pretty happy,” and only 12% claimed to be “very happy.” It’s the lowest record of ‘very happy people’ since the poll began in 1972.

Well, researchers obviously wanted to know — what’s the secret of the ‘very happy’ people (needless to say, nobody wants the secret of the unhappy people; we can all write the book ourselves); everybody wants to know what the secret to happiness really is. It turns out that the common denominator of these individuals pointed to three fundamental aspects: their belief in G-d, a strong sense of community, and their commitment to marriage. Even those who were unmarried were nonetheless firm believers in the institution of marriage.

So, I took a long, hard look at myself. I’ve got a strong belief in God, I’m married, and I am active in my community. With all these elements in place, I wondered where I truly fit in the happiness spectrum. Was I among the “very happy” or just the “pretty happy” group? I began to struggle mightily with the question, and — not being able to come to a satisfactory conclusion — I fell into a depression...

But then I noticed that a significant number of those 12% who claim to be very happy actually attribute their happiness to something innate. They believe that being happy is just something they were born with. I therefore reached the

conclusion that this study just happened onto the lucky 10% of the population who naturally have a happy disposition; they're the kind of people who can find happiness no matter what life throws at them, and it's almost effortless for them. For the rest of us, "normal" people, being joyful is a daily battle — a struggle we face on a regular basis. Thank G-d, my crisis was averted.

The Holiday Happiness Spectrum

This week we read the Torah portion of Emor, and I think we find representation of all three levels. The first section of the parshah is on the topic of the Kohanim, but the second section goes through a list and description of all the Jewish holidays. It begins with Shabbat, and from there goes to Passover, Shavuot and so on.

The common denominator of all these days is that they are joyous occasions; that's what sets them apart from ordinary weekdays. However, when you begin taking a closer look, you discover many subtle differences.

For example, Shabbat is actually not considered a day of happiness. It's a day of enjoyment, a day of pleasure. The prophet Isaiah says, "You shall call Shabbat a day of pleasure" (58:13). Pleasure means eating good food, sleeping a bit more, avoiding hard labor, and so on. On Shabbat, you should *feel* like a king; the presence of Shabbat is something that you feel inside, not necessarily something expressed to the entire world. Joy, on the other hand, is an emotion that bursts forth from within you, and is contagious — it spreads to others as well. (See 20 Kislev 5737. Sichos Kodesh vol. 1 pg. 313).

The holidays, on the other hand, are all meant to be joyous occasions. But there are differences among them as well. Some holidays are explicitly described in the Torah as joyous days, while others are not.

Passover, the first holiday of the year, has no explicit command of joy. Shavuot, the next holiday, has a single solitary mention, "You should be joyful before G-d . . . in the place that He chooses" (Re'eh 16:11). However, Sukkot has not one mention, but three! Twice in Parshas Re'eh (14-15), and another in our parshah (23:40) — we are repeatedly reminded, "Be happy!"

What is the reason behind these differences? Why shouldn't we be equally joyful

on all the holidays?

Many people don't know that the holidays are centered around the agricultural cycle; Passover is the beginning of the harvest season, Shavuot is when the fruits ripen, and Sukkot is when the harvest season comes to a close.

This holds the key to the joy-levels. The Midrash explains: "Passover is the beginning of the harvest season and people don't know how big their harvest will be. At such a time people are worried and can't be expected to really rejoice. Even during Shavuot, when the grains have already been harvested, the fruits have not yet been gathered, so the Torah mentions 'rejoicing' just once. But when Sukkot comes around, and the farmers can see how G-d has blessed the work of their hands, then we can indeed greatly rejoice." (Pesikta D'Rav Kahana 39).

On Passover, one is, perhaps, "not so happy"; on Shavuot he is "pretty happy," and on Sukkot he is "very happy."

When Are Jews Happy?

The first section of the Torah portion, regarding Kohanim, also has an element of joy in it:

On every holiday, we observe the custom of Birchas Kohanim; the priests stand in front of the congregation, spread their hands, and bless the people of Israel.

This is, in fact, only the custom in the Diaspora. In most places in Israel, this blessing is recited every single day (don't worry, they do it without the lengthy singing).

Why are we worse off? Are we less deserving of this blessing on a daily basis?

The explanation lies in the story of Isaac, who called his son Esau and asked him to make him a delicacy, "so that I may bless you" (Toldos 27:4). In other words, to be able to give a blessing, a person needs to be in a happy state of mind (Shulchan Aruch Harav, 128:55).

The Alter Rebbe therefore notes that for Jews in exile, where life is tough and we are not in a constant state of joy, the blessing was reserved for holidays — when the joy is a given.

What's the reason for this condition? The Talmud says that to channel blessing on another person, you need to have a "good heart." You need to feel goodwill towards the individual and be happy for him. Any jealousy or negative feelings will get in the way of the blessing. And when is a person most generous? When he is in a happy state of mind. Therefore, holidays are the appropriate time for this blessing.

Well, this means that we don't get to have this blessing every day. Come and grab it on May 26 and 27. On Shavuot, we will be at least "pretty happy"; the Kohens will bless us, and we will all bless each other.