

If you were to imagine what it would take to be labeled the world's happiest country, what criteria would you come up with? Freedom from oppression, a healthy economy, a surfeit of leisure time might be three things that come to mind.

A writer for the Asia Times who goes by the pseudonym Spengler wrote an article last May establishing two criteria for evaluating the happiest country. He reasoned that a high suicide rate is a sign of unhappiness, and since an ideological opposite of wanting to end one's life is wanting to create more life, a high fertility rate is a key indicator of happiness. By analyzing the proportion of people in 35 industrialized countries who choose to create life against the proportion who choose to destroy their own, he determined which country was the happiest. By these criteria, standing at the top of the heap is ... drum roll, please, ... Israel. Israel? We could list reason after reason why Israelis should be spending their days unhappily worrying about terrorism, war, Palestinians, Hamas, secular-religious tension, racism and the challenges of absorbing Ethiopian immigrants, political corruption, and a growing immigrant guest laborer problem. How on earth can Israelis be so happy?

Perhaps it is because of Israel's longevity - not the State's but the people's - that we Jews are optimists because we are certain nothing can destroy us, so we embrace a love of life in spite of the problems. Our faith defies logic -- Zionism should never have succeeded, and Israel should never have survived its early wars. The fact that it did might best be explained by our Torah blessing: *Asher bahar banu*, God selected us to fulfill a particular covenantal role in the world.

The article raises an intriguing question that I want to address this Rosh Hashanah - the question of the mitzvah of happiness in Jewish life.

The author and talk show host Dennis Prager regards happiness as a moral imperative. He writes that happy people make the world a better place. Unhappy people bring pain to their spouse, parents, and children. Happy people are equally contagious, but they spread joy rather than pain.

The spiritual quest of a Jew is to transcend our limitations, to reach above and unite with the Divine. Weighing us down are bodily limitations and pains. Raising us up is a sense that no matter what the challenges, we can still put a smile on our face and embrace each day, each moment, and each breath with a sense of gratitude that we are alive!

One of the first people I met in Grand Rapids was a man in his 70's, and the first words out of his mouth to me were, "never get old - getting old is horrible." He was continually angry and depressed. He didn't like his family, although they seemed to do their best to take care of him. He never smiled. When I tried to visit him once in an assisted living facility, he pulled a sheet over his entire body and told me to go away. He spent the last 10 years of his life waiting to die.

That is no a way to live a life. I can tell you with certainty that nothing happened in his life that forced him to be that way. I know people who have known real suffering but nonetheless are pleasant, happy people. We are not the victim of the circumstances of our life.

One of the people whose life circumstances could justify unhappiness and anger is Joe Stevens. Joe, for those of you who don't know him, survived Nazi Germany as a member of the resistance, hiding his Jewish identity as he fought the Nazis alongside Poles, Lithuanian, and others who would gladly have shot him or turned him in had they known his true identity. After the war, Joe learned that he was the sole survivor of his extended family. Yet, he introduces his memoir, entitled "Good Morning," with the following words:

“Good Morning” is an expression used daily by millions, often without sentiment or sincerity. To me it is a warm greeting very close to my heart. I fell in love with it, and will continue to love it until the end of my days.

There was a time in my life when, upon awakening in the morning, I considered it a blessing to greet someone with “Good Morning,” to spend another day on this tragic earth. I always felt as if I had lived my last day. Waking in the morning, I was always amazed that I was still alive. The surprise gave me the courage, strength, and will power to fight without fear for the Allied cause one more day. Each day, then, was to me the most precious gift. I was sure that I would not come out of the war alive.

Therefore, “Good Morning.”

It's not that Joe Stevens is immune from unhappiness. When his wife Mary died, he was deeply depressed. It was his fundamental decision to be thankful for each day that sustained him. Joe is not unnaturally cheerful. He is a normal person, with periods of happiness and sadness. Yet, his example of greeting each Tel Aviv day with the words “good morning” and a beautiful smile on his face is an inspiration.

A 2005 study published by the American Psychological Association found that people who have an optimistic outlook on life recover more quickly from trauma in their lives, live healthier lives, and live nearly 20% longer than pessimists. An Israeli study suggests that women who are happy and optimistic are 25% less likely to develop breast cancer.

How is possible to stay positive when life is treating you like a punching-bag? Dr Raj Persaud in his book 'The Motivated Mind' reports research into the differing mental habits of optimists and pessimists showing it's all in how we interpret past successes and failures.

When something bad happens to a pessimist, they assume it is representative of a pervasive problem with disastrous implications for the rest of their life. They also assume that every problem encountered is permanent and personal.

When something bad happens to an optimist, they do the exact opposite. An optimist tends to restrict the event's implications, avoid taking it personally and assume it is only a temporary state of affairs.

When something good happens, optimists will let it spill over into other areas of their life as well as assuming it's personal and permanent. And a pessimist doesn't.

200 years ago, Reb Simcha Bunim of Parsischa said, “God's kindness is attracted to joyousness. A joyful person is usually blessed with plenty, even though he may be impious. A sad person is usually in want, even though he be God-fearing.”

Don't read this teaching as a statement of magical piety, that in order to get everything you want all you need to do is to act artificially joyful and you will be blessed. That is surely not the case.

It is, however, the case that joyful people generally think that they have all they need. They don't complain - they are optimistic, see the bright side, and are ever hopeful. It's not that nothing ever goes wrong in their life. When a disaster happens, they are thankful for the years they lived without experiencing sorrow, and confident that after they deal with this matter that their lives will return to the previous state. Unhappy people generally look for the next disaster. No matter how well things are going, they are always worried that things are not going to go well

tomorrow - and because our lives are always full of ups and downs, they generally get what they expect.

We yearn for happiness, but for many the block to achieving joy comes when we compare our lives to the lives of those around us. All we see are reasons to be unhappy. We lack a nice car - our neighbor just bought a new BMW. We lack a nice home - our neighbor just redid her kitchen. Our job is a boring dead end -- our co-worker is a rising star. We have tzuris all around . . . . our neighbor just took an Mediterranean cruise. If I wanted, I could look around the room today and see nothing but death, depression, and illness, . . . . because I am privileged to be part of your life and see your insides, as it were. I know that the surface your neighbor sees of you, and that which you see of your neighbor, doesn't tell the whole story. I know that while the essence of your yearning is true, what you see around you is false. You cannot legitimately use the happy life of your neighbor as an excuse for your unhappiness. Rather, you ought to look more closely at your own life -- find the blessings that are there among the tzuris, because the blessings are there. The tzuris does not negate the blessing, and the blessing, no matter how thin it may seem, is reason for happiness.

Jewish teachings about the religious obligation of happiness abound. Rabbi Mordechai Gifter taught that we are obligated to feel joy . . . . Human nature is to constantly want more than we presently have. A midrash teaches, "One who has one hundred wants two hundred" (*Kohelet Rabbah 1:34*) Our moments of joy are mixed with sadness over what we lack. The Torah, therefore, commands us to rejoice with what we have. . . . Lack of joy with what we have is destructive both physically and spiritually. [Pirke Torah, vol 2, p. 107]

A mashal, a parable, of the Ba'al Shem Tov teaches:

Once there was a musician who played so beautifully that whoever heard him could not hold back the joy, and began to dance. The closer you got to the musician, the more beautiful and sweet the music, the more intense and wild the dancing. Then, a certain deaf man came along, one who could not hear the lovely sound of the music. He saw all those people dancing so wildly, and said, "They must be crazy." But in his heart, he asked, "What's this joy all about?" Were he truly wise, he would understand that the joy was caused by that lovely music. Then he, too, would have danced.

The Nimshal, the lesson of this parable, is that we make ourselves deaf to the potential for joy. It is there, all around us. Part of us, though, is deaf. This is literally true for one who is experiencing clinical depression. One way or another, though, we can heal ourselves. We can teach ourselves to hear. The deaf man could watch the musicians, see the joy on their faces, see the rhythm of the movement of their fingers, feel the beat of the instruments. He can learn to hear the music, and learn to let his body experience the music and move to it. He can learn to dance. We can learn to see and focus on the blessings.

Happiness is a dance, a balance, between the physical and the spiritual. Happiness is living in the moment and pursuing a vision or a dream. Happiness is living with what we have and what we are, even while we are pursuing the dream to have and be more. Happiness is living with "Dayeinu," enough, even as we work hard to see increases. Happiness is appreciating the blessing and pleasure of each moment of life, even as we see life as a journey along a winding and sometimes rocky path. Happiness is embracing the physical without getting overwhelmed

by “stuff”-it is -- wanting more but embracing less. As Abraham Lincoln said, “Most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be.”

It has been said that there are only two kinds of people in the world. There are those who wake up in the morning and say, ‘Good morning, God,’ and there are those who wake up in the morning and say, ‘Good God, it's morning.’

For the sake of the person next to you in bed, be the person who says, “Good morning, God.”

For the sake of the person you see when you buy your cup of coffee, be the kind of person who finds the energy to say, “Good morning, God.”

For the sake of your co-workers, be the person who puts on a smile on your face and says, “Good morning, God.”

And for the sake of bringing more light into the world, be the person who wakes up in the morning and says with a smile in your voice, “Good Morning!”