

Can happiness be taught?

By Amy Klein

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Are you happy?

No, seriously.

Are. You. Happy?

You can't answer that question, can you? You know what the first two words mean, but you're not exactly sure what that third word is, even though you use it all the time. "This makes me happy"; "She seems happy"; "Happy Birthday"; "There! Are you [un]happy now?"

And does "Are you happy?" mean are you happy right in this very moment that you are reading this sentence? Or, happy with your entire life? Anyway, what does it mean to be happy? Does it mean to experience constant pleasure? Bouts of joy? Moments of ecstasy? Does it mean to suffer no pain? Never be sad? Never struggle with challenges? Whatever it is, how does one get happy?

It's a High Holy Days challenge if ever there were one, since if we all lived happier lives, wouldn't the world be a better place?

So. Are you happy? Or are all these questions making you miserable?

Actually, the quest is not new. From Adam to Aristotle, Tony Robbins to Tony Soprano, from the Bible to the best-seller lists, philosophers, religious leaders, theologians, politicians — all have dealt in one way or another with what it takes to live a happy life. America, in fact, is the only nation founded upon this: The pursuit of happiness is our inalienable right.

And pursue it we do, with vigor.

Now more than ever before, it seems. If the '60s were about “Freedom,” the '70s about “Me,” the '80s about “Money,” the '90s about “Power,” in the new millennium we're recognizing something essential: None of the above, by themselves, can bring about happiness.

Think about it: Anything anyone has ever wanted in life — to be free, to be king, to be rich, to be slim, to be loved — can be boiled down to “one thing,” to quote Curly in “City Slickers”: To be happy.

And never before has the word happiness appeared in so many popular book titles. “Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment,” by Tal Ben-Shahar; “Happiness and the Human Spirit: The Spirituality of Becoming the Best You Can Be,” by Abraham J. Twerski; and “The Pursuit of Happiness,” by Chris Gardner and Quincy Troupe, upon which the Will Smith movie is based, to name a few.

Even the world of psychology — which has long studied human suffering — has joined the fray. With the recent founding of “positive psychology,” a new branch devoted to applying empirical methods to studying and creating happiness, it seems everyone — from rabbis to doctors to teachers to coaches — is involved in the quest once dominated by self-help gurus.

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But what does it mean to be happy? And how do we get there?

Here is some of what a wide range of writers, psychologists, rabbis and happiness gurus have to say on the subject:

What is happiness?

“Most people have a very fragmented idea of what happiness is,” said Dr. John Drimmer, who co-founded of The Positive Psychology Center of California last year, which offers individual and group psychotherapy, professional training and corporate consulting to help people live lives of purpose and joy and fulfillment. Drimmer said Americans equate happiness with self-esteem — but that’s only a part of it; self-esteem alone doesn’t lead to happiness.

“Let’s say you put all your emphasis into developing oneself. Ultimately, the truth is we’re all going to die,” he said, adding, “Sorry to sound like an existential Jew.”

Instead of happiness, he said, “Well-being is a better word. That’s what I think we can expect, and want, out of life.”

Harvard professor Tal Ben-Shahar puts it quite simply: “Happiness is the overall experience of pleasure and meaning,” the Israeli-born author writes. In a phone conversation from his home in Israel — he will commute to Boston to continue to teach his positive psychology class next semester — Ben-Shahar said that we tend to confuse pleasure with happiness.

“Pleasure is an important component, but not the only one ... we also need our behavior to be personally meaningful, to be personally significant,” Ben-Shahar said.

True happiness lies somewhere between the hedonist’s indulgent lifestyle (live only for today) and the religious ascetic’s lifestyle (live only for the world to come). The Hebrew word for happiness is osher.

“In Hebrew *osher* means approved — I live a life of which I approve, an authentic life,” Ben-Shahar said.

“Authentic Happiness” is the name of another book, this one by Dr. Martin Seligman, who in 1998 founded the field of positive psychology, which “focuses on the empirical study of such things as positive emotions, strengths-based character and healthy institutions,” according to the University of Pennsylvania’s Positive Psychology Center. Seligman’s research, the center’s Web site says, “has demonstrated that it is possible to be happier — to feel more satisfied, to be more engaged with life, find more meaning, have higher hopes, and probably even laugh and smile more, regardless of one’s circumstances.” (At www.authentichappiness.com, you can find tests to take using positive psychology.)

One of the best scientific explanations of what it feels like to be happy comes from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of the “Flow” series that began with the 1990 “Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience (Steps Toward Enhancing the Quality of Life)”: “The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.”

These moments of flow, or optimal experience, can occur while working; socializing; exercising; reading; being with family, friends, lovers or alone (but probably not while watching TV, which, according to his scientific monitoring, actually produces lower levels of flow). Here’s how he breaks down the phenomenology of enjoyment:

- We take on tasks we have a chance of completing.
- We must be able to concentrate on what we are doing.
- The task has clear goals and immediate feedback.
- We have a deep and effortless involvement and are separated from everyday worries;
- We have a sense of control over our actions during the experience.

- Our concern for self disappears, but emerges stronger after the flow experience.
- Our sense of time is altered during the experience.

But why are we so concerned with happiness at this particular time — are we so very unhappy now?

Some people would argue that we are not any more unhappy than our grandparents were.

“Nothing changes, because the human condition is eternal,” said Dennis Prager, radio host and author of “Happiness Is a Serious Problem: A Human Nature Repair Manual” (Harper Perennial, 1999). “If you would have asked your grandmother if she was happy, she would have looked askance at your question.”

He said her response might have been, “If I had lunch and are my kids well,” then that’s happiness.

Others might say that we think about these questions only because we have the time and leisure now to think about them.

“In a way, there’s never been a time or place in the history of the world in which you have so many people who didn’t have to worry about meeting their basic needs,” Drimmer said. If you’re running for your life, trying to feed your family, evade natural disasters or political terrors, you might not have the wherewithal to ponder, “Am I happy?”

But now — for better or for worse — we do.

And perhaps it used to be that people — people like our grandparents, and their grandparents — thought that if they just had this one thing (food, freedom, wealth, kids, security, their daughter marrying a doctor) then they would be happy.

“Traditionally, people looked for it in more money and prestige, but they [now] realize it hasn’t worked,” Ben-Shahar said.

In other words, some of us have gotten everything we ever wanted, and we are still not happy.

“Jealousy, desire and the pursuit of honor are the three biggies that will take you out of your life,” Rabbi Naomi Levy of Nashuva, a post-denominational spiritual community in Los Angeles, said, quoting “Pirkei Avot” (Ethics of Our Fathers, 4:28). “They will destroy your life. I counsel people all the time who have spent so much time pursuing things that don’t make them happy, and they don’t understand why they’re not happy. We spend our whole lives thinking that this next thing will make us happy — whatever the next thing is — it’s very easy for us to fall into that pattern.”

Many rabbis and spiritual leaders believe that unhappiness is the modern plague because we are so disconnected from religion.

“When a man has a path, he is happy,” said Rabbi Matityahu Glazerson, author and speaker from the RazOt, The Lev Eliyahu Institute, who recently lectured on joy at The Happy Minyan in Los Angeles. “There is no happiness like the closing off of doubt.”

“To be truly happy, we need to live as spiritual beings,” writes Twerski, a doctor and rabbi, in “Happiness and the Human Spirit: The Spirituality of Being the Best You Can Be.”

He’s not talking about being religious.

“Every person can be spiritual, regardless of the degree or even presence of formal religion, by being the best person he or she can be,” he said.

Even scientists agree that our general disconnect from religion might be what has gotten us to this search for happiness, because religion and religious institutions provide many of the essential ingredients needed to be happy: interconnectedness, community, family, meaning, uplifting experiences, a sense of purpose. But many scientists, who pride themselves on intellectual rigor, say the days of formalized religion are over, despite those benefits.

“The shields that have worked in the past — the order that religion, patriotism, ethnic traditions and habits instilled by social classes used to profit — are no longer effective for [the] increasing number of people who feel exposed to the harsh winds of chaos,” Csikszentmihalyi writes. “Today it is more difficult to accept their world view as definitive. The forms in which religions have presented their truths — myths, revelations, holy texts — no longer compels life in an era of scientific rationality, even though the substance of the truth may have remained unchanged,” he said.

Maybe a new, intellectually satisfying religion will arise, he said, but “in the meantime, those who seek consolation in existing churches often pay for their peace of mind with a tacit agreement to ignore a great deal of what is known about the way the world works.”

Others see our era in more dire terms: It could be, they argue, that ours is an apocalyptic time. “We are on the verge of the messianic era,” said Arjang Zendehdel, head of Dreamality Education & Coaching a center that uses 14 different disciplines, including positive psychology, to support people in discovering their full potential. Zen-dehdel, who was also a host of a weekly radio show in English and Farsi, said the messianic era means intense divine consciousness and awareness.

“People are becoming more and more thirsty, and they’re not satisfied with the way things were,” Zendehtel said.

Is it possible to become happy?

First, scholars in the field argue, happiness is not a static or definitive state of being, it’s actually a process. The question, Ben-Shahar writes, should not be “Am I happy?” but “How can I be happier?”

“The question acknowledges the nature of happiness and the fact that its pursuit is an ongoing process best represented by an infinite continuum, not by a finite point,” Ben-Shahar writes. “We can always be happier; no person experiences perfect bliss at all times and has nothing more to which he can aspire.”

And that is the whole point of psychology — or at least positive psychology.

“It’s the empirical study of how people can live rich, rewarding, wonderful lives,” Drimmer said. “Not just individually. How can we create families that are like that and even countries that are like that?”

It’s true that there are some genetic and environmental factors. Some people are born with better temperaments, better parents, better living conditions, better lives. But almost all the happiness research has shown that happiness has little to do with outside conditions.

Viktor Frankl, in “Man’s Search for Meaning” (Mass Market Paperback, 1997), catalogued Holocaust survivors who found meaning in their lives, and even Alexander Solzhenitsyn was at times in “flow” in prison. Twerski found conjoined twins who didn’t want to separate because they were happy. On the other hand, every day we × read about celebrities — who would seem to have reached the epitome of what we’re striving for — who nevertheless are on drugs, in rehab or on the verge of suicide.

“Many people assume that money is the key to greater happiness. In fact for most people, money has a very small effect on happiness, because their basic needs are satisfied already, and there are much more important causes of happiness,” writes Michael Argyle in “The Psychology of Happiness” (Routledge, 2002).

“Ultimately, happiness is not based on what we have,” Zendehtel said in an interview. “Ultimately, happiness comes from within.”

Levy said she pays close attention to the Torah verse, “V’samachta b’chagecha” (and you shall be happy on your holidays).

“Can you command joy? If you can command it, it must be that joy is an option, that it’s within your strengths to achieve it,” she said. “There’s an aspect to happiness that’s in our power, ‘Sameich Bechelko,’ [Who is happy? He who is happy with his lot].”

Prager takes it one step further. Not only is attaining happiness possible, it is a person’s duty to be happy.

“We’re morally obligated to act as happy as possible,” he said. “I have increasingly less patience for the chronically unhappy. Because almost everybody alive has a reason to be unhappy.”

How can we become happier?

Even though most happiness guides say that they cannot simply “give recipes for how to be happy” (“Flow”), most offer steps toward a well-lived life.

Twerski offers 10: Be humble, compassionate, patient, open to change, choose wisely, make the most of all situations, improve yourself, have perspective, purpose and × search for truth.

Prager offers five: Express gratitude, let go of our images, act happy, don't rely on children for your happiness and practice self-control.

Ben-Shahar offers six: Accept emotion, engage in enjoyable and pleasurable activities, have perspective, simplify, take care of your body and express gratitude.

Zendehtel offers five: Gratitude, perspective, faith that everything happens for the good, spirituality and growth.

All of the lists stress gratitude and perspective, which brings to mind the parable of rabbi Nachum Gam Zu, who always said, despite his misfortune, "Gam Zu Le'Tovah" — it's all for the best.

To acquire these traits, though, is not as easy as reading a book, taking a class, making a resolution. They must be practiced.

For example, Drimmer explained in an interview three exercises he has his UCLA medical students do.

- For gratitude: Every night for a month, students must take five minutes to go through their day and think of three things that made them happy.
"And what we know is that over a period of a month the neural pathways begin to shift," Drimmer said. "The reason to do it at the end of the day is we know about the nature of memory, and the last thing reflected on before we go to bed is very powerful."
- For meaning: The students meditate in class on their week, to find what it was that was most personally meaningful.
"Why did that matter to you?" He keeps asking them to get it down to an irreversible word: "Invariably the words are different aspects of the same irreducible gem — they are all words about connection and caring and unity."

- For purpose and using strengths: Each student must ask five classmates to identify their five top positive characteristics from a 24 “Character Strengths” list, and then pick the most common occurrences and see if they can use those strengths the next day.

Csikszentmihalyi doesn't offer exercises, but he does advise people to become involved in auto-telic pursuits: “a self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward.”

Which is what they say about mitzvot, or positive commandments: they are a reward in themselves.

So where does Judaism fit into this? Does God want us to be happy? Can a religious person be happy?

There has long been a debate as to whether it is an actual mitzvah to be happy. “Mitzvah Gedolah Lehiyot B'simcha,” Rabbi Nachman of Breslov said, meaning, it's a great mitzvah to be happy.

But many debate whether this is a positive commandment in itself, as it comes from the Psalms, “Ivdu et Hashem B'simcha” (worship God with joy). Some say the words simply mean one should be happy when performing a mitzvah, especially since being happy is not counted as one of the 613 commandments.

But Rabbi Aharon of Karlin, one of the early Chasidic leaders, reportedly said, “There is no mitzvah to be joyous, but joy can bring on the greatest mitzvot.” It is also true, he said, that “it is not a sin to be sad, but sadness can bring on the greatest sins.”

Some say the Eskimos have 100 words for snow, but the Torah has many different words for happiness. “Simcha” is the generic word for happiness; “alitz” means joy.

According to Glazerson, who wrote “Letters of Fire: Mystical Insights Into the Hebrew Language” (Feldheim, 1991), many of the words for happiness kabbalistically refer to a certain type of happiness: “Sasson is a sudden unexpected happiness, gila is the happiness of discovery, rina is a refreshing happiness, ditza is a sublime joy, chedva is the happiness of togetherness and tzahala is dancing and rejoicing.”

Hebrew’s Osher, for happiness, has the same root as the Hebrew word for head, rosh. Simcha has the same letters as thought, or machshava. “There is no happiness without the head. It’s all in a person’s mind,” Glazerson said. “If the head is straight, you will be happy.”

In fact, the advent of the Chasidic movement in the 17th century sought to bring a mystic joy — with singing, dancing and prayer — a reaction to what they saw as an overly ritualistic, intellectual Judaism among those who came to be known as “mitnagdim,” or opponents.

The popularity of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach in the 20th century, again, has sought to bring that primal joy of song back to Judaism.

Joy is “what Judaism is all about,” Glazerson said. “How can a person be unhappy if he truly believes in God?”

In “Living a Joyous Life: the True Spirit of Joyous Practice” (Trumpeter Books, 2007), Rabbi David Aaron talks about a prediction from the Zohar mystical text: “It said there will come a time when the Jews will relate to Jewish tradition like cows eating grass, and that this generation will bring ruin upon itself.”

“The Talmud said that when people accept the Torah with joy and happiness, these feelings are guaranteed to be long lasting,” he added. “But when people accept the Torah with anger or feelings of coercion, though they may observe its commandments for a while, eventually they reject them and everything breaks down.”

It's easy to lose the point in whatever we are doing, Levy said.

“It's easy to practice a Judaism that's rigid, it's also easy to practice in a way that's mindless, to just get out of bed and not be aware of anything. It's easy to lose all of it,” she said. “The more mindless we are, the more we act out of fear, or the more we don't learn that we can't just show up and expect something to happen. The more passive we are as Jews, the less we're going to get out of it.”

The question of how to make Judaism more meaningful and relevant is a different story, but everyone agrees that it must be practiced voluntarily and with ... happiness.

“For those who subscribe to the morality of duty, finding meaning — leading a moral life — necessitates sacrifice,” Ben-Shahar writes. “Sacrifice, by definition, is not pleasurable (if it were, it would not be sacrifice). The morality of duty, therefore, puts meaning and pleasure against each other.”

Most theologians and scientists agree that religion does provide a structure and opportunity for happiness.

“Religion can provide standards of right and wrong that are not altered by expedience. While it is true that people may distort religion for their own needs, religion can still provide guidelines that help us know how to be more considerate, more compassionate, more spiritual,” Twerski writes.

Both Prager and Ben-Shahar were raised in Orthodox homes and still ascribe to many of the strictures, although they do not call themselves Orthodox.

“Many of the habits that I was taught, or that I practiced as a child, when I was Orthodox, I still keep today,” Ben-Shahar said. “I value them today on a much more × conscious level than I did then.”

“The best advertisement for religiosity is a happy religious person; the worst is an unhappy one,” Prager said. “So I make this appeal to religious Jews who walk around unhappy: Either walk around happy, or stop being religious.”

But can an atheist achieve happiness? (Duh!)

Prager doesn't think so: “If you believe that there is no God, there is no ultimate justice, then everything is pointless. I don't understand how you can be happy with those beliefs. I just don't understand it,” he said. But he's in the minority.

Every person can acquire a spiritual side that is necessary to achieve a state of happiness.

“You don't have to believe in God or be a religious person to be appreciative or to have great things in your life,” Levy said. “Judaism is just one way to happiness, not the way.” What makes a spiritual person is an “expansive” outlook, she said. “It's the ability to be aware of your surroundings, it's the ability to find some kind of connection, to feel connected — whether you're a person of faith or not.”

For believers and nonbelievers alike, happiness should be a priority. Hillel said, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I?”

Ben-Shahar said, “If we do not make the pursuit of our own happiness a priority, we are hurting ourselves and, by extension, our inclination to help others.”

Are we there yet?

Since happiness is not a destination but a lifelong process, it is not possible to achieve Curly's “One Thing” and then rest on our laurels forever. “I think it's in our DNA to × want more,” Zendehtel said.

Or, to quote Al Pacino's character in "The Scent of a Woman": "The day we stop lookin', Charlie, is the day we die."

Reb Shlomo Carlebach teaches and sings about the mitzvah of joy in

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Tal Ben-Shahar will be speaking in Los Angeles at the Professional Leaders Project Think Tank on Oct. 29.