

Happiness and Pleasure (Edited Transcript)

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People struggle with the concept of happiness. What is true happiness, and how do we achieve it?

The reciprocal relationship between the rich and the poor

This week's portion, Behar-Bechukotai, has a very interesting insight into this question. One of the laws our portion deals with is charity. It says *Vechi yamuch achicha, vehechezakta bo, va'chai imach*, 'if your brother becomes destitute and struggles with poverty you shall give him strength and he will live with you.' The Talmud expounds on what the phrase *va'chai imach*, 'and he will live with you,' means. Our Sages show us in the Midrash how the rich and the poor are inextricably linked. Generally, we do not think of the rich and the poor as having an interdependent relationship; but really they live together in the same world and impact on each other. On the one hand the rich are giving charity to the poor; on the other, the poor are giving the rich the opportunity to do a mitzvah. Thus there is a mutual interaction and dependence between them.

You can often tell so much about a person from their relationship with money. In fact, the Talmud says there are three ways that you can learn about a person: *kiso*, his pocket, i.e. money; *ka'aso*, his anger, i.e. whether he loses his temper and over what; and *koso*, his cup, i.e. his relationship with alcohol. Money is one of the three indicators about a person's character; it brings out his true essence.

There is a very interesting passage in the Midrash which talks about the dissatisfaction of the rich and goes to the heart of what is true happiness. The Midrash says that sometimes you find a wealthy person who is very resentful towards the poor. Some people are generous and keep to the Torah's obligation of *tzedakah*, charity. They realise that G-d only gave them the money to help others and to make a difference in the world. Others are resentful of having to give charity. The Midrash talks about a wealthy man who tells the poor man, well, I worked hard for this money, why don't you? Why don't you go out and work? You have strong arms, strong legs and a strong body. But this is the wrong approach. It is true, there are two mitzvot: the mitzvah of the wealthy to give to those in need, and the mitzvah incumbent on each of us to work for our daily living; as the Talmud states, it is much better to work hard and earn less than to take charity. But unfortunately, some people are in a position where they have to take charity. Sometimes people get their mitzvot confused, with the rich man worrying about the poor man's mitzvah and vice versa, and that's when things go wrong. Everybody has to worry about their own mitzvah in the world. (Incidentally, this is a very important principle in general, in all relationships: don't worry about what the other person owes you, rather you do what **you** have to do. This is a guiding principle in marriage as well as in all different kinds of relationships.)

The Midrash says that G-d says to such a rich person, it is not enough that you don't want to give of your own money, but now you cast an evil eye, an *ayin ra'a*, on this poor person?! An evil eye means you look on him with a disparaging look, with resentment.

True happiness is appreciating what we have

The Dubna Maggid discusses why the rich person resents the poor. What does he see in him that causes such resentment? There is the resentment of having to part with his hard-earned (so he thinks) money; he does not realise that G-d gave it to him, that all money is a gift and therefore we have to give it generously. But there is something else to this resentment. The Dubna Maggid points out that there is resentment here because it touches on the essence of contentment with life. Some people have this misconception that the wealthier you are, the happier you are; that contentedness is in proportion to whatever you own and that being able to buy whatever your heart desires is the ultimate happiness.

The Dubna Maggid addresses this misconception of people in a very fascinating way. One of the greatest obstacles to appreciation,

to happiness, to gratitude to G-d and to awareness of our blessings, is habit?the fact that we get used to things. The more accustomed we are to something, the more we begin to take it for granted. It is human nature that the more regular access we have to something the less we appreciate it.

The miracles of nature

To work on appreciating what we have is quite a paradigm shift. Hence the Talmud says to give thanks to Hashem al kol neshima v'neshima, ?for every breath of air that we take.? We don?t stop to think for a moment what a miracle it is that we can just breathe. The magnitude of this miracle only occurs to us when we see a person on a ventilator and then we understand the miracle of what it means to actually breathe.

All of the blessings that we have on food and drink are about appreciation because we tend to take things for granted. We don?t understand their true value and we stop seeing the magic of the world. There is a famous passage in Psalm 19, which is actually part of our Shabbos morning prayers, which says: Hashamayim mesaprim kevod E-l, uma?aseh yadav magid harakia ?the heavens declare the glory of Hashem and the expanse of the sky tells of His handiwork.? But, the passage continues, Yom l?yom yabia omer v?layla l?layla yechaveh da?at, ?day following day brings expressions of praise, and night following night bespeaks wisdom.? These praises are said every day and night and, therefore, as the passage goes on to say, ein omer v?ain devarim bli nishma kolam, ?There is no speech and there are no words; their sound is unheard.? In other words, people don?t mention this glory; they don?t even take note of it. If we would actually stop for one moment and realise the awesome miracle of the existence of the skies and the sea and everything around us, that would inspire us; and yet because it is there every single day we are uninspired by it.

This idea is expressed at one of the great miracles that took place in Jewish history - the splitting of the Red Sea. It was an awesome miracle, the greatest miracle the Jews had ever seen. And yet, it says that when they came to the other side they said, ?This is my G-d and I will glorify Him, the G-d of my father and I will exalt Him.? The Dubna Maggid asks, why did they refer to G-d as ?the G-d of their father?? As if they were saying, we acknowledge this miracle but we know that our Forefathers also experienced great miracles. How could they refer to G-d as ?the G-d of my father,? given that in the previous generations no one had experienced miracles like the splitting of the sea?

The Dubna Maggid answers that what they were saying was, true, we see the sea splitting but we realise that every part of nature is in fact a miracle, not just when the sea splits. The only difference between nature and miracles is the frequency with which they occur. This is why the Talmud says that when we refer to rain in our prayers (during the winter months - according to the seasons in the Land of Israel) we refer to rain specifically in the second blessing of the Amidah, which is the same blessing which refers to G-d?s power to revive the dead. The Gemara says that the day rain falls is a miraculous one, the equivalent of the revival of the dead, one of the great miracles that will take place in the times of Mashiach.

When water falls from the sky, within those drops of rain is the nourishment for plants, flowers, grass and trees. The seeds which are plated in the ground actually decay before they grow; they are lifeless. Then the rain comes and revives them, making them grow. We see this all the time so we think nothing of it. But the Gemara says step back for a moment and realise that rain is a miracle no less than the revival of the dead. It is the same miracle, just a question of being accustomed to it.

The difference between physical and spiritual enjoyment

One of the biggest obstacles we have to living a much greater, more inspired life is being able to appreciate things that happen every single day. This, says the Dubna Maggid, is the key to understanding the concept of pleasure. Hashem has created the world in such a way that you can only enjoy something when you don?t have too much of it, because the more you have of it, the less you want it. He quotes an amazing passage in the Gemara, in Succah 46, which says that there is a difference between the physical and spiritual world. Midat basar vadam, keli reykan machzik, malei aino machzik. ?The way of flesh and blood is that something which is empty holds contents and something which is full cannot contain anything.? Aval midat haKadosh Baruch Hu, malei machzik, reykan aino machzik. ?The way of the Holy One Blessed Be He is that something which is full holds contents but when it is empty it does not.? Meaning, in the physical world we appreciate something when we are empty, when don?t have it. We appreciate a

good meal when we are hungry, a glass of water when we are thirsty. If we have eaten or drunk too much, the food and drink lose their appeal and we don't want them anymore.

This is the nature of pleasure in the physical world. Hashem has made it in such a way that it only grabs us, only holds the contents, when we are empty. When we have too much of something we don't enjoy it any more. Hashem has designed the human psyche such that the more we have of the physical world the less we want it; the less we have of it the more we want it. Thus, the way to properly enjoy the world is to do it within limitations. In fact, so many of the laws of the Torah are there to provide a framework of limitations so that we can properly enjoy the pleasures of the physical world in a way that doesn't detract from them.

Saturated with pleasure

In the Shabbos evening prayer, in the part just after the Amidah where everybody sings together, we talk about how Hashem gave Shabbat to am medushney oneg, 'a people saturated with pleasure.' The Dubna Maggid says that Hashem structured Shabbos in such a way that we can indulge in delicious food and drink, elegant clothes and celebration, while during the week we do not, and this way we truly enjoy it. So many of the laws of the Torah, says the Dubna Maggid are about enjoying within moderation because when there is excess you actually can't enjoy it anymore. Whether it is the laws relating to Shabbat or the laws relating to marriage or to food or to whatever it is, they provide a framework within which we can access the real joy of the world.

This, says the Dubna Maggid, is the root cause of the resentment the rich sometimes feel towards the poor, as mentioned by the Midrash above. One of the great challenges of wealth is to appreciate blessing because there is such excess. A poor person, however, has the ability to appreciate even a simple meal and enjoy every morsel because he does not have it often. He appreciates things that a rich person doesn't. Of course, as always, there are exceptions to human behaviour, but this is one of the opportunities of poverty and one of the challenges of wealth.

All things good - in moderation

Every situation in life has opportunities and challenges. A key to enjoying the world is to find a way of enjoying it within moderation. This links with the other part of the statement in the Talmud, that with physical matters only that which is empty can contain something, but that with spiritual matters it is the opposite. When we are full we want more and when we are empty we don't.

When it comes to Torah and forming a connection with Hashem, the more we have the more we want and the less we have the less we want. If we don't invest in our soul, if we have no connection to Judaism, to Torah learning and doing mitzvot, then the soul does not even begin to thirst for Torah because it does not even know what it's missing and therefore does not seek it. Matters of spirituality are the very opposite of the physical world: the more we get from spiritual things, the more we want of them. The greater our connection with Hashem, the more involved we are with davening, learning, doing mitzvot, giving charity, acting with kindness and goodness, the more inspired we are and the more we want of it.

Isn't it interesting the way G-d has wired us to correspond to the way that He wrote the Torah? We know that the Torah is the blueprint for the world; as the Talmud says, 'G-d looked into the Torah and created the world.' Hashem has wired us in accordance with the Torah principle that when it comes to the physical world, the more you have the less you want; the more excess the less pleasure. The greater the limitations, the more you can enjoy it. This is how the Torah gives us access to the physical world - through a framework of limitations. When it comes to the spiritual world, however, the more you have it the more you want it. The less you have it, the less you want it. Therefore Torah directs us to put in as much energy as we can into Torah, so that we can benefit even more from it.

When it comes to the physical world, so long as it is within the framework of the limitations of the Torah, it will lead to real enjoyment and pleasure. When it comes to the spiritual world, there we have to throw ourselves into it; the more you invest in it, the more inspired you get. You often see people who seem so inspired with their Judaism and you think to yourself, how did they get so inspired? The answer is that the more you put in, the more you get from it.

What we learn from this is that it doesn't matter who you are, whether you are wealthy or poor, healthy or sick, whatever situation of life we find ourselves in, the key is to appreciate what you have and to find ways of enjoying it.