

Does Hashem Want Us to Be Happy?

Rabbi Jason Weiner

Not everybody appreciates Rebbe Nachman's famous adage, "*mitzvah gedolah l'hiot be'simcha* — it is a great mitzvah to be joyous." Some have in fact changed the saying to, "*simcha gedolah l'hiot bemitzvah* — it is a great joy to do a mitzvah."

Perhaps the discomfort with Rebbe Nachman's saying is that it is not accurate; there is actually no direct mitzvah among the 613 to be happy. We know that mitzvot must be done "b'simcha — with happiness," but we are never actually commanded to simply be happy. Although there is a mitzvah to be happy on festivals, "*v'samachta bechagecha*," which may imply that some level of joy is indeed commanded, the mitzvah of joy on festivals is simply fulfilled through lavish food and drink, not with the specific emotion of happiness. One may argue that we cannot be commanded regarding something that depends on one's inner emotions and is difficult to control. However, we are commanded regarding such similar matters as fear and love of God, so we see that one can in fact be commanded regarding his or her inner feelings.

Despite Rebbe Nachman's great desire to be happy and to instill joy in his followers, we are left with the difficult question: does Hashem want us to be happy? It would seem clear based on the numerous verses and mitzvot that require serving God with joy and different sorts of

periodic happiness, that Hashem does in fact want us to be happy. Indeed, the Ramchal tells us that God is the essence of good and that *hat-achlis babriah haya l'heitiv mituvo* — G-d's purpose in creation was to bestow of His goodness to humanity."

If so, the question strengthens: why is there no commandment to be happy? It is logical to assume that if Hashem wants us to be happy but does not command us to be, this must have been carefully designed and there must be a profound reason. Judaism commands us regarding every intricate detail of our lives. We even have a principle that it is greater to do something when commanded, than to do something without being commanded. But this leads us precisely to the answer to our question: happiness simply cannot be commanded, it must come from within.

One must want to be happy in order to achieve happiness. It is only when a person truly aspires to be happy and is willing to make the effort and inner attitudinal change to make him or herself happier that the process can begin. It is easy to complain, feel sorry for oneself and be sad. Happiness on the other hand requires exertion; it takes desire and work. For it is only when we work on ourselves and earn our happiness that it can be genuinely felt. Even when one is in deep sorrow, there are many strategies for coping: taking comfort in family, friends or even hobbies. Sometimes there is also a need for ther-

apy or medication, but none of these can be truly effective without personal effort and an inner desire to be happy. If a person does not want to be happy, no other person or thing can really make them happy. True happiness can only be autonomous.

Agnes Repplier was right on when he quipped that, "It is not easy to find happiness in ourselves, and it is not possible to find it elsewhere."

It is possible to have other mitzvot that require emotions, such as loving G-d, because their purpose is to create a relationship. In a relationship one can ask to be loved. The fact that G-d desires our love is actually one of the most lovable things about Him! Once we know that G-d wants a relationship, and we are commanded to engage in it, we can work towards it. Furthermore, the Sfas Emes writes that although it is very difficult to fulfill a mitzvah that is dependent upon emotions alone, the fact that it is commanded teaches us that the ability to love Hashem is built into our nature, and if we seek it hard enough we can uncover it. Since happiness is not commanded, the opposite must be true. Even though it is important for a person to be happy, demanding that someone feel happiness is simply ineffective.

This is why there cannot be a mitzvah to be happy — genuine happiness cannot be mandated, we have to bring it out on our own.

So yes, Hashem does want us to be happy. He wants us to be truly, deeply happy, and that is exactly why there is no commandment to be happy! ●

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The Blessing of a Parking Space

by Judy Gruen

I drove to the market, silently congratulating myself on my brilliant advance planning.

My genius had been to call in my meat order the day before, which I figured would save me as much as 20 minutes waiting in line, not including the saving of my mental health from not having to guard my position at the meat counter, lest anyone else arrive after me, pretend I wasn't there and shout out her order before the butcher called on me.

But as the saying goes, woman plans, and Hashem laughs. The parking lot was jammed and finding parking proved tougher than finding a pro-Israel story on National Public Radio. My sanguine demeanor of just a few moments

before was rudely replaced by my rising blood pressure.

I calmed myself by recalling a lesson I learned at a *shiur*, namely, that the many mundane tasks in a Jewish woman's life all had a higher purpose. Taking care of a Jewish family was a service to Hashem, even when it meant cleaning the area in the crisper drawer that can really get yucky if you don't stay on top of it. This meant I was not simply searching desperately for a parking spot; I was serving HaShem!

But on my fifth fuel-wasting crawl around the streets, it became a strain to sustain that spiritual high. And just as I slowly drove through the alley behind the store, a man pushing a cart loaded to the top with pita breads was also heading toward the alley.

One of us had to stop for the other. Admittedly, if I had been in a more generous mood, I would have yielded, but as neither of us had an absolute right of way (did we?), I kept going. Then the guy pulled his cart back as if he were cocking a gun, then forcefully rammed the cart into my car.

I was shocked. Had my transgression been so dire that I deserved to become a victim of "pita rage?" Tearfully, I pulled away, not wanting to mess with a guy who had missed his last 20 anger management sessions. Then and only then did I find a place to park two blocks away and finally went in, shaking, to collect the meat.

You will understand that I remained unnerved for the rest of the day. If there were no coincidences in life, I had to wonder what I had done to deserve this.

Was it my ignoring the guy I had seen on the street asking for *tzedakah*? Was it the ego of expecting a parking spot the second I needed it?

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