

Happiness

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

At China's National People's Congress this year, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao declared that increasing happiness was more important than the GNP. If China really cared about its citizens it would give them more freedom. Guangdong is to change its name to "Happy Guangdong" and officials in China have established "happiness indices".

If "happiness" in Chinese is the same as "happiness" in English, then it is just another "happy" clappy, fluffy, meaningless expression of a desire to feel good. But what does feeling good amount to? Absence of pain? Or is it some physical state, like sneezing or taking Viagra? When the Beatles sang that "happiness is a warm gun", whichever interpretation you choose to place on the words, it cannot be any more serious a description than that other cliché that "love is never having to say you're sorry".

John Locke in 1693 wrote in "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" that "the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness." But then he failed to explain either what "happiness" was or what "true and solid" meant either!

The United States Declaration of Independence, which was drafted primarily by Thomas Jefferson and was adopted by the Second Congressional Congress on July 4, 1776 declares that:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." So what in Heaven's name is "happiness"? It can't be simply "pleasure", because then the state should have no right to stop me walking around in an opium-induced stupor, or running around naked. Are we talking about what a pig rolling around in the dirt feels, or a hippopotamus in the mud? Pleasure cannot be sustained permanently. It is easy to overeat and feel sick, to overindulge and feel deflated or exhausted.

The classical Hebrew word "simcha" is often translated "joy". We are commanded to "serve God in joy", to "be joyful on your festivals". How do you get to be joyful? I guess by enjoying the good things in life. But that is a matter of personal attitude. You cannot legislate for a mental state. You can merely suggest it as a goal to be aspired to. Similarly "happiness", "ashrei" is not a state of being so much as an appreciation of how fortunate one is. It is something we should aspire to but can never guarantee or legislate for. Anyway there is a fundamental difference between "pleasure" and "joy/happiness".

Happiness may result from unhappy or unjoyful situations, when we do a good deed or a spiritually beneficial one. When I go to visit a dying congregant, I want to be there in that ghastly hospital, but I am as far from happy or joyful at that moment as you could imagine. Or what if I put my life in

jeopardy to save a drowning soul? That too is very "good" thing to do, according to my moral and religious system, but it is hardly a happy experience. Ask any parent if there aren't moments of pain, anger, and frustration in bringing up children just as there are moments of sheer delight, pride, and excitement. Is there a permanent state of a "happy parent", even when one may sometimes have to nurse a sick or injured child? What Locke calls "true happiness" surely is something more.

When the rabbis ask, "Who is a wealthy man," they reply, "Someone joyful, sameach (satisfied), with his life". Satisfaction too is a state of mind. I have known millionaires who thought they were poor. It seems to me that the aim of human beings should be to do that which is beneficial, valuable, and creative.

Happiness can also come from a conviction that one is on the right path, even if at any moment it is strewn with thorns and thistles. The root word ASHR meaning "happy" also means "validate". Happiness is having direction, structure, goals, and targets. Such as a religious life, for example, gives.

But who decides what goals and targets are appropriate? What of murderous dictators who are convinced they are right to torture rebels into submission, recantation, or death? Marxists or Maoists who believe human life is dispensable in pursuit of the "end" for society? Maimonides, in his vision of a Messianic Era, defined it simply as removing political coercion and allowing individuals to fulfill their potential—and naturally he saw that potential as including the spiritual, not only the physical .

All religions and political systems agree on vague goals of peace and goodwill, but not on how to achieve them. That is why nowadays in the West we prefer political systems that leave most of private values and private lives up to individuals. My religion requires my sorting out my values and goals for myself, regardless of what political system I live under.

I believe the Festival of Pesach has it right. We think about what freedom means, what it allows us to do, and what our goals are for ourselves. We remember and value others, see examples of different lives, for better and for worse, those free and those oppressed, and we accept the right to be different. But why a Seder Night for this? Humans need a ritual framework to remind them constantly of their values, so that when we lose momentum we are brought back to our ideals.

Happiness and joy are individual emotions. Being happy means appreciating good fortune, not giving up when things go badly. It is like being sensitive. One needs to cultivate it. It is very personal endeavor. Everyone has to imagine that he or she has come out of slavery and now has to make decisions. That is what Pesach is designed to remind us of.

Chag Sameach!