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Judaism, Happiness, and the Good Life

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A Jewish understanding of “Happiness” is not simple, but then, what in Judaism is simple. While there are ample words for joy and celebration, there is no precisely equivalent word for happiness in the Hebrew lexicon. The manner in which the question is put for this forum, is philosophical. At the very moment that concepts such as Happiness and the Good Life were being pondered by Plato, Aristotle and their philosophical schools, late Second Temple Judaism was emphasizing the importance of reliance upon divine revelation rather than human rational thought. God, through revelation was teaching humanity the way to the God-loving path of life. Reaching that path and staying on it meant something equivalent to happiness. Straying from the path meant exile from God, i.e., oblivion.

Another Jewish approach to the concept of Happiness is to be found in a story told by the Chasidim of the late 18th Century. An unhappy man goes to his rabbi to ask his help. His home is too small. The inevitable conflicts which occur in this small space, among members of his family, have made his life miserable. What should he do? The rabbi instructs him to bring a goat, a cow, a chicken, and a horse into his home, then come back to talk in a week. A week passes and the man returns. His clothing is disheveled and torn, he looks as if he has lost a great deal of weight, and overall, he looks more miserable than he was on his first visit to the rabbi.

“Well, how did it go,” asks the rabbi.

“Just look at me. How do you think it is going?”

“Now, get rid of all the animals and come see me in a week.”

The following week the man returns and is all smiles. “Rabbi, you are a genius. We are all so happy now.” The moral of the story is that happiness is surprisingly close to misery. We need to see the potential for happiness in every encounter of life.

As the prophet Micah put it:

It hath been told you O’ man what is good, and what the Eternal requires of you: only to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

Later rabbinical authorities continued this vein of thought when they counseled that observing the commandments of God led to a worthy life. But was that happiness in our common understanding of the term? Not really. In a number of commentaries a picture of happiness does emerge. This brand of Judaism saw happiness as something you could bestow on others, but truly not yourself. Their idea was doing for others brings happiness back on yourself.

A life that is good takes care of the life-gift given to you by God and then reaches out to those who are in jeopardy. Doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God.