



Revealing the inner beauty of the Torah in a way that touches and inspires the Jewish soul

PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

B.S.D.

By: Rabbi E.E. Dessler
Excerpt from 'Michtav Me'Eliyahu'

A happy life? Isn't that what we all want? Presumably, everyone knows what happiness is - it's having everything you want, and since what you want costs money, it would follow that money is the key to happiness. So the happy person must be the one who earns the most money: the brilliant businessperson, the top executive, the go-getter. Surely he's got all it takes for a happy life. What else is there?

At any rate, that is what the successful people of this world tell us. They praise ambition up to the skies, and how they look down on anybody who seems to lack this quality.

But if we look into this matter properly, we had better ask ourselves whether we have ever actually seen a happy person. If we ask other people whether they have ever met or seen happy people, they are sure to answer, "Of course we have." And we may be inclined to think the same way ourselves. Of course -- we tell ourselves -- there may be rich people who are unhappy, but for the most part, surely, riches and happiness go hand in hand.

Anyway, these people look happy enough. When we see their palatial homes, their dinner parties, their servants, their chauffeured limousines, their pockets lined with money and precious stones, we are forced to conclude that -- unless disaster strikes -- they are the happy ones.

But this answer would be extremely superficial. If we want to go into the matter systematically, there is only one way to approach it. We must go to these so called happy people and ask them directly. It is not sufficient to ask one person about the other; we must ask each person individually how he himself really feels; then we might get closer to the truth. What do you think we would find?

ASKING THE PEOPLE

Let us start by asking the rich -- those who have more money than they know what to do with, those who live in mansions and travel in the most expensive cars. What would they tell us if we could get them to talk with complete honesty and frankness? When it comes to the point, they will all let out the secret: they are not really happy. They may have achieved wealth and riches in a strictly limited and limiting sense, but when it comes to happiness -- they are still very far away.

Jealousies and lusts disturb their peace of mind; domestic troubles are rife; their wives are bored, their spoiled children grow away from them; their sons are insolent, their daughters rebel; they suffer endless troubles of this sort. And don't think that these troubles are incidental, nothing of the kind; all of them develop from the result of the affluence itself. "No one dies with half his desires fulfilled"; so, dissatisfaction and frustration are the lot of even the richest person. So we won't find happiness here.

Let us try asking others. Perhaps the middle-income bracket? These people generally work very hard and long hours for their money. Let's find out from them if they have somehow found the secret to happiness. But when we investigate, we find something very surprising.

They work hard all their lives, often getting stomach ulcers in the process, but they never seem to find time to enjoy their money. During their working years, they are always busy preparing for happiness. However, when their working life is



Revealing the inner beauty of the Torah in a way that touches and inspires the Jewish soul

over, they find they are too old; the zest has gone out of life, and they cannot enjoy their leisure. They did nothing in their lives but work and, without a day's work to do, they can hardly find any point in living. So when are they happy? Never.

Perhaps we'll find happiness if we go further down the social scale. Let's ask the workers. They work hard day by day, and sometimes nights, for their weekly wages. But they are never satisfied because they feel that they are getting a raw deal; they are missing out on all the good things of life. They feel they are being exploited by the rich. They -- the workers -- produce the wealth, but they are not allowed to enjoy it. Others rob them of the fruit of their labors. Is this happiness? Surely not.

Where, then, do we find happiness in this world of ours? This was our question, and we have found no answer. It seems we can hear an echo resounding from all the world: "A happy life? There is no such thing!" This would seem to be an established conclusion, confirmed and re-confirmed whichever way we analyze the problem.

FINDING A REMEDY

But then we have to ask: Why would God have created such a great and wonderful world so that everybody in it, everybody without exception, would live in misery and anguish? This cannot be the case either. There must be a way out. There must be some way of repairing this terrible misfortune which has befallen the whole of mankind. We must search for the remedy; we must find the key to happiness. We can be sure that God, the source of all goodness, must have provided the world with a way to happiness; it is only up to us to find it. But before we can find the remedy, we must diagnose the disease. What is this epidemic disease, of world proportions, that robs us of all happiness in life?

Our Sages, the true Sages of the Torah, have already told us the answer. It is stated clearly in the Mishna: "Jealousy, lust and status-seeking remove person from the world." (Avot 4:28) The world, as God made it, is a happy one. It is we who have removed ourselves from the world of happiness to the world of suffering by means of these three evil desires. So we only have to run away from jealousy, lust and prestige -- that is, to banish them from our hearts -- in order to transform the world into one brimming over with happiness from end to end. Then, we will find that we will not only have happiness, we will also have riches in the true sense of the word.

The sages say: "Who is rich? He who rejoices in his portion." (Avot 4:1) They do not say that he is also rich; they do not say he is very rich; they simply say "He is rich" -- period! The fact is that one who is not satisfied with his portion in life -- whatever it may be -- is not only not happy, he is not rich. In material terms he may have millions in the bank, but remains impoverished both in emotional and physical terms.

What does being poor mean? It means not having what you need. If a person wants and needs something that he does not have, he is poor, however much he may have in the bank. We shall find, in fact, that the so-called "rich" person is much worse off than the "poor" one because his ambitions and needs are so much greater.

The poor person's needs are easily satisfied, but the rich person's desires and prestige-seeking are never gratified; they can never be gratified, because satisfying one need only leads to the next, ad infinitum. If we look at each of them as he sees himself -- not as the poor person views the rich -- we shall see that they are both very badly off. They both live miserable and frustrated lives; but, if anything, it is the "rich" person who is worse off than the "poor." But the one who has conquered his lusts, who makes do with a minimum and is happy with his lot -- the one who needs nothing that he does not have -- he is the rich person. No one else in the world is rich but he.

DIRECTING ONE'S AMBITIONS

Who is this person? Let us take a closer look at him. We said he has banished desires and ambitions from his heart. Does that mean that he is a weak-kneed person, without energy, without "drive"? Is that what we call "life"? Is he like an old man, with no goals, no desires, with all his vital energy spent? Could this be what we mean by a happy life?



Revealing the inner beauty of the Torah in a way that touches and inspires the Jewish soul

No! Certainly not! Nothing could be further from the truth. What we mean is this:

There is no happiness in the world of material things; there is only happiness in spiritual concerns. The one who enjoys a rich spiritual life is happy. There is no other kind of happiness in existence.

We see this in individuals who understand Torah. Those fortunate people who devote their whole mind, desire, enthusiasm and ambition, to the pursuit of Torah and its wisdom -- they experience what true happiness means in this world. We are not talking about the World to Come; we are talking about this world -- here and now. Of course, there is no happiness without goals, drive, and ambition; indeed, these things are fundamental to life itself. Happiness is dependent on your goals and direction in life, and to what ends the drive and ambition are directed.

Happiness is also achieved when goals are attainable, when they depend on no one else for their fulfillment, and when they are independent of those self-frustrating urges called jealousy and status-seeking. When can that be? Only when the ambition flows from a love of Torah, a love of Mussar, a love of wisdom, and the desire for true ethical living.

This kind of ambition can be realized by ourselves alone. The more energy, the more drive, we put into attaining these goals, the happier we will be. This is the meaning of the Mishna, "This is the way of Torah: You will eat bread and salt and drink water by the measure and make the floor your bed -- and labor in the Torah" -- that is, if you are ready to do all this because of your tremendous enthusiasm for Torah; if all the things that the world holds dear mean nothing to you because the only thing that matters to you is your progress in Torah, and attaining spiritual and moral greatness, then -- "happy and fortunate are you in this world." (Avot 6:4)

You are the truly happy one in this world; you, and nobody else. This is the Torah-truth about happiness.