

Jewish Latin Princess Episode 46

The Pursuit of Happiness, Re-defined

This is a short synopsis of a Keynote Speech I gave in St. Louis. I've omitted personal anecdotes and jokes.

Happiness has been the hot self-help topic of the last 15 years in popular culture. A Google search for “happiness” yields 198 million results, and 100,000 books on happiness, or related to it are available for purchase on Amazon.com. That’s a lot of writing and a lot of searching...

Actually, I often wonder what would the Founding Fathers of our Country say if they saw society today. Didn't we tell you to pursue happiness, - isn't that what it says, “every man has an inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” They'd say, “what's wrong with everyone!? Be happy already!”

Everybody is seeking it and it seems the more we search for it, the farther away we're getting from it.

We need to ask ourselves, whether we're looking for happiness in the wrong places, and whether we're just defining happiness the wrong way.

As a Jewish woman, I look to Judaism for answers to lifestyle questions - for Judaism is not just a religion. Judaism is much more than that. It's a way of life. So, I ask myself, what can Judaism teach me about living a happy life?

We're about to enter the month of Adar and the Gemorah says, “Mi she nichnas Adar maarvim b'simcha.” “When the month of Adar enters, we increase in Simcha, in Joy.”

Well, if we have to increase in simcha, in happiness, that assumes that we are already happy. We are already joyful. Come Adar, we just have to take it up a notch!

So, Judaism itself must have already given us the guidelines to obtain happiness, if it's asking us to go ahead and increase in it at a certain time of year.

I host the Jewish Latin Princess Podcast. On it, I interviewed Faigy Pollok, an expert on marital intimacy - talk about a hot topic -- and she shared with me an expression in Hebrew that I loved. “Don't search for the way to happiness, but rather for the happiness along the way.” And that's exactly what I think Judaism gives us, the happiness along the way through this journey called “life.”

So, we don't have to be pursuing happiness. Jewish life gives us a framework through which we will find the happiness that exist along the way. Today I will share 3 ways in which Judaism does this for us and that I have found extremely helpful in my life... Ready?

#1 Redefine Yourself:

If we live our life in terms of what we perceive with our physical senses, what we can see and touch, we're getting a very limited view of life and of ourselves.

We may be physical beings, but we have a soul that is the very essence of our existence. This soul is transcendent in nature as it says in the Book of Job, "the flame of G-d is the soul of man."

Look at the flame of a candle closely and you will see an approximation of your soul. The flame reaches upward, as if toward G-d. Yet, the wick pulls it back to earth. Similarly, your soul is constantly reaching upward, while your body holds you back with its demands for physical sustenance. There is a tension between body and soul, one wants to go up and one goes down. To be a wholesome and healthy person, your body and soul need to work in harmony. We don't need to choose one over the other, indulgence or abstinence; we can and we must merge body and soul. We have to integrate them toward fulfilling one objective: spiritualizing the material.

And you know how we do this? Mitzvot! Mitzvot are the ways we integrate both body and soul, we take physical things and we elevate them to reveal the G-dliness inherent in them.

A story is told of the great Rabbi Levi Yitzack of Berdichev who was one day looking out over the town square and he sees that people are just flying though. Everywhere he looked everyone was rushing. (Grand Central Station) So he stops one man, and says, "What are you rushing for?"

The man, annoyed at the question, he's in a rush after all, replies, "I'm running to make a living. My parnassa"

Rabbi Levi Yitzach says, "What makes you so sure that your livelihood is in front of you? What if it's behind you? Maybe you should stop and let it catch up to you.

We travel so fast that we completely miss the view.

We are looking for richness - both materially and spiritually, for depth, for joy ...

Where do we find it? If we would slow down a bit, we would listen - we would listen to our soul.

Judaism forces us to sloooow down ? Like seriously, and so often - I always say G-d does not have the same sense of time as I do - it's taken me years to adjust to His sense of time, but it has nothing to do with my watch, or my calendar that's for sure!

I mean it's almost like can we get going already? Seriously - Like the guest on my podcast Abi Pogrebin, who wrote the book My Jewish Year, where she spent an entire year learning about and observing all the Jewish holidays - she told me, it seems like there's a new holiday every three days!? Right.

But, it's not even the holidays, it's... I want to crash in bed... not so fast. Shema. You want to eat something...well, is it fit for my body and my soul? Is it kosher? Baruch... You can't just run off to that meeting, wait you have to bentch!

You need to keep working? Shabbat...

You got a new client, new payment came in? Great there's that Nordstrom sale. I needed a few pairs of shoes. Not so fast, you have to take 10% off the top. It's not your money. G-d made you an agent of that money so you could give it to others. It's his. Doesn't go to nordstroms. There's families out there depending on this money.

Judaism is not Waze, it won't tell you what's the fastest route because it's not about speed, it's about the journey and paying attention throughout the journey.

Listening! The Waze lady talking every minute - too distracting.

So you have to grab the good old map. Those ancient relics.

Except our map is not an ancient relic - because it's G-d's eternal wisdom, it actually speaks to our reality today!

It tries to shape us into mindful human beings, into individuals who can take care of their soul as much as their body. Into women who can allow the innermost part of themselves to find expression in their physical existence.

So I think we need to stop looking for G-d, for happiness, for meaning. And what we really need to do is listen to your soul. She's trying to speak you, you just have to listen.

You know what it's saying?

"hey I'm here. I want to grow, I want expression, I want to flourish, I'm here to work with you!"

"Allow me to express myself."

"Give me a mitzvah please!"

The word mitzvah comes from tzavtah, connection. When we do a mitzvah, we are connecting to G-d Himself.

The Alter Rebbe - the first Chabad Rebbe and author of the holy book of Tanya - quotes the Book of Job saying that a Jew is a cheleck elokah mi maal mamash! The Alter Rebbe says, over there, the soul is a piece of G-d, literally a piece of G-d.

This is not a figure of speech. It's not poetic license. He says, it's literally - mamash- a piece of G-d. And that is our true identity: we are a piece of G-d.

A student of Freudian psychology once went to the Lubavitcher Rebbe and told him, “I've been learning that Judaism teaches that our real identity is this soul which is divine, but then Freud talks about the Id, and the Id has a lot of coo coo stuff going on in there. Which one is it? Is it the way Freud describes it or is there something here I'm missing?”

The Rebbe said to him, sure if we dig deep within ourselves we're going to uncover a lot of shmutz. It's like when you dig the earth, there are layers of mud, and as you go deeper the colors and texture of the mud changes. But, if you dig deep enough, you will find? diamonds.

Freud found the Id, but if he had dug a little deeper he would have found the Yid.

When we find the Yid - when we identify with, connect to and give expression to that pure soul of ours through the physical world - we will be able to live happy lives.

Which is by the way why, a Jewish birthday is so important. The Hebrew date of your birth is the day your soul was chosen to come into your body. G-d chose you to come down to this earth to fulfill a special mission. Your Hebrew birthday is the day G-d said, “You matter! I need you. You're my Partner.”

Isn't that cause for celebration!? So, being that I'm the Jewish Latin Princess, I say you throw yourself a party! Go find out your Hebrew birthday and celebrate it. Acknowledge this essential side of you on that special day. Invite friends, share a word of Torah, a positive message from Judaism that can help them and yourself, learn your new chapter of Tehillim (the Psalms), give charity in honor of your special day. Say a little l'chaim, reflect on the past year and set some goals for the new year....I've given you permission to have two parties this year - why not? Celebrate your English or Secular birthday and also celebrate your Hebrew birthday!

Which brings me to my second lesson we learn from Judaism,

#2 Celebrate

When I was very young, on my first trip to Israel, we had a beautiful speaker come and talk to us. She was an older woman, very beautiful, put together, eloquent, cheerful. She happened to have been a Holocaust survivor. And I can't tell you what she said about her experience, but there is one thing that I remember from everything she said. She said, that every week she has a great party to go to and that is Shabbat. (Judaism) That once a week we celebrate life, celebrate creation and we dress up in our finest, and look so beautiful, and we prepare and eat such delicacies, and we celebrate and spend time with each other. And we do this every single week. And I remember this image that she presented of her delight on having the finest, and celebrating life on Shabbat stayed with me till today.

Judaism doesn't rain on any parties. We're not ascetics. In fact, at the very least, every week, we should celebrate. That's why on a day like today, Shabbat, we take our best china, we put flowers, we taste the best wine, the best food, nice clothes, we celebrate Creation. We take a break from the grind of the week. What other nation can do that? Like I told you last night, it makes no sense, it's something you can only imagine royalty would do. Yet, we do it. We "indulge" in a beautiful feast, we rest, sleep later, read, go for a walk, talk to our families, say no to the demands of the boss or the business or whatever. It's pure pleasure.

We have a mitzvah to rejoice in the Festivals - *B'Samachta b'chagecha*.

You know what the Gemora says about this? That women should buy jewelry and new clothes - actually it says that her husband has to buy her jewelry and clothes. This is what makes us happy, this is what's going to put us in a festive mood! That's what the Gemora says. Men are never going to understand it. We don't buy things because we need more. We buy because we find pleasure in the new. The Ben Ishai said, "something new makes a woman happy!" It's expensive, says your husband! Yeah, whatever, there's nothing more expensive than a sad woman.

So, we have to celebrate and enjoy the pleasures in life. By the way this is why we have blessings of enjoyment - the *birkat hanehenin* - there are blessings that we say on our food.

Obviously, based on #1 Redefine Yourself, we understand that we're not looking at pleasure as a way to only serve ourselves/our bodies - that's never going to lead to happiness - but as a way to connect our innermost selves, our soul, to its Source - G-d. He wants us to derive pleasures from everything that he allows us to partake in this physical world - within the guidelines He prescribed - pleasure, within our marriage, within our Holidays, in our way of dress, in how we eat and what we eat etc. We need to celebrate!

#3 Appreciate

Very much connected to changing our mindset...

The word simcha is connected to the Hebrew word for mind, machshava. Happiness is in our mind! (And I don't mean in losing our mind.)

The Alter Rebbe explained in the holy book of Tanya: "the brain rules over the heart." We can use our mind to control our emotions and that, says Rabbi Shneur Zalman, is an inborn trait of every human being. We just have to utilize it.

There's an insightful verse in the Torah in the book of Devarim that says:
"Tachas Asher Lo Avadeta es H elokecha b'simcha uvtuv levav meirov kol"

תחת אשר לא אבדת את ה' אלקך בשמחה ובטוב לבב מרב כל

“Because you did not serve the L-rd, Your G-d, with happiness and with gladness of heart, (b’simcha u b’tuv levav) for the abundance of everything.” Devarim 28:47

In other words, appreciate, have gratitude for the abundance of everything. See what you have, not what you’re lacking. Being happy rests in our ability to use our mind to appreciate the abundant blessings in our lives! There’s a direct connection between focusing on and appreciating the blessings that we have been given, and experiencing joy.

Rashi, the foremost commentator of the Torah, goes further and interprets the part of the verse that states “me rav kol,” “from an abundance of everything,” as, “While you STILL had an abundance of good!” “You didn’t serve me with joy and gladness of heart while you still had an abundance of good.”

Which is something we see in human nature: It’s hard to feel grateful for the abundance in our lives. We take it for granted and in fact, we tend to appreciate things only when, G-d forbid, we lose them. So according to Rashi, G-d is saying, you need to appreciate it while you HAVE it. So the Torah is truly talking to a real challenge of the human condition, one which is so very true to our lives today!

Pirke Avot says, “Eize Hu Ashir HaSameach B’Chelko” - Ashir is another word for happy, it means rich also, Who is happy or rich, the one who is happy with what he has.

We live in a world, If I only this, if I only that...if only I had a thinner body, a better mother in law, a larger bank account, a better husband, more children, a different sister in law, a nicer car. We have millions of dollars in marketing and advertising helping feed the “if only” mindset and pushing us further away from a gratitude mindset.

In fact, it’s become increasingly easy to look at what others have, instead of looking at what we have We constantly open our phones to see what our “friends” have! We’re all looking at everybody else’s lives. Everybody is posting their best lives, everything looks prettier and rosier by everybody else, and you’re left with feelings of inadequacy, depression, longing... “How come my life is not as good as hers? If only I had this or that?”

Takes so much conscious effort to be grateful, to not take things for granted and really be mindful of the abundance we actually do have in our lives.

We have a framework that teaches us to be grateful human beings. From the first moment we wake up...

We have this beautiful prayer that we say when we first wake up, and I invite you all to say this first thing when you wake up tomorrow morning. Those first seconds of consciousness. Mode Ani Lefanecha, Melech Chai, Vekayam, Shehechesarta Bi, Nishmasti, Bechemla Rabba Emunaseja. (You can order Mode Ani cards at ThankYouMendel.com)

"I am thankful to you, Living and Eternal King, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me, Your faithfulness is great."

If you take these 12 words and you analyze them, it's the most profound and empowering thing.

First of all, I'm a grateful human being. I wake up with a gratitude mindset. Being grateful for the most basic - that my soul was given back to me so I can go and do stuff. Now, it gets even more powerful than that.

I am totally full of flaws and weaknesses, and I mess up, and ...

And yet, the Creator of the world, cares about giving me back life, giving me back my soul. You have faith in me!? With all my imperfections, my handicaps, my weaknesses.

Yes, apparently if we're still here, and B"H, we are, we still have what to give, we have what to offer to the Infinite. We have what to offer His world.

It's pretty amazing. This is just the beginning of your day. This is just a tiny thing in Jewish life. 12 simple words embedded in our tradition, so powerful. So empowering.

And, by the way, this gratitude mindset continues throughout our day. A Jewish person says about 100 blessings a day, thanking H" for the food we eat, thanking H" for letting us see and differentiate from the good and the not good. Thanking H" that our bodies function optimally.

There were once two Students of the Maggid of Metzrich - the student of the Baal Shem Tov - founder of the Chassidic movement... these two students did not understand a certain passage in the Talmud - if you were thinking of taking a nap, now is not a good time. Listen to this. (Judaism) "a person has to bless upon the bad, just as he blesses upon the good." The Maggid says I can't answer you. There's one person who can answer your question, Zusha of Anapoli....I never had anything bad happen to me. I never experienced any challenges.

Most of us will never achieve that state of being, which is that the physical world doesn't affect me, doesn't impact my mood, my state of being, it's not a challenge. But what we can grasp and work on every day is the concept behind this. And that is that my attitude, how I view things changes my whole reality.

I'm going to share with you a final story which my kids love - a story of Story of Reb Zucha and his brother Elimelech - disciples of the Maggid of Metzrich.

One day the righteous brothers got thrown in jail by the poretz (the Russian landowner). They sat quietly in jail trying not to cause any trouble with their inmates. Until at some point in the late afternoon, as the time for Mincha had arrived, Elimelech begins to

weep. His brother Zusha says, “why are you crying?” Elimelech says, “Zusha every day of my life I’ve connected with my Creator by praying. And now look!” Elimelech points at the bucket in the middle of the room, otherwise known as the chamber pot, whose presence precludes an individual from praying, according to Jewish law. “You see, now I can’t pray!” Zusha responds, “But, my dear brother, don’t you realize that the same G-d, Who commanded you to pray, also commanded you not to pray when the room is unfit for prayer? By not praying in this room, you have achieved a connection with G-d.” At which point, Elimelech smiles and takes his brother’s arm and breaks into dance. Their inmates, with not much else to do, join them in a circle at which point the guards come in to control the commotion. Upon being questioned, one of the prisoners answers, “We have no idea!” “Those two Jews were discussing the chamber pot and all of a sudden they broke out in dance.” “Is that right?” sneered the guards. “They’re happy because of the pail, are they? We’ll show them!” And the same men who were responsible for the chamber pot, promptly removed it from the room. The holy brothers then prayed minchah undisturbed.

Where does the joy of Elimelech come from? From connecting with G-d! Being connected with His Creator. The same G-d who says that you should connect with him through prayer, says that in this particular circumstance the way to connect with him is by not praying!

What had Zusha and Elimelech achieved? Not just connection with G-d. They were able to use their true inner happiness derived from that connection, to change their reality, this is what the Bal Shem Tov called, “Simcha Poretz Geder” - Joy breaks all barriers. So much so, that the same guy that put the chamber pot, can come and take it! WE have what it takes to be happy. It’s in a way of life called Judaism.

No, Judaism doesn’t not promise us that we are going to have a life without challenges or without pain. For whatever reasons we can’t understand fully, G-d created a world in which challenges will be part of the fabric of existence. But, Judaism does promise us that, despite the trials and challenges or, perhaps through them, we can actually find happiness along the journey that is our life.

So, Redefine Yourselves, Celebrate and Appreciate... and let me know how it goes! May we be able to together celebrate in the ultimate joy with the coming of Moshiach speedily in our days.