

It is a Mitzvah to Be Happy!

Parashat Ki Tavo

Joel E. Hoffman

This week's Torah portion contains the commandment to be happy. *Deuteronomy 26:11* states: "You shall be happy with all the goodness that Hashem, your God, has given you and your household..." But how does one fulfill this mitzvah? After all, it is an emotion. The answer lies in knowing and internalizing the following three teachings of Judaism:

The first is a short teaching from the rabbinic text *Pirkei Avot* (4:1) which asks: "Who is a wealthy person?" And then answers: "He who rejoices with his portion." This advice relays that one should stop focusing on what one does not have, but to be appreciative of what one does have no matter how much or how little.

The second teaching is that every mitzvah a Jew does not only improves one's self, but also residually improves the world, and doing mitzvot brings the world one step closer to how God would like the world. Thus, knowingly working towards fulfilling God's desire, which is done through doing mitzvot, fosters an incredible sense of pleasure and happiness.

The third is understanding how God operates in the world and its ramifications. In short, Judaism teaches that everything that happens to a person is because God orchestrates it to happen—this phenomenon is called Divine Providence--yet at the same time humans have Free Will.

Divine Providence and Free Will occurring simultaneously may seem like a contradiction, but the following analogy explains how this is possible. Imagine a master chess player playing against a novice chess player. The novice chess player has 100% free will as to where s/he moves his/her pieces. However, by how the master chess player arranges his/her pieces, s/he "directs" the novice player to make particular moves. In the analog, God is the master chess player who orchestrates situations and we are the novice chess player.

Furthermore, since God is good, everything God does is good and for our benefit. Therefore, one should not get angry when annoying things occur, such as when a slow driver gets in front of a person when s/he is in a hurry, or gets a flat tire, etc. Rather, one should be happy about the situation because it is ultimately for one's benefit. On rare occasions in hindsight we are privy to why a something that seemed negative at the time was really for our benefit.

Another example of how Divine Providence manifests in everyday life is if someone is an impatient person God does not help him/her by orchestrating events to avoid

circumstances where s/he would probably lose his/her temper. Rather, God arranges more opportunities for him/her to practice his/her patience!

The Sages also taught the converse of this concept which is: when a person loses his temper it is considered as if s/he worshiped an idol (Talmud *Nedarim* 22b). This is because when one loses his/her temper it demonstrates that for those few seconds s/he did not believe God was running the world at the micro-level. Otherwise s/he would not have lost his/her temper.

An important aspect of the teachings of Divine Providence is God does not give a person a challenge that s/he cannot handle, and every challenge is an opportunity to grow spiritually. Therefore, when a person has a severe challenge such as a major illness, a financial crisis, a family issue, etc., s/he should have the peace of mind that s/he can overcome it, and, of course, will grow from overcoming the challenge.

To summarize, to fulfill the mitzvah of being happy it takes: 1) Recognizing and appreciating everything God has given a person. 2) Knowing that one's purpose as a Jew is to do God's will which is concretized as mitzvot, and in doing so, this helps bring the world closer to perfection. 3) Keeping in mind that God runs the world at the micro-level, therefore, every seemingly bad thing that happens to a person a person can handle, and, in fact, is actually for one's benefit.

God can command one to be happy because God knows that if one concretizes these teachings s/he will be happy, and thus, fulfilling an important mitzvah.

Joel E. Hoffman is ordained as a rabbi, but works as a math and science teacher at a special education high school in the Boston area.