

JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES



IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS SOURCE SHEET AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PROJECT
INSPIRE.
A PROGRAM OF aish HaTorah

MODULE II

In our first module we described happiness as an attitude which is built upon appreciating the blessings that we do have in our lives. Happiness has more to do with really “wanting” what we have, than having what we want. It doesn’t take a particularly religious person to cultivate this kind of happiness born of gratitude.

Let’s take a more philosophical or spiritual look at the topic by examining one of the more enigmatic encounters in the Torah – the confrontation between Yaacov and Esav as Yaacov is bringing his family back to Canaan from Mesopotamia.

Esav has sworn to kill Yaacov over an incident (stealing the blessings of the firstborn) that transpired over 20 years before. Yaacov tries to avoid a violent confrontation by placating Esav with an enormous gift. After sending to Esav three sets of caravans laden with servants and animals as tribute, the following dialogue ensues between them:

SOURCE 1: *Breishis (Genesis) 33:8-11 Confrontation between Yaacov and Esav*

And he (Esav) asked, “What do you mean by all this company which I have met?” He (Yaacov) answered, “To gain my lord’s favor.”

Esav said, “**I have plenty**, my brother; let what you have remain yours.”

(Yaacov) Please accept my present which has been brought to you, for God has favored me and **I have everything.**” And when he urged him, he accepted.

וַיֹּאמֶר מִי לָךְ כָּל־הַמְחִנָּה הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר
פָּגַשְׁתִּי וַיֹּאמֶר לְמַצְאֵחַן בְּעֵינֵי אָדָנִי
וַיֹּאמֶר עֲשׂוּ יִשְׁלִי רֹב אַחֵי יְהִי לָךְ
אֲשֶׁר־לָךְ:
קַח־נָא אֶת־בְּרֹכְתִי אֲשֶׁר הִבָּאת לָךְ
כִּי־חֲנַנִּי אֱלֹהִים וְכִי יִשְׁלִי־כָל וַיִּפְצַר־
בּוֹ וַיִּקַּח:

Both Yaacov and Esav are very rich men, which is very evident by their dialogue, but how they describe their wealth is very different.

Esav says I have plenty or a lot, rov in Hebrew. Yaacov on the other hand says, “**I have everything**”.

Q: Which seems to be a more humble response, that of Esav or Yaacov?

It would seem to be that of Esav. Yet we know him to be an evil person consumed with the delights of the physical world.

Q: Does Yaacov really mean he has everything, from a physical standpoint? How could we understand his answer to reveal a spiritual dimension?

Q: Perhaps their carefully chosen responses reveal competing philosophies of life? Can you guess what they may be?

Esav's view is totally physical and of this world. I have a lot, though more would be better. Yaacov, on the other hand could not really mean that he has everything in a literal sense, he must mean that he has everything that he needs. This is a very spiritual view which brings G-d into the picture. From this perspective, everything that we have at any given moment is an express gift from G-d and should add to our happiness. **Not only do we have blessing, but we are being taken care of by our Father in Heaven.**

Consider the following source which builds upon the dueling paradigms of Yaacov and Esav, **Yesh Li Rov – I have a lot, versus Yesh Li Kol – I have everything.**

In the last book of the Torah, we are told why the Jews were exiled from Israel and sent into a long Diaspora:

SOURCE 2: Bamidbar (Numbers) 28:47

Because you would not serve the Lord your God in joy and with a full heart (when you had) **an abundance of everything.**

תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עֲבַדְתָּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְטוֹב לֵבָב מְרֹב כָּל:

Our ancestor's downfall pivoted around the fact that when they had an "abundance of everything" they could want they weren't happy.

In our first module we described happiness as deriving from appreciating what you have. In source 1 above we contrasted two approaches to evaluating your lot in life, that of Esav (I have a lot (rov)...but more would be better") and that of Yaacov. (I have everything (kol)). Although at first glance Esav seems more humble, yet his take on life easily devolves into an endless game of acquisition and a focus upon all that's missing in life. Yaacov's plate on the other hand is always full.

The Israelites were punished severely for the attitude they possessed when rich – specifically described as an "abundance of everything", in Hebrew M'Rov Kol. The first letter "Mem" is a prefix and means "from", rov means "a lot" and "kol" means everything; literally "from a lot of everything". Any way you cut it, this is a really awkward way of saying great abundance.

Q: Looking at the phrase carefully, can you see why they were unhappy when they had everything? What were they focusing on, rov or kol - "a lot" or "everything"?

It would appear that they experienced their wealth from a perspective of "a lot" rather than a perspective of "everything". Had they done the reverse they would have been happy and content and never exiled from their land.

Consider the following incident that happens just before this meeting that gives more nuance to the philosophy of Yaacov- which is the worldview of the Jewish People.

SOURCE 3: Bereishis (Genesis) 32:23-25

That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children, he **crossed the ford** of the Jabbok

After taking them across the stream, he sent across all his possessions.

Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn

וַיָּקָם | בַּלַּיְלָה הוּא וַיִּקַּח אֶת־שְׁתֵּי נָשָׁיו וְאֶת־שְׁתֵּי
שִׁפְחֹתָיו וְאֶת־אֶחָד עֶשֶׂר יְלָדָיו וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת מַעְבַּר יַבְבֹּק:

וַיִּקְרָם וַיַּעֲבֵרָם אֶת־הַנָּחַל וַיַּעֲבֹר אֶת־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ:

וַיִּזְתַּר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ וַיֵּאבֶּק אִישׁ עִמוֹ עַד עֹלֹת הַשָּׁחַר:

The commentators ask, how can Jacob be left alone if they all crossed over the Jabbok river together the night before?

SOURCE 4: Commentary of Rashi on Bereishis (Genesis) 32: 25...Jacob was left alone.

Rashi deduces from the fact the verse says "Jacob was left alone", it must mean that he went back across the Jabbok river. Rashi explains, that " Jacob forgot some small vessels and crossed back over the river to retrieve them."

Q: As mentioned, Jacob was a rich man. Why would he go back over the river for a few small vessels of seemingly little value? What does this reveal about Jacob's spiritual world view?

He actively sees G-d in orchestrating his life circumstances, so nothing in his life is extra. It all is knowingly prepared to help him achieve his purpose in life.

Q: How could having this type of philosophy about life enhance our happiness?

Summary:

We started with the principle that our attitude about our life circumstances is the source for happiness, or unfortunately dissatisfaction and misery.

It's not about managing life circumstances as much as it is about embracing the good that life is bestowing upon us, at any given moment in time.

In this module we added the powerful idea that this view is enhanced when we realize that it is part of a plan by G-d who loves us and is carefully crafting our lives for maximum pleasure and self-actualization.

Therefore, in addition to this awareness adding happiness to our lives because G-d is looking out for us, it encourages us to take advantage of everything that life brings our way, both good and even the not so good!