

Divinely revealed Scriptures, but interpret the text philosophically.

In their approach, the pursuit of happiness is a rational endeavor in which the human intellect seeks to attain perfection, but the pursuit of perfection takes place within a religious framework. It becomes a religious obligation to devote one's life to the pursuit of knowledge about the world, about humanity, and about God. Only the one who lives by the Wisdom of God as revealed to Israel can possess correct knowledge about the world God created and ultimately reach closeness to God. To be happy, or to flourish, Jews have to live in accordance with Torah and become wise.

Both Aristotle and the Jewish thinkers who were influenced by him also presupposed that to live in accordance with human nature, one must be good. Goodness required acquiring virtues through the deliberate, habitual practice of good acts; and living the good life in this world was necessary if a person was to transcend mere biological life. For Aristotle this transcendence

meant the contemplation of philosophical truths, and for Jewish Aristotelian philosophers it meant experiencing the blissful immortality of the intellect—a bliss of contemplation that is not subject to the passage of time or to one's emotions or passions. Such a life of contemplation, however, could be attained only by those who maintained appropriate social interactions, guided by the principle of moderation. Maimonides and his followers believed that Jewish law itself had specified this path of moderation, by instructing Jews how to act properly.

The Jewish philosophic conception of happiness, then, had much in common with the Greek perspective, but with two main differences. First, Jewish philosophers believed human beings could have a personal relationship with God, culminating in love, and that human happiness was contingent on this relationship. Second, Jewish thinkers held that God had revealed to humans, or more precisely to Israel (the Jewish people), the specific instructions specifying how to

act. The best life, according to Jewish thinkers, was one in which a believer manifested an unconditional love of God, lived the life of Torah for its own sake, and strove to become most like God through good deeds.



What can we learn today from these premodern discourses on happiness?

First, a well-lived life requires a lifelong process of thought and reflection. As such, there is no contradiction between living a happy life and experiencing doubt, sadness, aggravation, or displeasure—feelings which tend to disappear when the particular circumstances provoking them disappear. Thus the well-lived life is not free of negative feelings or events, but one in which imperfections are properly understood and better handled.

Second, human well-being pertains to who we are—i.e., excellence of character—rather than what we own or how other people perceive us. The ongoing effort to acquire the virtues that constitute good character remains a noble goal for us, individually and collectively.

Third, flourishing as human beings requires that we develop a philosophy of life that takes into consideration *objective* truths about who we are as humans and what we all share, such as our needs for love and for meaning. The contemporary preoccupation with “difference” and “identity politics” has made it easy to forget our commonalities.

Fourth, a model of happiness grounded in Torah can fortify our Jewish identity. Because many Jews saw the Torah as the prescription for the happy life, they were able to sustain their sense of spiritual superiority, withstand persecution, and resist the temptation to convert.

When contemporary Jews reflect on the meaning of happiness, they would be wise to avail themselves not only of the new science of experiencing subjective well-being, but also with Jewish philosophic discourses on happiness, which require constant engagement with the Torah and its meaning for our lives. In such discourses we find the crucial question we need to ask ourselves: “What sort of person *do I need to be* in order to live a happy life?” □

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