

How Happiness Thinks

Where does the word happiness come from?

Hap is/was a Norwegian/Viking word meaning luck.

In English you still can find it in its original meaning in the words happenstance and hapless.

It is interesting to note that in German e.g. the words for luck and happiness are identical, only distinguished by transitive/intransitive usage.

There are many different words for happiness in Hebrew

- *Simcha* ([Hebrew](#): שמחה), a generic word for happiness,^[1] also used to describe a celebration (e.g. a wedding, bar/bat mitzvah), it is also a name for both males and females
- *Osher* ([Hebrew](#): אושר), a "deeper, lasting happiness"^[2]
- *Orah* ([Hebrew](#): אורח), a word used to mean both "light" and "happiness"
- *Gila* ([Hebrew](#): הליג), a term that may specifically refer to an exuberant outburst of joy^[3] or the "happiness of discovery"^[1]
- *Rina* ([Hebrew](#): רינה), a term used to describe a "refreshing happiness"^[1]
- *Ditza* ([Hebrew](#): הצייד), a "sublime joy"^[1]
- *Sasson* ([Hebrew](#): שושן), a "sudden unexpected happiness"^[1]
- *Tzahala* ([Hebrew](#): הלהצ), a word used for both "happiness" and "dancing"^[1]
- *Chedva* ([Hebrew](#): החדה), a word denoting the "happiness of togetherness"^[1]

Why are we called Jews (Yehudi) instead of Hebrew (Ivri). The root of the name Yehuda is hodaah – to thank to express gratitude.

The weekly reader of the Jewish news might come to believe that Judaism opposes happiness and favors worry, guilt, and conflict. We seem to be so down and obsessed with our problems: anti-Semitism, anti-Israel propaganda, assimilation, intermarriage, scandals, and on and on. But actually, Judaism very much embraces the importance of happiness.

In recent years, a lot of attention has been given to the biological, economical, and philosophical approach to happiness, but what about the religious approach? Can and should the great religious virtues bring us deeper life contentment? The great virtues of gratitude and idealism not only add to the lives of others, but can enrich us with a happier and fulfilling life.

Deuteronomy “and you shall rejoice with all the bounty that God has given you.” Since Torah tells us to rejoice – being happy is a mitzvah.

Traditionally, Jewish practice and learning has placed a great deal of emphasis on living a life filled with joy and gratitude. In Jewish texts there is wisdom, which is supported by research and explores what it means to nourish positive emotion.

“Classical Jewish theory emphasizes action. It’s involved with establishing goals and strategies. It encourages you to be a positive and effective agent of your own destiny.”

Studies indicate that religion contributes to personal happiness. “Survey data consistently show religious people as being somewhat happier and more satisfied with life than non-religious people,” Seligman writes in “Authentic Happiness.” “Religions instill hope for the future and create meaning in life.

In her book, *The How of Happiness*, Sonja Lyubomirsky notes that there are multiple ways that kindness can make us happier. Surveys of volunteers show that volunteering is associated with diminished depressive symptoms and enhanced feelings of happiness, self worth, mastery and personal control.

One of the first empirical studies to provide a glimpse into problems of affluent youth was a comparative investigation of low income, urban 10th graders and their upper socioeconomic status, suburban counterparts. Affluent youth reported significantly higher levels of anxiety across several domains and greater depression. They also reported significantly higher substance abuse than inner city students, consistently indicating more frequent use of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana and other drugs. Suniya Lutha PhD.

Stress is an impediment to happiness but that seems to be quite difficult to eliminate in today’s world. Certainly, there are things we can do to decrease our stress. We need to unplug from our devices and social media. News today is about disasters both physical and metaphysical. Spending excessive amounts of time on social media/internet has been linked with depression. This is in part due to social isolation and in part due to the infamous FOMO.

Joy has a special relationship to gratitude.

We should find purpose in everything we experience. We can hopefully find growth opportunities even from annoying moments. Instead of processing them

as stressful experiences, we can process them as something beneficial. It's all about perception.

Gratitude is important. Dr Emmons conducted a study in 1998 to look at the effects of gratitude on physical and emotional well-being. People were asked to either describe 5 things they were grateful for, five hassles or five events that affected them. People in the gratitude group felt better about their life and were more optimistic about the future – 25% happier. They had fewer health complaints and spent more time exercising. Something as simple as counting blessings once a week resulted in significant emotional and health benefits.

When we have been surrounded by a super abundance of blessings all of our lives, we tend not to notice the gifts, hence the abundance fails to bring us happiness.

The desire for more hinders our ability to be happy for when we focus on attaining something, we neglect to focus on the blessings we already have. The drive for more causes our minds to dwell on the negative, on that which we do not have.

Ritualizing gratitude at fixed intervals allows us to reap the full happiness benefit from that which we have. Judaism has a built in system of rituals that facilitates a steady expression of gratitude for all the blessings in our life. We can say blessings for food, for waking with our souls and experiencing a rainbow.

Psychologists teach the importance of gratitude in the present. This is made most clear by the rabbinic teaching: “Who is rich? He who appreciates (or is happy with) his portion” (Avot 4:1). To cultivate this, the rabbis teach that we should make 100 blessings a day. These are moments when we step back and reflect upon our good fortune and express gratitude.

Perhaps the most basic event that all humans can feel gratitude for is waking up each morning. There is a Jewish blessing to commemorate this daily miraculous occurrence (Modeh Ani): “I express my gratitude before You, God, for You have returned my soul to me with compassion; how great is your faithfulness!”

Realizing that each day is a blessing can lead to real inner joy.

Another common time to express gratitude is before and after eating. Take a pause before moving on to be grateful for what we have.

We also need to nourish an emotional awareness of gratitude towards God. Jewish prayer and the Jewish system of blessing is about expressing gratitude to

God. The only part of the Amidah that cannot be delegated to the chazzan during the repetition is the Modim, which is my favorite prayer. It focuses most directly on expression of gratitude to God for all that God has done for us as individuals and as a people. When we give thanks to God, we can't delegate to others. A translation of this prayer based on the writings of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav (1772-1810) can be found in Siddur Lev Shalem

My God, open my eyes and my heart that I might always merit to see the good in the world and the good that You have bestowed upon me, even as I experience difficulties and am troubled. May no physical ailment or spiritual despair cause me to forget the blessings You have granted me in life. May Your love and Your compassion ever be before me.

Shabbat gives us a time to express gratitude. If you look at the Amidah from the weekday service and compare it to the Shabbat service, you will notice that the prayers are different. During the week, we are asking God for things but on Shabbat, we are expressing our gratitude to God for all that we have been given.

Secular thinkers describe the central role that gratitude has in living a moral life. Cicero, the ancient Roman philosopher, described gratitude as a cornerstone of all values. Studies have found numerous benefits that stem from building the capacity for gratitude into daily living. Those who regularly express gratitude are more likely to be forgiving, generous and agreeable and less likely to be narcissistic and selfish. In one study, 95% of individuals described feeling happy when expressing gratitude.

How to foster gratitude

1. count one's blessings
2. Over the next week, express gratitude to two people who have had a positive influence on your life.
3. Directly express gratitude
4. Impediments to gratitude
 - a. Self pre-occupation
 - b. Expectation/habituation/routine
 - c. Entitlement
5. Journal keeping

In *Pirke Avot*, it says that "The reward of a mitzvah is the mitzvah itself" (Avot 4:2). Rather than some metaphysical intervention, the great feeling that comes from doing right is itself the reward. Feeling good about doing right is an important reminder that we are on the right track and is constitutive of the

ethical personality. One of the greatest contributions that Judaism makes to the potential of soul actualization is that we are to serve G-d in joy. Judaism preaches: happiness must actively be cultivated if we are to thrive in this life.

The Israeli-born Harvard professor of positive psychology, Tal Ben-Shachar, in "Happier" wrote: "We are so constituted that we actually need our lives to have meaning. Without a higher purpose, a calling, an ideal, we cannot attain our full potential for happiness... Being an idealist is about having a sense of purpose that encompasses our life as a whole; but for us to be happy, it is not enough to experience our life as meaningful on the general level of the big picture. We need to find meaning on the specific level of our daily existence as well."

Victor Frankl, in *Man's Search for Meaning*, explains: "What man actually needs is ... the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him." When we struggle to achieve our ideals, we live a life of meaning. To do this, one not only needs courage but also fellow human beings (family, friends, mentors, spiritual community).

Happiness alone cannot be our end point. Toni Morrison, speaking to college graduates, said it best: "I urge you, please don't settle for happiness. It's not good enough. Of course, you deserve it. But if that is all you have in mind—happiness—I want to suggest to you that personal success devoid of meaningfulness, free of a steady commitment to social justice, that's more than a barren life, it is a trivial one. It's looking good instead of doing good." While we should strive to live with joy, we should balance this with other life commitments and values.

When we actively cultivate gratitude and idealism, we can become happier individuals better equipped to change the world and live inspired lives committed to doing good. When we infuse joy into our service and commitment we can actualize to the next level and in more sustainable and meaningful ways.