Welcome to Week 2 of the Happiness Challenge

Hopefully, by now, you’ve spoken with your partner, had some thoughtful discussions about happiness and gratitude, and are ready to move on as we begin the next installment in our Happiness Series...

WAIT. Before you move on, please discuss the challenge you selected last week and see how you did. Did it change your perspective? Did you feel any different?

Please, take a moment. THEN let’s move on and tackle the material for Week 2.

What Then?

In our previous session, we discussed the different ways that people may pursue happiness. (They might focus on long-term pay-offs or short term pleasures, for example.) But what if someone has a genuinely difficult time being happy? What if they can’t focus on things that might bring them joy today or tomorrow because something else – something objectively difficult, even horrible – that makes doing so nearly impossible? What if the burdens of today leave you exhausted, barely able to keep up? Focus on happiness? Ha! In periods of challenge or difficulty, it sometimes seems herculean just to keep our heads above water. How can we be expected to be happy too?

This question is so apropos today. In the wake of COVID-19, divorce rates have skyrocketed, and depression is at an all-time high. Many of us have faced unemployment, financial strain, illness, homeschooling (eek!), or unbearable loneliness.
Even if we were left unscathed, we certainly know others who did not fare as well. So the question remains as relevant as ever: when the going gets tough, what then?

**Take It Home:**

Think of three challenges you are currently facing in your life. (If you can’t come up with three, please come and coach the rest of us!) How do these challenges affect your happiness or general state of well-being? Do you feel it is possible to be happy despite them? Why or why not?

**I Can't Be Happy**

First, let’s challenge the notion that a person CAN'T be happy while facing a very challenging situation. Obviously, no one can be expected to walk away from something difficult doing the Hora like it’s their bar or bat mitzvah. But there is a form of happiness that is real and enduring – a sort of calm happiness – that can still be achieved.

Let’s begin our discussion by taking a look at a Gemara:

**Source 1: Talmud, Taanit 29a**

משנכנם אדר מרבין בשמחה

*As (the Hebrew month of) Adar arrives, one should increase their happiness.*

*(More about this special month in Session #3)*

**Explanation:**

This selection from the Talmud is incorporated into Jewish law. What an unusual law! We’re expected to make ourselves happy? What if our circumstances don’t allow us to be happy? The Talmud though clearly implies that one can choose to be happy. This doesn’t imply that someone will be happy, for example, when they lose their job. But it does mean that there’s a form of happiness, or peace of mind, that is always accessible. The question is how.

**The Anatomy of a Challenge**

To better understand the Jewish perspective on challenges, let’s consider the word’s etymology. In Hebrew, one of the words for “ordeal” (i.e. a challenging situation) is ניסוי. Interestingly, this is the same word for “test,” and it appears several times in the Torah. To better understand the correlation between these two definitions, let’s explore the first time the word appears in the Torah. ¹

---

¹ Rav Tzadok HaKohen (among others) teaches that the first time a word is used in the Torah expresses its intrinsic or essential meaning:

ר”ח תמוז אות א בכל מקודם הпервונים ומקודם בEDURE הוא שורש מדבר.
Source 2: Genesis, 22:1
והאלקים נסה את אברהם
And G-d tested Abraham

Discussion Questions:
Abraham was the progenitor of the Jewish people, a truly righteous person — in fact; he was the father of monotheism! Why did he need to be tested? But more than that, G-d is all-knowing; didn’t He already know what the outcome would be? Why the need to test Abraham at all?

To answer these questions, let’s take a look at the Kabbalisitic teachings of the Zohar:

Source 3: Zohar, Part 1, 106:2
ומי בעי קודשא בריך הוא尝试א בני נשא
אינו, דאמר רב חמא מנא, לא המsameי י用地, ובגבערב נכת אוגו, ונא האות והמופת גו, יי
משה יعالכים זגו, ולחבי בני נושא, דאה כל שעבדי דרב נשתדי קmime!... אלא
שמנסה אומם כי לתרים ראשם בכותה נסיתון. כעש雌 נשמת הקדוש בורק אה
לאברמש, שכותב, והאלקים נשה את אברמש, ויה נשה, ויה אחרון, ויה שאתה
אומה, ירימ נס, שיא נס, מירם חזיל שלו וכל העולים.

Does G-d need to test human beings? G-d already knows the extent of a person’s devotion... but He tests people to raise them through various ordeals. With Abraham as well, where it says ‘והאלקים נסה את אברהם,’ that G-d tested Abraham, it needs to be understood [based on the fact that ‘נֵס’ or nes,’ the Hebrew word for ‘test’ also means a ‘raised banner’] as G-d raising Abraham’s stature through each feat. 2

Explanation:
According to the Zohar, life is not random. Foiled plans, difficult circumstances, and personal trials are hand-crafted to help us grow. Abraham was an astounding individual. But imagine if Abraham hadn’t been challenged; he may never have

2 In Psalms 60, the words נֵס לְהִתְנוֹסֵס (which have the same root as נִסָיוון) means ‘a banner to be displayed,’ and is correlated with the root נשא, which means to ‘raise up’ or ‘elevate.’
actualized his extraordinary potential — all of world history would have taken a different turn. Challenges allow us to show ourselves what we’re made of.

**Note:** This discussion intends to convey how a person might benefit from seeing their challenges through the lens of the Kabbalistic principle mentioned above. Understanding why we may experience pain is beyond the scope of this discussion.

**Take It Home:**

Think of a time when you came out of a challenge a better version of yourself. How did you become stronger? What did you learn?

**Differing Paths**

The following true story illustrates how, through challenges, we can discover so much about who we are:

In November 2014, two men armed with axes, guns, and knives entered a Jerusalem synagogue and began attacking the praying congregants. The sound of gunshots rang out in the morning air. Two men, one a resident of the area, and the other a young man who had come to Jerusalem to study abroad for the year, found themselves just outside the carnage. The scene was ugly. Just in front of them lay a man, covered in blood, flung down the front steps of the building like a ragdoll.

Stunned by what they saw and realizing they were meters away from an active terror attack, one of them, the native, paused for a moment and then ran for his life in the other direction. The student decided to jump in. With an adrenaline rush like he never experienced before, he ran to the bloodied person, ripped off his shirt, and instinctively wrapped it around the injured man’s head until medical help arrived. Accompanying the victim to the hospital, the doctors told him that his quick intervention had saved the patient’s life.

This moment was traumatic — for both of them. The native who ran for his life cannot be faulted for leaving the scene. But there can be no doubt that the student’s life was forever changed — for the better. If he hadn’t known it before, he now realized that he possessed courage and a willingness to put his own life at risk to save another person’s life. He was a role model for others and could go on from there to become a leader. It had been a dormant ability. Now it was a part of who he was.
Failure is Not an Option

Now that we've considered how we can view challenging circumstances, we're left with this question: What if I fail? What if, instead of rising to the occasion, I'm crushed by it? That's wholly possible, isn't it? Why would a uniquely kind, Supreme Being put someone in a place where they may go down the wrong path?

Again, a commentary on Source 2 (G-d testing Abraham) reveals some fascinating insights:

**Source 4: Nachmanides (Ramban) on Genesis 22:1**

You should know that “Hashem tests the righteous” (Psalms 11:15) When He knows that a righteous person will fulfill His will...G-d may [grant him the opportunity to grow and] test him.

**Discussion Question:**

How might this teaching of Nachmanides answer our question of why G-d would test someone if there's a chance they may not pass the test?

**Explanation:**

According to Jewish philosophy, we are tested only at a point where things are challenging, where a person could go either way and is perfectly balanced between the pull of their higher self and their lower instincts. This intersection of opportunity is referred to in Jewish philosophy as a person’s point of בְּחִירָה, or ‘free will.’ It is at this point, where the war against oneself rages, that a person can ultimately, in the most realistic way possible, define who he is. His actions become a banner - a sign - for what he truly stands for.

If the battle weren’t hard, our free-will wouldn’t be engaged in the same way. While choosing whether to drink orange juice or coffee in the morning is also a choice, it doesn’t impact our essence in the same way (though it may affect our blood sugar.) Challenging situations are just that -- challenging -- because they are the specific mixture of ingredients that provide us with the opportunity to grow.

So how does this answer our question? Why test someone if they can fail? Nachmanides states, G-d doesn't test a person unless there is a possibility that they can grow from the experience, that they can pass the test. This doesn't mean that a person necessarily will - we all have free will. But it is possible. So no matter how crushed, tired, or exhausted someone may feel, the person has it within himself to pass through to the other side and conquer the challenges he faces.
Take It Home:
With this philosophy in mind, go back to your list of three challenges. Do you feel more equipped to handle them? Happier? Why or why not?

I Don't Feel Righteous

At this point you might be saying, "Yeah, but this whole thing isn’t talking about me. I don’t feel righteous." Got it. But we’re also our own worst critics. Before making up your mind as to whether this concept applies to you, let’s better understand what it means to be righteous in the first place.

Source 5: Proverbs, 24:16

כִּי שֶׁבַע יִפּוֹל צַדִּיק וָקָם

Though the righteous one may fall seven times, he will rise.

Discussion Question:
What does this lesson from Proverbs teach us about a righteous person?

Explanation:
According to this teaching from King Solomon, who was said to be the wisest person who ever lived, we see that one aspect of a righteous person is that, despite his falls and failures, he gets back up again. If you have ever, even once, fallen and then risen above who and what you were – above your circumstances, your upbringing, or your habits - you have the potential to be a righteous person. The defining characteristic is that you choose to fight the good fight – to own your life and what you’ll make of it. And then, you may become that person you were meant to become.

Take It Home:
Picture a challenge/test that you’ve been “failing.” Close your eyes and take a couple of minutes to envision yourself rising to the occasion and showing up the way you’d want to.
Growth Mode

Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier offers this invaluable analogy: We tend to think of life as a spa. We assume that it will (or should) be easy, enjoyable. A cakewalk! So when things don’t go according to plan, we think that something is deeply wrong. But in actuality, life is more like a gym. It’s set up to challenge us in the most fundamental ways. In fact, as we are taught in Ethics of Our Fathers (Pirkei Avot), “according to the pain is the gain.” (Now, if that doesn’t sound like a gym slogan, we don’t know what does!) And at this gym of life, we have a personal trainer — G-d — crafting every workout to help us hone the muscles we’ll need to become the most optimal version of ourselves.

When we walk out of the gym after a good workout, we’re happy. We might be in pain, but we’re proud of ourselves. In the gym of life, our Personal Trainer has the end in mind too. He wants us to live our lives to the fullest, proud of who we’ve become. Because the ultimate travesty would be reaching the end of our lives feeling we could have done or been more.

Like we said earlier, the happiness we can experience during challenging times isn’t jubilance. It’s something far more subtle: it’s knowing that you’re on a journey of who you were meant to become — and knowing that you can do it.

Summing It All Up: Choosing Happiness

As we said at the beginning of this session, happiness is a choice. As in our first lesson, it comes through a paradigm shift. When we stop asking why and instead ask what or how — what can I learn from this, or how can I grow — we can potentially grow from the experience and achieve inner happiness.

Take It Home:

Let’s look at that list of challenges one more time. What can learn, or how could you grow from them?
This Week's Challenges:

To deepen your understanding of the concepts you’ve learned, choose one of the following challenges to help you apply them. Tell your partner what you chose, and make sure to follow up with one another next week to see how you did:

• Say the Modeh Ani prayer when you wake up. When you get to the words “rava emunatecha” ([G-d], abundant is Your faithfulness), focus on the fact that G-d gave you another day and believes that you can conquer whatever comes your way today.

• If you have a challenge that you feel you keep failing, set aside 1 minute each day to envision how you would respond to that challenge if you showed up as the best version of yourself. Picture what you would do or say, how you would walk or move, how you would feel. Go into detail and live that moment in your mind! Envision yourself as a riser — not a faller.

• Think about who you want to be at the end of your life. Take 5 minutes to write down all the attributes you’d like to have (or the accomplishments you’d want to have made, and the characteristics it would’ve taken to have done so.) Go through your list. Put an asterisk next to any attributes you feel are currently being developed by a challenging situation in your life.

3 Modeh ani text: מודה אני לפניך מלךחי וקיים,שהחזרת בי נשמתי בחמלה; רבה אמונתך.

Modeh ani lefanecha, Melech chai vkayam, sheh-he’chezarta bi nishmati b’chemla; raba emunatecha.

I gratefully thank You, living and eternal King, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me. Abundant is Your faithfulness.