

What is Joy?

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Rebbe Nachman teaches: It is a great mitzvah to be happy always.

Strengthen yourself to push aside all depression and sadness. Everyone has lots of problems and the nature of man is to be attracted to sadness. To escape these difficulties, constantly bring joy into your life—even if you have to resort to silliness (Likutey Moharan II, 24).

You'd think that being told to be happy is superfluous. Who doesn't know this? Is it really necessary to coax, urge and encourage people to be happy? It's a natural desire, not one that has to be worked on. Or is it?

"True joy is the hardest thing of all," Rebbe Nachman insists. "You must *force* yourself to be happy all the time" (*Advice*, Joy 35).

Life certainly gives us enough excuses to be worried. *How* am I going to meet the tuition payment? *What* did you say happened to the car? *Who* did you say you're bringing home for dinner?! And we're not even mentioning health issues. The list is endless. Your alternatives: joy or depression.

Depression, though, is your worst enemy. Rebbe Nachman compares depression to the bite of a serpent (*Likutey Moharan* I, 189). Just as a serpent strikes suddenly, so does depression. All of a sudden it hits and you're left wondering how you can ever be happy again. My *Rosh Yeshivah*, Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen, used to say, "People think that difficulties are unexpected in life. They're surprised when troubles attack and

sadness comes. But even if a person were to live for a thousand years, he would still have a long list of problems waiting for him. When one leaves, another is sure to follow on its heels. This is an axiom of life.”

It’s a cycle. Something unexpected happens and we get annoyed. The doldrums and depression, still mild, are on the horizon. We’re already less tolerant of whatever happens next. Naturally we anticipate everything going wrong. And it does! At the same time we get angry, experience greater failure, become more depressed, and feel more discouraged and lethargic. The serpent of sadness has struck and its poisonous venom of depression begins to spread, without our being aware of what actually happened.

Interestingly enough, depression, sadness and suffering are actually a necessary ingredient in the world. Our Sages state, “Whoever mourns Jerusalem will yet share in its rejoicing” (*Ta’anit* 30b). Without experiencing sorrow and mourning, there is no way for us to appreciate its opposite. We have nothing with which to compare our happiness. Therefore we experience suffering. Only then can we know the true taste of joy. And because some sadness and suffering are necessary, Rebbe Nachman urges us to strive for joy. We have to use all our strength to attain happiness, since only by being happy will we have the necessary faith, courage and strength to face our sorrows and burdens and overcome them.

What Does This Mean To Me?

Joy puts you on the fast track to achieving any goal you desire. Therefore Rebbe Nachman emphasizes the importance of being joyous at all times. While it’s easy to be happy when you feel good and things are going smoothly, what should you do when you don’t feel happy and there’s nothing to be joyous about? Rebbe Nachman offers these suggestions for getting back on track:

Force yourself. The importance of joy is so great that you should make every effort to be happy. This can be compared to a group of people who are dancing in a circle while a sad person looks on. They reach out and pull him in to join them, whereupon he leaves his depression off to the side. However, when the newcomer stops dancing, his depression returns. Though the few minutes of joy are valuable, still, it would be better to bring the depression itself into the circle of happiness and keep it there (*Likutey Moharan* II, 23). Forcing yourself to be happy will eventually turn the cause of your unhappiness into a real source of joy.

Someone once asked Reb Noson how he could be happy when he had so many problems and difficulties. Reb Noson answered, "Borrow the happiness!" (*Siach Sarfei Kodesh* 1-736). When it comes to money, we rarely hesitate to borrow against future earnings. Well, sadness makes a person feel he's missing something. The thing to do, as Reb Noson advises, is to borrow from whatever you can think of that makes you happy. Besides, there's a big difference between owing money and owing happiness. When money is paid back, it hurts a little. But with happiness, when we pay it back, we have happiness again. Forcing joy and happiness actually pays fantastic dividends!

Fake it. Even if you don't feel happy, you can fake it. Pretend to be happy. Who says that if you're feeling down, you can't smile? We fake a smile often enough when trying to be polite, why not now? Try it. A smile, even a put-on grin, is contagious. Not only will it make others happy when they return your smile, but, as studies show, smiling relieves tension and really does make your outlook on life a lot brighter (cf. *Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* #43).

Remember your good points. Another way you can become joyous when depressed is by acknowledging that you have at least some good within you. Even if you can't find anything good in yourself, you still have what to be happy about: "I am a Jew!" (*Likutey Moharan* II, 10). Simply be happy that you can feel proud and joyous about your heritage, which is not even your own doing, but a gift from God (more about this in Chapter 11, "What are the Good Points?").

Sing, play music and dance. Music clears the mind and makes us happy. Music has the power to help us pour out our heart before God. It also has the power to sharpen our memories and enable us to concentrate on our goals (*Advice*, Joy 14-15). Therefore Rebbe Nachman says it's a very good habit to inspire ourselves with a melody. The spiritual roots of music and song are quite exalted and can arouse our hearts and raise our spirits (*Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* #273).

The Rebbe also talks about the special power that dancing and clapping have to make us happy and mitigate the negative things affecting us (*Likutey Moharan* I, 169). It is customary in every Breslov synagogue to dance each day after the morning and evening prayers. Many Breslover Chassidim dance after learning together, and some even dance daily by themselves. It's a sure-fire way to arouse feelings of joy and happiness.

Do something silly. In talking about making every effort to be joyous, Rebbe Nachman said this even includes resorting to acting a bit silly. The price one pays for a

little silliness is far less than the price of depression and lethargy.

Echoing the message found in Chapter 6 about free will: There is joy, there is depression. Which path do I choose? Rebbe Nachman says it depends on how you view yourself. If you find good, then you think good, things are positive and you can be joyous. The opposite is also true. So choose happiness.

Reb Avraham Chazan commented, "If Rebbe Nachman taught that it's a great mitzvah to be happy always, then we must believe that there is what to be happy about!" (*Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen*).