

Vayishlah 5772 – Happiness
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

[Sing.]

“If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands.”

[C’mon everyone!]

If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands. If you’re happy and you know it, and you really want to show it.

If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands.”

Anyone know other versions?

How about:

“If you’re happy and you know it, shout hooray ... or: snap your fingers.”

What about a good one for a *shul*?

“If you’re happy and you know it, say Amen.”

This popular, repetitive song, ostensibly for children, has its origins, according to some, in an old Latvian folk song.

The music for this song is from *Molodejnaya*, written by Isaak Dunayevsky for the 1937-38 Soviet film “Volga–Volga.” (Raise your hand if you’ve seen it. Me neither!).

This is a fairly simple song; but like many aspects of life, sometimes simple can be most instructive.

I like this version:

If you’re happy and you know it, then your face will surely show it.

Or:

“If you’re happy and you know it, then you really oughta show it.”

How do we show that we’re happy?

We smile.

That's it.

We smile.

Go ahead and try it. Just smile.

Smile at God and the world.

Smile at your neighbor or the stranger sitting next to you or behind you or in front of you.

We all know the benefit of having someone smile at us. If we see someone else smile, it immediately changes our mood, our psychological state. But those same benefits are available to us when we smile to ourselves.

We all live lives with some amount of stress, and our bodies react to stress in visceral ways, often utilizing our fight or flight mechanisms. This reaction pumps the body full of adrenalin.

Of course, this response evolved thousands of years ago to protect us. If we were being attacked by a hungry jaguar, pumping a lot of blood away from our vital organs and into our limbs could help us run faster, saving our life.

But most of our stress today does not require the fight or flight mechanism. We are stressed about our school work, our families, our jobs, our finances, the state of the world economy, or the state of world peace or the world's environment.

But usually, we cannot run or fight to cope with those.

But our bodies react in the same way, pumping adrenalin.

Over long periods of time, that adrenalin can lead to many medical problems, including chronic inflammation, which can lead to diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, strokes, hypertension, obesity, and auto-immune disorders.

While there are many ways to combat stress and its deleterious effects on ourselves, one of the simplest is the one that we just employed: smiling. Even just raising the corners of your lips very slightly is beneficial.

There have been many studies about this. Smiling is healing. It relaxes the body. It helps us manage stress, and it restores our psyche to equilibrium.

Laughter provides similar positive benefits. So, when we come to *shul*, and we hear a sermon that makes us laugh or smile, or we smile as we speak to someone at Kiddush, we are benefiting.

According to scientists, smiling lowers our blood pressure immediately; it boosts our immune system immediately; it releases endorphins, serotonin, and natural pain killers immediately; it lifts the moods of the people around us, causing others to approach us with a sense of happiness and joy.

One of my favorite facts is that smiling has the same benefits as eating 2000 chocolate bars. Now, I don't know about you, but while I like chocolate, that seems like a bit much.

I'd go with the smile.

In this morning's Torah reading, we find one of the most dramatic and powerful vignettes in the entire Torah. Jacob, who has been away from his brother Esav for 20 years after stealing Esav's birthright and his father's blessing, is now returning to the land of Canaan.

He is incredibly anxious. He is so frightened that he divides his people and his flocks into two camps, stating, "If Esav comes to one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape." (Genesis 32:9)

It is in that state of mind, that Ya'akov settles down for a night of sleep, crossing the Yabbok River alone.

During the night, he wrestles with a mysterious assailant. Is it God? Is it an angel? Is it Esav's protective angel? Is it a metaphoric demon of the river, or is it Jacob's own conscience?

Whatever it is, Jacob is transformed in name, body, and soul. His name is now Israel; he walks with a limp; he has confronted the deepest aspects of himself.

But he is also in a different emotional state. He is ready to greet his brother, although he may still be somewhat afraid. When Jacob sees his brother running to greet him, he senses that Esav himself has been transformed. Esav runs and embraces Jacob, falls on his neck, kisses him, and they weep together.

Like laughing and smiling, crying releases a set of endorphins into the body – different from the fight or flight adrenalin.

There is great power to this reunion. Esav accepts an additional gift from Jacob and thanks God for all the blessings in his life. Then they journey together as brothers. We can imagine the smiles on their faces.

As Jacob describes the presents that he brings his brother, he uses the Hebrew word *minhah*, which we associate with the afternoon service. At its core it means a gift. Jacob utilizes that word five times with his brother to indicate the gifts that he is bringing him.

But in the last verse he uses the word *brakhah*, a blessing, for this gift. While we may associate the word *brakhah* with a blessing, like the *hamotzi* – the blessing over the bread – what does the word *brakhah* really mean?

Brakhah comes from *berekh*, meaning knee; by bowing at the knee, we acknowledge the presence of the other.

It is a greeting. It is hello. It is a smile. When we greet someone, we say: *barukh haba'* – literally, “blessed is the one who is coming into our presence,” but it really means, “I am greeting you,” sending you my smile, my love.

And when we bless God with a *brakhah*, it doesn't mean that we are saying, “We are giving God a blessing,” as if we have the ability to bless God; we are informing ourselves, God, and the world that we are smiling upon them. We are thankful. We are grateful. We appreciate what we have in our lives, and that changes our entire disposition.

Jacob and Esav see each other's faces, and Jacob is basically relating to his brother, “I am smiling at you. I am bringing you my blessing, my welcome.” And Esav reciprocates and welcomes Jacob back to the land of his birth.

The Mishnah states (Avot 4:1): “Ben Zoma said: “*Eizeh hu ashir? Hasameah b'helko* – who is rich? The one who is happy with his portion.”

Being happy starts with realizing that each one of us has gifts and blessings that we bring to the world. But while each of us has blessings, it is not merely that we possess them that is critical, what is vital is what we do with them – how we utilize those blessings in the world and how we share them with others and how we approach others.

Is it with a frown? Is it with anger? Is it with disappointment? Is it with a smile? Is it with real emotion? Or are we in state of fear? In an anxious place? Do we really appreciate what we have?

The left side of the Ten Commandments is instructive. The left side contains: don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness, and finally, don't covet.

From this we learn that there is a flow on that left side of the Ten Commandments from the bottom to the top. If we start with being happy with who we are and what we have, then we don't covet, we're not jealous, we don't lie or steal or commit even worse acts. But we must start with an approach to life of gratefulness for who we are and what

we have. And out of that sense we bless, we welcome, we smile, we greet the world with a sense of joy and happiness.

That is not to say that this is easy. We know that chemical imbalances in the brain can make it difficult to be happy, predisposing us toward depression. Sometimes the answer is not merely a smile or being happy, but requires psychotherapy or psychotropic medication. And there are many sad and difficult times when smiling does not resonate.

But that said, most of the time, smiling is the key.

The rabbis teach that when a funeral procession and a wedding procession arrive at the same intersection in a town at the same time (Ketubot 17a), the funeral procession must give way and allow the bride to go first.

This is counterintuitive. Doesn't the dead body take precedence? It needs to be buried in the ground as soon as possible. What's going on here?

Our rabbis were incredibly psychologically astute. They understood what's really fragile. Happiness is more fragile than sadness. Our rabbis were reminding us that it is easier to become sad, to become depressed, and to mourn, than to remain in a state of happiness. The mood of the funeral procession will not dissipate even if it has to pause, but the wedding celebration, although filled with joy, can fall apart if people stop dancing and rejoicing. It is harder to re-enter a state of happiness than of sadness.



The great rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, who lived from 1772 until 1810 in the Ukraine, taught a joyful Judaism encouraging singing, dancing and clapping. Even though he suffered from depression, he knew the power of joy, of a smile.

Reb Nahman taught: “*Mitzvah gedolah lihiyot b’simḥah tamid* – it is great mitzvah, a great commandment, to strive to be happy always.” (*Likutey Moharan II*, 24)

The *Ashrei* – Psalm 145 – thanks to our rabbis, begins in our Siddur with verses from Psalm 84 and 144 that contain the word *Ashrei* – Happy. “Happy are those who dwell in your house.”

Whenever I say that *Ashrei* prayer, which we just said a few minutes ago, there are two actions I do.

One relates to the verse: “*poteiah et yadekha* - you open your hands.” I always try to turn over my hands, reminding myself that I need to be engaged in acts of *hesed*, acts of loving kindness, in opening my hands to others.

But the second action is more subtle. I try to smile. This is a prayer about being happy. Sometimes I am happy, but sometimes I'm not. But either way, when I recite or hear the *Ashrei*, I try to smile.

A smile makes us more attractive, changes our mood, creates contagious energy, relieves stress and boosts our immune system, lowers our blood pressure, releases endorphins, lifts our face and makes us look younger.

A final smile and joyful act would be to sing Rabbi Nahman's teaching: "*Mitzvah gedolah lihiyot b'simhah tamid* – it is great mitzvah to strive to be happy." It's an older form of "If You're Happy and You Know It."

Let's smile and sing: "*Mitzvah gedolah lihiyot b'simhah tamid*"

Shabbat Shalom.