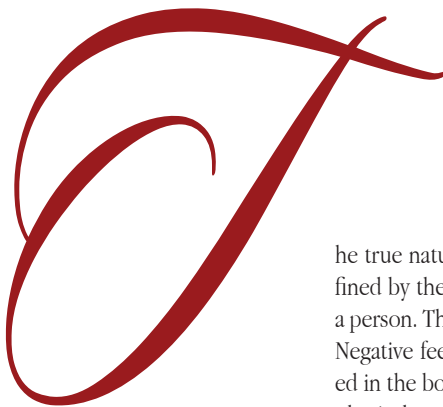


how much does **HAPPINESS** cost?

by Rav Itamar Schwartz, *sblita*
author of the *Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh* series



The true nature of human existence is defined by the soul, which is the real “I” of a person. The soul is fundamentally good. Negative feelings and emotions are rooted in the body, which is only the exterior physical garment to the soul. By identifying oneself as a soul garbed in a body rather than a body with a soul, one can subdue and separate the negative thoughts, emotions, and actions rooted in the body. This includes the entire range of negative characteristics and feelings such as anger, hate, jealousy, as well as anxiety, fear, and sadness. Shifting one’s primary identity to one of soul rather than body is a fundamental step in personal spiritual development and connection to the inner world of the soul. The soul is the only place where unconditional love can be felt. It also holds the connection to the Creator of the world. An important step in the process of accessing the authentic world of the soul is to understand the role of desire in the attainment of true joy and happiness.

Someone with a small coin in their pocket is not afraid of losing it since, relatively speaking, their desire for it is very weak. Even if they lose it, its loss is inconsequential. Compare this to someone carrying ten thousand dollars. The average person will be anxious about losing it, since the loss of such a significant sum will be felt. We can immediately see here the role desire plays in a person’s anxiety level. When the desire for something is not strong, the fear of its loss is either very weak or nonexistent. The stronger desire is for something, the larger the fear of losing it. One of the most intense anxieties a person can have is the fear of losing life itself. It is thus clear that the root of the problem is not fear, but rather desire. The work of uprooting fear and anxiety therefore begins on a deeper level at the true source, at the point of desire.

There are two places a person can search for joy and contentment: through acquisitions or through inner experience of self. According to the Rambam, true joy is not derived from that which is external, but rather

from an internal experience within the heart. It is only here where true pleasure and happiness resides.

“HAPPINESS” OF ACQUISITION

The root of the Hebrew word for desire, *ratzon*, is the same as the word for running, *ratz*. This alludes to the running involved in acquiring something—the run to buy it and the effort exerted to attain it. This occurs when a person doesn’t accept their current situation and leaps onto a fast track to change it. In this context, all *ratzon* is a race to attain the desired thing and connect it to oneself.

Most desires consist of the illusion that when the desired thing is attained, it will bring a happier and more carefree life. Some people switch cars every two years since they believe a new car will bring more happiness. If it were clear to them that the car will actually not cause more happiness or less worries, they would have no desire for it. They would be unwilling to invest time and effort in the race to get it, and certainly not make it into a major focus of life. Unfortunately, many people believe that their lives are lacking and that greater happiness will come only through the attainment of something beyond their current situation.

“HAPPINESS” OF SELF

In contrast, there is the happiness and contentment that comes from the essential experience of self. Our sages wrote, “Who is wealthy? One who is happy with their portion” (*Avot* 4:1). They weren’t referring to someone with “everything,” but rather to one who lacks things but is nonetheless happy. How is this possible if someone doesn’t make it through the month financially, or has a child in the hospital, etc.? How can a person be happy with troubles?

This is where happiness from the essential experience of self becomes relevant. It is a happiness that doesn’t depend on what you have, since if you were to do a general inventory, what you think you lack would undoubtedly outweigh what you possess. So where is the happiness? It



doesn't exist with the acquisition of things, since true happiness is rooted in the essential experience of self rather than in acquiring something external to oneself.

A human being was created with an innate happy disposition, and unless there is a specific reason to the contrary, one should be naturally joyful. If you ask someone why they are not 100% satisfied with their lives, they may answer because they don't have enough money, health or honor, etc. This could be true on a peripheral level, but on a deeper level, their discontent stems from a desire for something beyond their current situation.

However, if one's natural condition is based on their original inborn state of happiness, then avoiding the desire for something beyond one's given situation would preserve this natural state. Unless a person undermines their own happiness with extraneous desires, then they need to be naturally satisfied and content. From a theoretical perspective, this doesn't make any sense. You could say, "What type of life is this? Not to want anything? Impossible!" The truth is, if you offer someone who lives in an airy three-story villa a stuffy windowless basement with a broken air conditioner, they would say, "Thanks, but no thanks. Leave me alone." On the other hand, the same basement would be a magical proposition to a homeless individual lying on a park bench. A person wants something only when they figure their current situation will improve when they get it. This is quite different when one feels their current situation is wonderful because they have everything they need. In general, people don't usually identify themselves in this way.

WE HAVE IT ALL ALREADY

"Naked I came from my mother, and naked I will return" (Job 1:21). This can be interpreted negatively, meaning that we are born with nothing. The opposite can also be understood, that we were born with everything. Unfortunately, we educate ourselves, or more accurately our souls, via a world that convinces us we must have all sorts of possessions. We gradually become accustomed to the idea that our lives require a whole range of things to be happy, which causes true happiness to become extremely rare. However, life can be seen from a totally different viewpoint.

For instance, imagine you are window shopping and notice a beautiful luxurious sofa in the store window. You begin to consider how it would feel to sit on such a comfortable couch, complete with newspaper in hand. You further envision living in a penthouse apartment over-

looking the sea. It seems so beautiful and bit by bit, even if it is remotely realistic, you are almost there.

What's the problem? You figure your life is currently lacking a beautiful couch and a penthouse apartment overlooking the ocean. Your happiness would be greatly enhanced if you could only acquire it and watch the waves roll in—a wondrous world. But the truth is, if you would take hold of yourself for a moment, you would realize that your current situation is actually better now, since the level of contentment you enjoyed before the desire will be stolen the moment you want something more. Here is the point where you can discover a deeper inner tranquility than a penthouse overlooking the sea could ever bring. This is a feeling with which most people are completely unfamiliar since their every desire, including the attempt to materialize it, is based on the conviction that they are incomplete without it.

When a person realizes that their fundamental structure is the soul—which at its essence is very good, perfect, and complete—then there is no perceived lack or desire to acquire more. If so, then why would I want to trade this for a sofa and penthouse apartment overlooking the sea? Which is more perfect, my Divine soul or a penthouse apartment? Obviously the soul is more perfect, but a person is not generally conscious of this fact. They think to themselves, "If I stop wanting, I will be unhappy since my contentment depends on a penthouse apartment." One who has never experienced their inner point of completeness is convinced that desire and its materialization is the key to a better life.

SHIFTING THE THOUGHT PROCESS

This is merely an ingrained way of thinking which can be completely reversed. An utterly different way of looking at life exists. Every time a new desire surfaces, stop a moment and ask yourself, "Will my life end if this desire is unfulfilled? Will I really suffer if I can't get it?" In the vast majority of cases, the answer is no. If it is a desire to increase possessions, then reflect deeper and say, "If I stop desiring this thing, even if I go on to acquire it, my life will be more complete without the desire."

Obviously, it is not possible to nullify every desire at once. Instead, it is a slow and steady process of accustoming oneself to think differently about life. The world is filled with nonstop enticements and advertising campaigns meant to convince us of one idea: this particular thing is the key to our happiness, even if it means going into debt for a few months or years.

However, there is something very precious at stake here. Begin to close your eyes to the world and believe you possess an inner treasure much greater than anything in the world—more wonderful than anything you could possibly buy or acquire. An inner power of tranquility and contentment already exists inside of you, since true joy and satisfaction do not come from external things. This treasury can only be discovered through the realization that your essential being is a perfect and complete soul, and that it is only the desire for something outside of you that causes unhappiness.

People search the world over for the secret to happiness. If there was a special pill that turned happiness into sadness, would anyone take it? Obviously not, but many take such a pill countless times in the course of a single day. The name of the pill is "desire".

We want without limit. Our entire life is built on an ideology that causes us to run away from the soul, surrounding us from the first moments of life. It accompanies us until the end of life, unless we catch ourselves in time to reverse the process. If you made a list of everything you want, how many pages would you fill? These desires are actually the road to personal destruction.

THE MINIMUM IS THE MAXIMUM

Our sages call this idea, "Bread with salt you will eat, water by measure you will drink, on the ground you will sleep, a life of discomfort you will live. Happy you will be in this world and prosperous in the World to Come" (*Avot* 6:4). Most people find this difficult to understand. "Happy in this world? What can I say, at least it will be good for me in the next world. I do good deeds, I learn a little Torah, I'll be rewarded in the next world." But this is not the intention of the Mishnah, since it says, "You will be happy in *this* world..." Yet, it remains illogical to first state, "...a life of discomfort you will live," and only afterwards write, "Happy you will be in this world..." What kind of happiness is that? You may say, "After all, I have a decent salary, so what's the problem? What is so wonderful about striving for the minimum?" But this is exactly the point we have been discussing until now.

A person takes another little piece of cake. It tastes sweet and feels good on the palate, bringing momentary calm. What harm is there in a little piece of cake? In and of itself, we know it is nothing, at least almost nothing. Even from a nutritional standpoint, no doctor will say that eating a certain food only once is poison merely because it doesn't follow nutritional guidelines.

The problem is not the eating per se, rather the desire for it—wanting something beyond one’s inborn state of contentment. These desires are effectively banishing you from your inner source of joy and contentment, and robbing you of the knowledge that there is another reality entirely.

We are not discussing other-worldly theories here, rather we are referring to happiness in this world. There is another definition of happiness, joy, and pleasure beyond what we have known until now. If you are unaware of the existence of such an inner treasure, then you’ll search for it on the outside. If you do know it exists, then there is no race to acquire something beyond your essential self.

LIFE VS. THE WORLD OF DESIRES

G-d said to Adam, “. . . on the day you will eat from [the tree], you will certainly die” (Genesis 2:17). Yet, Adam didn’t die on the same day, he lived for 930 years. Nonetheless, the Torah writes that on that day he will certainly die. The problem here was Adam’s essential desire which commenced a process of death from the moment he wanted to eat from the tree. If you realized a process of self-death is set into motion the moment you begin to want something, no matter how small, you would say, “Thanks, but I’ll do without the cake, I prefer life.” It would be clear that it is not worth trading a piece of cake for the connection to an inner world of perfect joy. This perspective should accompany a person throughout life. Of course, a piece of cake is only a minor example of this principle.

A person is driving along the highway and suddenly sees smoke billowing out of the engine. They immediately stop on the side of the road and escape the car in the nick of time before it goes up in flames. Unfortunately, the car insurance just expired yesterday—they fully intended to renew it, but figured one day wouldn’t matter. Alas, \$15,000 up in smoke. A normal thought would be, “How can I cover \$15,000?! If I had renewed my insurance on time yesterday, I’d have the money in hand today!”

However, if you’d ask the same person that if they needed a life-saving operation costing \$15,000, would they spend the money on it? Obviously, they would run to get the money in any possible way. This is because when speaking about life itself, \$15,000 is nothing. Yet, a person wouldn’t generally make a connection between this type of financial loss over a car and losing life. One needs to think, “By desiring this \$15,000, I have entered into a world of desires that will effectively uproot me from the inner experience of true life and happiness.” Which is preferable? To

give in on the desire for the \$15,000 or lose life over it?” The answer is obvious.

The truth of such an outlook is known and proven with those who have tried it. A day doesn’t normally go by without some unexpected and unwanted occurrence. Who can claim a full week has gone exactly according to plan? Your upstairs neighbor made a racket all night, you get up in the morning and the baby is sick, you miss work, the car needs to be towed, etc. Choosing and accepting one’s current situation is relevant every time something doesn’t go the way you want, no matter how small and insignificant.

FORGING A NEW PATH TO THE HEART

Our sages define suffering as anything that opposes our desire. As the Talmud states, one who desires a certain coin from their pocket, but takes out another instead, experiences suffering. Begin identifying even the smallest desire for something that causes a tiny pang of unpleasantness in the heart, and ask yourself, “Why am I feeling uncomfortable right now? Is it because I believe that if my desire was fulfilled, I would feel better? Am I unhappy only because my desire has not materialized? Is it really worth it to uproot my entire life over this desire?” Reprogramming ingrained thought patterns takes persistence, since even after you let go of the desire, there is no immediate gratification of feeling inner contentment. At first, one needs a level of faith to believe they have a soul which inherently contains all pleasure and enjoyment. Then, by proceeding with basic faith, one will slowly become accustomed to a certain level where desires are weakened. A feeling of enjoyment will begin to be experienced from an entirely different place.

To illustrate, as long as one has no children, they are unable to comprehend the pleasure they bring, since there is no pathway to that inner point of pleasure. Likewise, someone who has never married is incapable of truly grasping what it means to stand under a *chuppab*. They could have attended 200 weddings and understand the concept of marriage intellectually—even enough to lecture on the topic—but have no first-hand familiarity with it. Only through making the connection to the inner experience can one know the feeling of what it means to be married.

This is the same for one who has never experienced a desire-free world. They have no source in their soul to fathom the happiness and satisfaction waiting behind the door. Once it is experienced however, the value in giving up de-

sires to access an unparalleled source of inner pleasure and joy will be obvious.


Fears come from the multitude of common desires encountered by the soul on a daily basis, where there is a fear of their loss. Life swings constantly between desire and the fear of not acquiring what it desires. It is far more preferable to give up desire than lose the inner world of the soul. Even when grappling with the fear of death, when there is faith that a world of happiness exists beyond this world, then there is no fear, even of death. Many people do not think in this way, but a person is not afraid of dying when they are already familiar with the experience of inner joy coming from a place of no lack.

THE ULTIMATE TIKKUN

All blemishes begin to fall away when a person works to repair the root point of desire in the soul and gradually enters into a world of authentic happiness and contentment. Without this effort, one searches in all the wrong places for happiness and life is very difficult.

All destruction in the world comes from desire. People attempt to satisfy their desire, if not willingly, then by force. Everyone builds their entire lives around their desires. Somebody wants one thing, someone else wants the opposite, and suddenly a world war erupts. If everyone worked on nullifying their desires, not a single war would have occurred in the world.

The *tikkun* of the world depends upon revealing a world of no desires. According to the prophet Isaiah, in the future, the wolf will dwell with the lamb (Isaiah 11:6). This is because when the wolf has no desire for the lamb, they can co-exist. But when the wolf desires the lamb, the lamb becomes lamb chops. As long as we are filled with desire, we are like wolves, consuming everything around us.

We spoke about the *tikkun* of the emotional world and its proper balance, arriving at the innermost point of desire (*ratzon*). When this point is repaired, the entire emotional realm is fixed as well. To the extent the force of desire can be quieted, there will be satisfaction and happiness in life. Since desiring what is beyond the essential self is the source of all personal and global problems, the solution is to uproot this type of desire to access the inner soul where all true contentment and joy reside. 

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• **RAV ITAMAR SCHWARTZ**, *sblita* lives in Israel and is author of the popular “Misbkan Bilvavi Eneb Series.” More of his *sbiurim* can be found at www.bilvavi.net.