

# HEALTHY HAPPINESS



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT KI TAVO  
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

Our emotional experience sometimes seems to come out of nowhere. When we try to understand what makes us feel a certain way, we are sometimes left with more questions than answers. Varying theories exist to explain how and why we experience emotions. One such approach, which is gaining popularity in the field, is referred to as the cognitive theory of emotions. In short, emotions are generally based on appraisals and are tied to goals. Positive emotions, such as happiness, derive from an assessment, either consciously or unconsciously, that I am moving towards accomplishing a goal. Negative emotions, such as sadness or regret, are generated when a goal is blocked.

One of the reasons presented for why the horrible curses delineated in Parshat Ki Tavo could befall Bnei Yisrael is “Because you did not serve the L-rd your G-d with joy and with goodness of heart when you had an abundance of all” (Devarim 28:47). Rabbeinu Bechaye and others understand this as highlighting the essential element of joy that should be present when serving G-d. Being happy while performing mitzvot is a vital and necessary component. This can be understood from a cognitive perspective, as being happy when following the Torah is a signal that our appraisal and goal systems are aligned with G-d’s commandments.

Yet, there are two strong arguments against such an understanding of the pasuk. First, as Rabbi Moshe Alshich contends, this doesn’t fit within the broader explanation for the curses that permeates the chapter. The reason given for the curses is that Bnei Yisrael wouldn’t be serving G-d at all, not that they were serving Him, but just didn’t enjoy the experience. Second, the punishment doesn’t seem to fit the crime. If Bnei Yisrael are keeping all of the mitzvot, but are just not happy while doing so, does it really make sense to punish them with such harsh curses?

Perhaps because of these questions, Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk understands the pasuk differently. The pasuk is not indicating that the punishment will come for not serving G-d with joy. The punishment will come for not serving G-d at all. Instead, the pasuk is explaining how Bnei Yisrael would devolve to a place where they wouldn't be serving G-d, namely, because of the joy and happiness they were experiencing due to their material wealth and abundance of physical good. In a similar twist, the Yehudi HaKadosh of Peshischa also argues that not only would Bnei Yisrael not serve G-d at all but they would enjoy not doing so. The fact that they would enjoy a lifestyle not aligned with G-d demonstrates that their goals and appraisals would be distorted and misplaced.

Commenting on the joy Bnei Yisrael experienced while sinning with the golden calf, Rabbi Moshe Alshich argues that it is one thing to violate commandments, but it is much worse to be happy about it. Ideally, he writes, by referencing the aforementioned pasuk, we should serve G-d with joy. If we do sin, the proper emotional response should be sadness and regret. Our goal is to serve G-d, and when we do, we should experience positive emotions. If we fail in our goal, we should feel a healthy amount of negative emotions to motivate us to fix the problem. Someone who is happy when sinning has no chance of repenting.

As we continue to traverse the month of Elul and progress towards the Yamim Noraim, we would do well to reflect on whether our goals are aligned with the Torah's. If they are, we should experience joy and happiness that we are living a life of Torah and mitzvot. If they are not, we should feel a healthy amount of sadness and regret that should motivate us to try harder and improve our relationship with G-d.

**RABBI DR. MORDECHAI  
SCHIFFMAN**

[PsychedForTorah.com](http://PsychedForTorah.com)

[PsychedForTorah@gmail.com](mailto:PsychedForTorah@gmail.com)

[@PsychedForTorah](https://www.instagram.com/PsychedForTorah)

