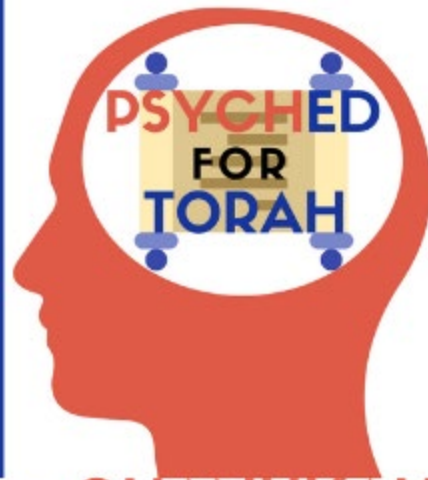


GRATITUDE & HAPPINESS



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - CHANUKAH
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

Close to 20 years ago, in response to the critique that psychology focused too much on disorders and diagnosis, Dr. Martin Seligman began to develop the field of positive psychology. The goal was to reinvigorate psychology by focusing on strategies that would help people flourish. One of the basic tenets of the theory is that if we focus on using and developing our character strengths and virtues, we will be happier and have increased well-being. Dr. Seligman and colleagues identified twenty-four character strengths and conducted research to better determine the details and nuances of how they can be developed. Of the twenty-four strengths, gratitude has been the most consistently and robustly associated with happiness and the life well lived. Thus, cultivating the trait of gratitude became one of the key interventions to increase happiness.

Gratitude permeates all areas of Jewish life and serves as the basis of many *tefillot*, *mitzvot*, and holidays. Chanukah serves as a perfect illustrative paradigm. In formulating the essential elements of the holiday, the *Gemara* states that they are days of הלל והודאה – singing praise and giving thanks. Rashi comments that giving thanks refers to the fact that we say “*al hanissim*” in *davening* and *bentching*. We articulate our gratitude for the miracles of the holiday in the context of the blessings of gratitude that we recite every day. Yet, when codifying this idea in the *Mishna Torah*, instead of writing that these are days of praise and gratitude, Rambam writes that they are days of *simcha* and *hallel* – happiness and praise. Why replace the word gratitude for happiness? Perhaps Rambam is alluding to the fact that gratitude and happiness are integrally related. By expressing my gratitude, I am at the same time experiencing happiness.

The act of lighting the menorah itself is also a symbolic expression of gratitude. Addressing the juxtaposition of the mitzvah of lighting the *menorah* in the *mishkan* and the story of how the leaders of the tribes dedicated materials to the *mishkan*, Rashi suggests that the former is a response to the latter. Aharon was feeling disappointed that the other leaders had opportunities to serve *Hashem* through their dedication while he was unable to participate. *Hashem* comforts Aharon by telling him that he will be able to light the menorah in the *mishkan*. But why is the *menorah* chosen to comfort Aharon? Aren't there a number of special services tasked to the *kohanim* that the leaders of the tribes were not privileged to participate in?

Based on a *midrash*, Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz suggests that the *menorah* is chosen specifically because it highlights the essential concept of gratitude. The *midrash (Bemidbar Rabbah 15:5)* is bothered by the whole concept of lighting the *menorah* in the *mishkan*. If *Hashem* is the light of the world, what significance is there in us kindling a light in front of Him? The *midrash* teaches that although *Hashem* doesn't *need* us to light the menorah for him because his whole essence is light, He nevertheless asks us to light the menorah, in order to provide us the opportunity to express our gratitude to Him. The act of lighting the *menorah* is inherently an expression of gratitude.

When we light the menorah this Chanukah and we celebrate and praise *Hashem*, let us be mindful of the message of gratitude. Let us be thankful for the miracles that took place *bayamim hahem* – in those days – and the ones that take place *bazman hazeh* – in our days. By feeling and expressing this gratitude, may we merit true *simcha* in our lives.

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