



It's All About Happiness

By Rabbi Shaya Cohen

Just the other day, a teenager came to see me. He complained that he had little use for Judaism. "I'm just not happy," he lamented, "I get no pleasure from Jewish studies and no satisfaction from religious observance. Nothing I am being taught will do me any good. "What is the point"?"

What had been offered him by way of guidance? I asked. He answered, "I was told that I am being selfish. That I am missing the point... that Judaism is not about being happy. I have a responsibility to the Jewish people", I was told "to all the generations before me who sacrificed so much. Later in life, my parents and teachers tell me, I will appreciate why Judaism is good for me."

The truth of this statement notwithstanding, many teenagers cannot find satisfaction in this approach. The reason some find it hard to accept has to do with the reality that many teenagers yearn for meaning in their lives. The feeling of emptiness, lack of meaning and purpose in life, felt in the general society, is slowly leaking into the Jewish community across the spectrum, albeit to a much lesser extent. Teenagers, who struggle to find themselves in general, have special difficulty with this issue. Despite their Jewish education, significant numbers of teens look to the secular society's means of "coping" with emptiness and lack of meaning--- alcohol, drugs, promiscuity, and anti-social behavior.

The challenge of our generation is to understand the depth of their yearning, their disappointments and their search for fulfillment and, to assist them in their quest for happiness.

Rabbi Nossen Tzvi Finkel, known as the "Alter of Slabodka", the Yeshiva that produced the majority of Torah leaders of the previous generation, once met the Torah giant, Rabbi Yisroel Salanter and asked his advice about the most important ingredient in making a Yeshiva. Reb Yisroel answered him with one sentence: "to revive the spirits of the lowly" [Isaiah 57].

In the Holy Language (Biblical Hebrew) the root of a word describes the essence of its concept. The root of one of the words for true happiness ("Osher") is "validation" ("Le'asher"). To be happy, is to feel validated.

Nothing will help our youth more in their quest for fulfillment, than understanding them and validating their feelings and ideas. Validating does not mean agreeing to their complaints but rather validating them as precious individuals, enhancing their

self-image and self-esteem. Beyond listening and validating, we need to be able to convey that there is a difference between short-lived pleasure and long-lasting happiness. We must guide them to recognize that a human being is a unique combination of body and soul and that if we nourish the body and neglect nurturing the soul, a human being cannot be truly happy.

They mistakenly think that their lives are about pleasure; the truth is that they are really all about happiness. Today's youth are impatient. They won't wait until later in life to appreciate why Judaism is good for them. If they are happy in their Jewish environment, they will stay. If they are not they will run. They need some kind of answer now.

It goes much deeper than just listening and validating. What is required is a cultural and educational change.

We must promote emotional education, and offer structured opportunities for parents and teachers to learn how to address each person's unique individuality. We can limit pressure and encourage development at their own pace. We can foster learning without criticism.

Moreover, they must see clearly how happy we are with Torah observance, and not be exposed to constant complaining and discontent.

Teachers should not only teach Mitzvah observance, they can also communicate the reasons and benefits of the Mitzvos (*Sefer Hachinuch*, Mitzvah 117). This reduces the pressure to comply, and inspires a sense of personal passion for observance.

Parents and teachers can inspire teenagers to seek a relationship with the Creator, through interactive and joyous Torah study. It is a tree of life for all who can grab on to it.

Comprehensive thorough training programs for parents, teachers and community leaders, will assure the best chance for inspiring happiness in our youth.

If they are happy, they won't use the "coping mechanisms" that are destroying our society. Their Torah commitment will be strong and lasting.