

CHOOSING HAPPINESS, DESPITE EVERYTHING

Today, facing the complex reality in the State of Israel, many people find it difficult to justify being happy when there is so much suffering outside. The choice of good has become a human dilemma, and the question 'Are we allowed to enjoy and seek moments of happiness while others are struggling?' occupies all of us. Every small moment of happiness, pleasure, or a smile is accompanied by a sense of injustice and feelings of guilt toward those who are not fortunate enough to experience similar moments.

But precisely in these times, choosing life — and small moments of happiness — is part of our resilience.

In this article, we will acknowledge the emotional complexity we experience these days and delve deeper into the question of 'living rather than merely surviving'.

Behind the Empathy and the Guilt

Since October 7th, all of us have experienced a renewed discovery of empathy — we felt the ability to connect as a community with the victims of the war and to understand, to some degree, their feelings, their pain, their fears, and even their loss. Empathy is a precious human quality that is essential for creating deep connections and mutual assistance. But alongside it, deep feelings of guilt about continuing the routine of our lives while others are suffering can sometimes arise.



This feeling, known as 'survivor's guilt,' is not the exclusive property of survivors of life-threatening events, but also a familiar human response in the face of collective trauma — as we have experienced as a people — and it manifests in the thought that we are not worthy of happiness or full lives while others suffer. This guilt, though natural, can harm our psychological wellbeing and prevent us from living fulfilling lives. Therefore, it is important to recognize that our ability to feel the pain of others does not obligate us to give up our own lives.

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Finding the balance between empathy and guilt — between acknowledging suffering and the need to preserve our strength — is critical. Reducing the sense of guilt will allow us to appreciate what we have, adopt a broader perspective, and move toward full lives, with the understanding that our happiness does not negate the pain of others.

Making Room for the Full Spectrum of Emotions

In the current period, we are influenced by the difficulty and feel the force of gravity pulling us downward — but this does not mean that we cannot also allow ourselves moments of happiness or pleasure. We need to grant ourselves the ability to experience the full spectrum of emotions, even within difficulty. This ability — called 'the permission to be human' — was defined by Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, a world expert in the field of happiness, as our permission as human beings to feel, acknowledge, and give expression to the full range of human emotions, and to give ourselves the freedom to experience everything that life offers us — both the good and the bad — without self-judgment.

This does not mean ignoring the suffering or suppressing the pain, but rather acknowledging its existence alongside positive emotions. It is okay to feel frustration, sadness, or anger at the situation, and at the same time to want to enjoy moments of grace. Do not be hard on yourselves — simply accept these feelings as part of your human experience.

Just like a roller coaster, life has ups and downs — but the complete experience makes us who we are. When we recognize that every emotion is a part of us, and when we learn to accept and live with all our emotions — both positive and negative — we will be able to cope with them in a healthy way, and we will discover that we have more tools for dealing with challenges than we thought.

How Can We Cultivate Happiness in Difficult Times?

First, it is important to remember that happiness is possible even in difficult times — the choice is in our hands. Contrary to what many think, happiness is not the absence of problems, but the ability to find meaning even within suffering.

Prof. Martin Seligman, one of the founders of positive psychology, argues that happiness is not a destination but a journey — a process of

cultivating positive emotions, strengthening social connections, and focusing on meaning. And perhaps the word 'happiness' feels a bit 'too big' in the current period — but the main intention and goal is to allow ourselves small positive moments, moments that do us good.



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Practical Recommendations

- Energy Chargers — 'Energy chargers' are activities that give me energy and generate a positive emotion, even for a short time. This could be listening to a song I love, reading a good book, going to a movie, etc. Identify one or two activities that charge you with energy and incorporate them during your coming week. Each week, choose 2 different activities that charge you.
- Setting Small Goals — Think about things you want to do, learn, or experience. Research shows that the mere anticipation of something positive in itself raises our happiness levels and reduces depression levels. Therefore, deciding on a near goal I want to achieve will allow me to focus on something positive in my life. Set yourself a goal you want to achieve in the next six months.
- Cultivating Habits — Changing habits is difficult, but there are several things that strengthen the chance of instilling a positive habit — including a clear definition of the activity (what, when, and with whom), and simply starting (!) and persisting with that activity for at least 21 days.
- Do Activities with Others — Closeness to others, spending time with friends or family, and nurturing close relationships can significantly increase our happiness. Seek opportunities to do something with someone. Try during the week to talk or meet at least once with someone whose company you enjoy.
- Express Gratitude — Appreciation and gratitude for what we have is a key source of happiness. Expressing gratitude directs your attention to the positive aspects of your life. To practice gratitude, you can take a few moments at the end of each day and think about a moment, event, person, or emotion with meaning from that day for which you can be grateful.

If I Chose Happiness, Does That Mean I Forgot?

On the contrary. Precisely in difficult times, choosing happiness does not contradict acknowledging existing suffering — it allows us to preserve our internal strengths, so that we can continue to support ourselves and those around us. Choosing happiness and cultivating it is not an escape from reality or ignoring difficulties, but a recognition that full lives include a wide range of emotions, and that the ability to find moments of happiness, pleasure, and connection to some meaning is vital.

Choosing happiness allows us to maintain mental health, strengthen our social connections, and continue to function even under challenging conditions. A happy person filled with energy can contribute more to their environment, help others, and have a positive impact on the world.

In summary, in these days, when all of us are looking, without compromise, to lift our heads above water and breathe a little air — all of us are allowed to nurture the good moments in life, and all of us are allowed to choose happiness.

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