

Shabat Shalom!

Yuval, you beautifully addressed a very difficult question: that of Divine reward and punishment. As an applied mathematician, I ask a simpler question that may be easier to answer. My question is how to satisfy a specific commandment, which appears explicitly 7 times in the Torah portion and implicitly even more, and that is “V’samachta” - “Be Happy.”

Why are we commanded to “be happy?” I think it is because it is not at all easy to maintain happiness throughout life.

Three months ago I was hit by a car while playing on a beach with our son Eitan. It was a crazy and unpredictable event. I was beset by the confusing feeling of dying in the ambulance, the noticeable worries of the doctors, and an immobile, painful and distorted body that was locked in a scaffold.

It was a devastating experience, and in retrospect I have come to understand that in order to survive it I had to rely on and nurture my inner happiness. It has not been easy to be happy, to say the least, but I will try to explain how I could do it.

The happiest creatures I can think of are nurtured babies, especially around 1 year’s old. They get constant warmth and loving stimulation from their family and caretakers and they make continual progress.

Like such babies, I was blessed after the accident with very loving family and friends. Like a baby, I had to learn basic skills, like sitting up, walking, and eating solid food. But unlike a baby I had an adult body that could not flexibly adjust and that experienced severe pain with every movement. I was haunted by memories of previous abilities and fear that I would not regain them.

In order to overcome all of these obstacles, I had to learn to reduce and even avoid fear and worries. An effective approach was to concentrate on short term goals and things I could control. After all, babies don’t worry; they live entirely in the moment. I also noticed the simple things that made me excited and grateful in the moment. Chapter 12, verse 7 says “usmachetem b’chol mishloach yedchem: “Be happy in all your undertakings.” Like the baby who gets positive feedback for every little thing, I had family, friends, colleagues, students, congregation, rabbis and hospital therapists who cheered my progress and gave me things to be grateful for. My family is very thankful for all the support we received from so many people. I am deeply thankful to my wife, Shirly, and my mom for their touching love and constant care.

In addition to the love and support I got from others, during this process I realized that I had to treat myself with kindness and compassion. I also realized that kindness and compassion towards myself go hand in hand with kindness and compassion towards others and that their practice increased my inner happiness.

Let's return to the Torah portion. Many of its commandments regard kindness and compassion, especially for the needy ones, such as the widows, the orphans, the Levites and the slaves. They urge the building of a just social system. The essence of these commandments is to bring happiness to the community and they have helped generations of Jews to survive hard times. Because, even in cases of unavoidable tragedy, inner happiness is a powerful force. In my twenties, I drew strength from watching the grace, hope, and kindness that my father showed during his brain cancer. I learned the power of inner happiness from him.

As for Moses, even though he could not enter the Promised Land, I still find him as a model of inner happiness. I believe that his great compassion and kindness resulted in truly strong happiness, and this helped him to lead through hard times in the wilderness. Indeed, I imagine his satisfaction with having prepared the people of Israel to enter the Promised Land. I imagine him wishing them even greater success than he had, as I do with my children and students.

True happiness has a very powerful effect on people. In chapter 14 verse 26, the Torah says, "V'samachta atah uveitecha." – "You shall be happy – you and your household". Seeing my children's happiness, their expectations for me to recover, and their loving interaction with Shirly and my mom made me happy. I hope that my inner happiness and progress also positively affected their happiness.

Yuval, Mom and I are so proud of you and want to congratulate you on your Bar Mitzvah day. While in the hospital, I got to see how grown up and mature you have become. You have been very helpful at home, and a caring and loving brother, grandson and son. Your evident love and care for me helped me heal. Mom and I are so glad you maintained your inner happiness and were able to focus on your goals - preparing for your Bar Mitzvah, obtaining your second degree black belt, investing in your friendships, having fun times with your brother, succeeding in your studies and playing baseball and basketball.

Mom and I wish you a lot of happiness in life. Remember that sometimes bad things happen and they are beyond our control. Mom and I trust you to be flexible and maneuver such situations as you have done so far. But remember that being smart, and responsible, and brave are not the only things. It is very important to realize how kindness and compassion can be helpful in dealing with hard times, and especially in relieving your stress.

Be well, do good work and be happy! As it says in Psalms (118:24) Ze HaYom Asah Adonai, Nagila V'nishm'cha Bo. This is the day God has made, rejoice and be happy in it. Hava Nagila, V'nismacha. Let us be happy.