

Putting the joy back in your Judaism: spirituality, positive psychology, and the pursuit of happiness

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Limmud Festival 2021
Monday 10 am, Room 13

1. A New Musar: R. Sacks zt'l and Jewish Psychology

“Mussar (also spelled Musar), [is] a Jewish spiritual practice that gives concrete instructions on how to live a meaningful and ethical life [...]. Mussar is virtue-based ethics — based on the idea that by cultivating inner virtues, we improve ourselves. [...] Today, a number of people who do not follow traditional Jewish rules and rituals are attracted to Mussar because it offers opportunities for personal transformation through a Jewish lens.”

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-musar-movement/>

R. Sacks zt'l often discussed the distinction between Torah and *chochmah* (wisdom/secular studies), and the importance of bringing the two together. One intriguing idea he proposed was the creation of a new Musar based on cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), positive psychology, and Jewish sources. He argued that Aaron Beck and Martin Seligman, the founders of CBT and positive psychology, were more “Jewish” in their approach than Freud. For R. Sacks, an authentically “Jewish” psychology emphasises human freedom and is future-oriented. Freud’s work was ultimately rooted in a Greek, tragic understanding of human existence, whereas for Beck and Seligman, like for Victor Frankl, human freedom is a key part of their teaching. R. Sacks points out that these three thinkers believe:

- that there is always more than one possible interpretation of what happens to us
- that we are free to choose between different interpretations
- and that the way we think shapes the way we feel

2. Seligman’s PERMA model of Flourishing

In his 2011 book *Flourishing*, Martin Seligman breaks down well-being into five areas (PERMA)

Positive Emotions: e.g. joy, hope, gratitude, pleasure

Engagement: being in ‘flow’ (‘the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity’)

Relationships: positive relationships have been shown to be one of the most important factors for both physical and mental health

Meaning: ‘belonging to and serving something bigger than yourself’

Accomplishment: achieving one’s goals

3. Cultivating positive emotions to 'rewire' the brain

In his book *Hardwiring Happiness: How to Reshape Your Brain and Your Life*, neuropsychologist Rick Hanson explains that for good evolutionary reasons the brain has a "negativity bias that makes it like Velcro for bad experiences but Teflon for good ones." Hanson outlines the importance of intentionally focusing on positive experiences to gradually rewire the brain for greater contentment and wellbeing. The core of his system is "taking in the good": 1) have a positive experience; 2) enrich it; and 3) absorb it (allow 20 seconds or more to let the positive feeling sink in.)

Hanson has recordings of a few taking in the good exercises (they take about 10 minutes) on his website: <https://www.rickhanson.net/hardwiring-happiness/faq/>

4. Who to follow in 2022

Note: I generally recommend learning from acknowledged academic experts, many of whom now publish popular books and host or appear on podcasts.

a) Positive Psychology

- Yale Psychology Professor Dr Laurie Santos has a [podcast](#) and offers a free course on [‘The Science of Well-being’](#)
- Dr Angela Duckworth, author of *Grit*, co-hosts a fascinating and entertaining podcast entitled [No Stupid Questions](#)
- Harvard social scientist Professor Author Brooks has a regular column in [The Atlantic](#) and has hosted two podcasts: [The Art of Happiness](#) and [How to Build a Happy Life](#)

b) Productivity

- [Cal Newport](#) is a professor computer science as well as an author and podcaster who focuses on productivity and ‘the deep life’; I highly recommend his podcast and book *Deep Work* (I’m sure the other books are good too, but I haven’t read them!)

c) Behaviour change and habits

- There are many popular books on forming new habits; most of them are written by journalists rather than academic experts, and some recycle out of date information
- I highly recommend [Dr BJ Fogg](#) of Stanford University and his book [Tiny Habits](#)
- I am offering an online course on [Spirituality, Positive Psychology and the Pursuit of Happiness](#) starting in January; it will include four weeks of email coaching to help you create your own Tiny Habits

5. Optional homework: exercises to cultivate positive emotions and positive relationships in about 10 minutes a day

A) Morning Reminder (30 seconds)

When you wake up, set the intention to “take in the good”¹ throughout the day. As often as you can, take any positive emotion that you experience, intensify it, and savour it for 20 to 30 seconds (or longer if you have time). Don’t forget to “celebrate” -- congratulate yourself on doing your homework!

B) Thank Someone (1 to 5 minutes)

Look for opportunities throughout the day to both feel and express gratitude. “Take in” the gratitude and then thank the person. This could be for something you received today or you could make a point of contacting and thanking someone who helped you in the past. (Don’t forget to congratulate yourself on doing your homework!)

C) *Lashon hatov*: pay a sincere compliment (1 minute)

R. Sacks zt”l argued that there is a positive mitzvah to use our powers of speech to praise, compliment and otherwise speak well of other people. Look for opportunities throughout the day to do so and focus on how good it feels when you do.

D) Evening Reflection (5 minutes)

1. List three things you are grateful for:
2. Did you manage to take in the good today? If not, take a moment to do it now.
3. Did you thank someone today? Who might want to thank tomorrow?
4. Did you compliment or praise someone today? How did that feel?
5. If you were on the receiving end of praise, a compliment or an expression of gratitude today, did you dismiss it or bask in it? Why? (If no praise came your way today, or you didn’t bask, think of a time in the past when someone paid you a compliment, and let it sink in.)

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