



# HOW HAPPINESS THINKS

A NEW SIX-SESSION COURSE

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NOVEMBER 2014

### COURSE RATIONALE

For many years, the most popular undergraduate class at Harvard University was Intro to Economics. Students likely assumed that this class would teach them financial literacy and help them amass wealth, so there is little surprise that they signed up in droves. But in 2006, a different course superseded the science of money. Tal Ben-Shahar, an Israeli-born psychologist, taught Positive Psychology, a course that offered psychological insights into daily joy and life fulfillment. More than 800 students attended, it becoming the most popular course ever taught at the university. It was so popular that students' parents and a handful of grandparents started showing up as well. The major media outlets reported this phenomenon, raising the question, why the thirst and draw to this topic? Clearly, the perennial thirst to study and learn about human happiness is today as strong as ever.

The Rohr Jewish Learning Institute is proud to offer an all-new six-week course titled How Happiness Thinks. Throughout this course, we will be addressing the following questions:

1. What makes happy people different from unhappy people?
2. To what degree do our circumstances (family, education, career, etc.) matter for our overall happiness?
3. What are some of the challenges to living a joyous life?
4. Can a person be happy despite going through difficulty?
5. Does G-d care whether people are happy?
6. What are some of the benefits of living life happily?
7. Is Judaism more concerned with human ethics or human happiness?

Jewish wisdom and mysticism addressed these questions many centuries ago, and yet, its insights are just as relevant today. So while each lesson of this course draws upon the latest research in the rapid-growing field of positive psychology, it also breathes fresh life into the discussion by unveiling the unique Jewish approach to achieving more happiness.



**Earn up to 15 American Psychological Association (APA) CE credits**

**ACCREDITATION STATEMENT:** This activity has been planned and implemented through a joint sponsorship of the Washington School of Psychiatry (WSP) and the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute (JLI). The Washington School of Psychiatry is approved by the American Psychological Association to sponsor continuing education for psychologists.



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## COURSE OUTLINE

### WEEK 1

#### THE HAPPY YOU

If happiness comes from within, then a positive self-concept is essential to human happiness.

What is a negative self-image? Where does it stem from? In what ways might it express itself? How does it hamper human happiness?

What is an arrogant self-image? Are self-centered people happy with themselves?

What is humility? How can people become more humble? Is humility just the right path or is it also the happy path? Is humility similar to a negative self-image?

This lesson discusses different ways of thinking about ourselves, in the hope of finding a joyous self-concept.

### WEEK 2

#### JOY DESPITE LIFE'S STATIC

Life has its hassles and hardships and this static impedes happiness. Building patience would help us cope better with these hardships, but what is patience and how does one nurture this virtue?

A major component of our stress is the fact that we need to tend to the many things going on in life. Without cutting anything out, how can we ease our mental load?

How can we eliminate our worries about the future? Do we have control over our minds? Why does it sometimes seem that we don't? Should we ignore our worries, or talk about them? Is there a way to build optimism and trust about the future?

### WEEK 3

#### SAVORING THE GOOD AND OVERCOMING ANGER

We live in an era in which people have so much, yet too many remain unhappy.

Is it possible for the abundance of today to contribute to happiness? Is it possible to find joy in material things? Why do people strive for more?

Certain negative experiences anger us. Is venting our anger good for our happiness? If not, how might we overcome it?



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## WEEK 4

### UNHAPPY TIMES

While Judaism endorses perennial happiness, there seems to be an exception: mourning the death of a loved one.

Is happiness appropriate at all after the loss of a loved one? Does time play a role here? Does belief in a just G-d mean that one is always happy? How can we avoid enduring and crippling unhappiness in the face of a tragedy?

The Jewish way in death and mourning can teach us a lot about whether, why, and to what degree happiness is relevant in the presence of sorrow, and what actions can be helpful to bring the mourner back to emotional equilibrium.

## WEEK 5

### HUMAN IMPERFECTION

If we were perfect, happiness would come much easier. But we are not.

How does happiness think in the context of committing a moral wrong? What about our character flaws, negative thoughts, broken resolutions, etc.? Are these supposed to undermine our happiness? If not, how is that different from indifference?

## WEEK 6

### TOWARD A MEANINGFUL LIFE

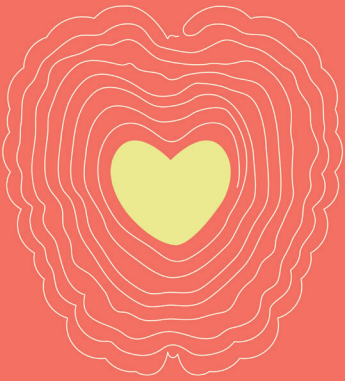
Research has shown that meaning, religion, and spirituality indicate higher happiness levels.

Why might meaning add joy to life? Why, and in what context, might religion add joy to life?

While there are multiple important answers to these questions, one element is that embracing Judaism means we uncover a tremendous amount of good that otherwise would be irrelevant. How can we learn to appreciate this goodness?

Is it proper to use religion as a means for happiness? Is life really about our happiness? Is happiness a religious issue?





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## SELECT ENDORSEMENTS

"A proper education should include more courses like this one which takes up basic questions of morality that are important to live a successful mindful life."



### ELLEN LANGER, PHD

Professor of Psychology, Harvard University  
Author of eleven books including *Mindfulness*  
and *The Power of Possibility*  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

"*How Happiness Thinks* brings together modern research in positive psychology and ancient Jewish wisdom. This marriage between theology and science can bring about significant positive change in individuals and communities."



### TAL BEN-SHAHAR, PHD

Professor, IDC  
Lecturer, Psychology Department, Harvard University  
Author of five books including *Happier*  
and *The Question of Happiness*  
Herzliya, Israel

"For a long time, when policy makers and educators asked me to develop programs or curricula to increase well-being in various field settings, I told them that there was not enough rigorous research to support such an endeavor. The day has come, however, that we are ready to apply the findings of positive psychology to the wider world! *How Happiness Thinks* is a thoughtful, impressive effort to accomplish just that. I wish I could take this course myself!"



### SONJA LYUBOMIRSKY, PHD

Professor of psychology at the  
University of California, Riverside  
Author of *The How of Happiness* and  
*The Myths of Happiness*

"I'm grateful to Professor Pelcovitz and The Rohr Jewish Learning Institute for the gift of this essential and pioneering course on positive psychology. It will not only benefit us as individuals striving to lead a happy, creative, and joyful life, it's teaching will also enhance our families, communities and the world we live in, as we learn new strategies to deal with stressful times."



### HARRIET LERNER, PHD

Author of eleven books including the  
New York Times classic, *The Dance of Anger*