

Singer-Jordan Edition

Naso

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It says in *Pirkei Avos*:
 The Tablets are the handiwork of God, and the writing was God's writing *charus*—engraved—on the Tablets. Don't read "*charus*," but "*cheirus*"—freedom—because there is no freer person than one who engages in Torah study. (*Pirkei Avos* 6:2)

It's a nice play on words, but is it true? Many have clearly argued differently, as they turned their back on Torah and the Sinai Experience, to achieve what they believe is true freedom. Torah obligations no matter how you spin them are shackles to them.

It all comes down to what you want from life. The end goal is what gives meaning to current action. Both a Torah and a secular Jew want the same thing in life, happiness. And not just any happiness, but meaningful happiness. Everyone needs some kind of quick fix at some point in life, but no one wants to live for them.

But what does it mean to be meaningfully happy? That's the entire question that people have been asking, either consciously or unconsciously since we were exiled from Paradise. The answers have been varied, and have even led to major wars at times. Because everything we do is for the sake of happiness, and we get very angry and defensive when things stand in our way.

Obviously. If two people are told how to become a better person, and one is only interested in having fun in life, that person is not going to be impressed. They won't be interested and will want to run in the other direction. There are plenty of people in the world having lots of fun without ever having to work on becoming a better person.

But then one day the fun-loving person realizes that the other person seems to be happier with less. They seem to get pleasure in life from smaller things, and that they are consistently pleased with themselves. It makes the fun lover wonder what they might be missing from life and if it is costing them something more valuable, like

inner peace.

After a few conversations and hearing the other person's take on life, they learn about their body and soul, and the difference between them. They start to understand why it is more difficult to do meaningful things in life than fun things, and how they are not their body, but their soul. Just like that, their perspective on life and their perception of themselves starts to shift.

But this time they can identify the resistance they feel as coming from their body, not their soul. They now understand that standing up to the body's demands does not mean standing up against themselves and that the body can decide to do things today, that can bear a heavy cost in the future.

It is not an overnight process, but it doesn't take long to already see change. And if the person stays with it to the end, they will reach that state of spiritual equilibrium and peace of mind. Looking back, they will wonder how they could have ever looked at life any other way, though they will remember that they did. As Shlomo HaMelech wrote, "*It is a tree of life for those who grasp it,*" and having "grasped" it, what once seemed no more meaningful than a simple tree has now become a tree of life literally.

The Torah says in advance of standing at *Har Sinai*:

They came to Marah, but they could not drink water from Marah because it was bitter. . . The people complained to Moshe, saying, "What will we drink?" So he cried out to God, and God instructed him concerning a piece of wood, which he cast into the water and the water became sweet. (Shemos 15:23-25)

According to Rebi Elazar HaModa'i, the branch came from an olive tree, and according to Rebi Yehoshua, from a willow tree, both of which are bitter. In the physical world, when you want to sweeten something bitter you add something sweet, like sugar to coffee. But in the spiritual world, apparently, the rules can be different, and bitterness can actually be the Divine method for making something bitter, sweet.

It was a very powerful message to take to *Har Sinai* and *Kabbalas HaTorah* back at the beginning of Jewish history. It remains to be a powerful message to take *Kabbalas HaTorah* today as well.

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