



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHEMOT > Tetzaveh

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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March 2, 2012  
Tetzaveh

**How Can I Become A  
Happier Person?**



## Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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### ABSTRACT

Kin Hubbard, the turn of the century humorist, famously said, “It is pretty hard to tell what does bring happiness – poverty and wealth have both failed.”

But, nevertheless, the pursuit of happiness remains a human obsession. Books promising secrets to achieve happiness continue to top the best seller lists -- only telling us that these methods are clearly not working... The number of people going to therapy and workshops seeking happiness are at record-breaking numbers. With all our online access to anything we wish, are we indeed becoming happier people?

We have just entered the Hebrew month called Adar, which is a month of joy. As our sages say, “When Adar comes in, we increase in joy.” But how do we do that when we are not in the mood?

Wouldn't it be nice to cast aside our personal/financial worries, our communal/national worries, and our global worries – and just be happy?

Yeah right, you say. We'd all like to know the secret to happiness.

This sermon examines the newest scientific proofs – which confirm what Jewish mystics always knew – that our attitudes shape our reality. Want to be happy, act happy. Want to change the world, change yourself.

One of the most powerful ways of changing yourself and the world is the global study of the Rambam instituted by the Rebbe -- whose 30th cycle we concluded and celebrated just yesterday.

## HOW CAN I BECOME A HAPPIER PERSON? HOW TO FIND HAPPINESS BY RE-DEFINING YOUR REALITY

### 1. Words of Wisdom from Small Children (Humor)

- No matter how hard you try, you can't put cats under water.
- When your mom is mad at your dad, don't let her brush your hair.
- If your sister hits you, don't hit her back. They always catch the second person.
- Never ask your 3-year-old brother to hold an egg.
- You can't trust dogs to watch your food.
- Don't sneeze when someone is cutting your hair.
- Puppies still have bad breath even after eating a Tic Tac.
- School lunches stick to the wall.
- You can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk.
- The best place to be when you are sad is in Grandma's lap.

You are smiling – that's good. Because I want you in a happy mood to hear what I have to say about ... happiness.

### 2. How to be Happy?

We have just entered the Hebrew month called Adar, which is a month of joy. As our sages say, "When Adar comes in, we increase in joy." But how do we do that when we are not in the mood?

Wouldn't it be nice to cast aside our personal/financial worries, our communal/national worries, and our global worries (especially our worries for the safety of Israel) – with the Arab world undergoing an unprecedented upheaval – and just focus on being happy?

Yeah right, you say. We'd all like to know the secret to a happy life, especially in this time fraught with challenge and crisis.

### 3. Pursuit of Happiness

As the turn of the (last) century humorist, Kin Hubbard, said, "It is pretty hard to tell what does bring happiness – poverty and wealth have both failed."

But, nevertheless, the pursuit of happiness remains an American obsession. After all, it is inscribed in our very Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Note it says the pursuit of happiness, not the capture thereof ... because happiness is a very elusive customer as the American Founding Fathers well knew.

Darrin M. McMahon, professor of history at Florida State University and the author of the *Happiness: A History*, quotes John Stuart Mill as saying:

Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so. Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at *something else*, they find happiness by the way.

McMahon suggests that "for our own culture, steeped as it is in the relentless pursuit of personal pleasure and endless cheer," Mill's message is "worth heeding." He points out sociological statistics, that the percentage of those describing themselves as "happy" or "very happy" has remained virtually unchanged in Europe and the United States since such surveys were first conducted in the 1950's. "And yet," he points out, the self-help industry continues to "pour forth books promising to

make us happier than we are today. The very demand for such books is a strong indication that they aren't working." In other words, we are constantly pursuing and never quite catching, hence the constant need for self-help, for self-analysis, for self-introspection.

Others argue that none of these are the key to happiness. Not introspection but action is the key, says University of Virginia psychology professor Timothy D. Wilson. Act happy and you will be happy. In his work, *Strangers to Ourselves*, he quotes Aristotle's famous words:

We become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage.

In other words, if we are dissatisfied with some aspect of our lives, one of the best approaches is to *act* more like the person we want to be, rather than sitting around analyzing ourselves. Or as Alcoholics Anonymous puts it: "Fake it to make it."

Of course, a certain measure of introspection is healthy and necessary, but an obsession that dwells on yourself, forever dissecting the pieces in order to fix each item, is self-defeating. Rather the focus must be not your *ego self* but on your *divine self* – the part that was created in the image of God – that part of you that is already perfect and is imbued with a higher calling.

The question is how to bring that part to the fore.

The answer is – and this appears to be the secret to happiness – by merely wanting to. Because our thoughts can change reality, and our feelings can change our destiny.

#### 4. Re-shaping Reality

The possibility may sound preposterous, but the truth is that science now is embracing precisely this idea – that our reality is shaped by our thoughts. Or as the recent sound-byte goes: "Neurons get wired by the way they are fired."

By repeatedly thinking about something a certain way, our minds actually get wired (or rewired) to follow that thought pattern.

If, for instance, you think negatively about yourself, your neurons get hardwired with a negative self-perception, to the point that the negative self-image becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. And then you can no longer distinguish between the initial thought and the reality it has created.

And once the neurons get hardwired into place, through habitual thinking, it becomes increasingly difficult to unwire yourself. Yet, just as we have become wired a certain way, we can also become unwired. Through persistent effort we can alter our neurons and rewire them with new attitudes.

Quantum physics takes this to a further extreme: We have the power to impact not just our neurons and self-perception but also the reality of our existence. Indeed, many scientists argue that there really is no distinction between our thoughts and the reality around us. If, for example, a certain event has never entered the realm of possibility in your consciousness, then you will not be able to see the event even if actually is in your sight of vision!

Our entire concept of reality is actually turned inside out: We always thought that there is an objective reality “out there,” which we then experience and try to comprehend. The truth is that it’s not reality that shapes our perception; our perception – our frame of reference – actually shapes our reality.

A six-year-old boy spotted Albert Einstein walking down the street and decided to try out his favorite joke on him: “Mr. Einstein! Why did the chicken cross the road?” To which the famous physicist replied, “My young burgeoning mind, zee question does not have a definite anzer. Vether zee chicken crossed zee road or zee road crossed zee chicken depends on your frame of reference.”

## 5. The Shape of Water Crystals (Optional)

A Japanese researcher, Dr. Masaru Emoto, has demonstrated that human thought has the power to change the shape and expression of water crystals. Using powerful microscopes he showed that crystals formed in frozen water reveal changes when specific, concentrated thoughts are directed toward them. In his book, *The Hidden Messages in Water*, he describes his findings, that water from clear springs and water that has been exposed to loving words shows brilliant, complex, and colorful snowflake patterns. In contrast, polluted water, or water exposed to negative thoughts, forms incomplete, asymmetrical patterns with dull colors.<sup>1</sup>

In some mysterious way, on a quantum level, sub-atomic particles sense that they are being observed, and they are affected by the observer.

As the physicist John Wheeler explains:

Nothing is more important about the quantum principle than this, that it destroys the concept of the world as “sitting out there,” with the observer safely separated from it by a 20-centimeter slab of plate glass. Even to observe so minuscule an object as an electron, he must shatter the glass. He must reach in. He must install his chosen measuring equipment. It is up to him to decide whether he shall measure position or momentum. To install the equipment to measure the one prevents and excludes his installing the equipment to measure the other. Moreover, the measurement changes the state of the electron. The universe will never afterward be the same. To describe what has happened, one has to cross out that old word “observer” and put in its place the new word “participator.” In some strange sense, the universe is a participatory universe.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This was also the subject of the popular 2004 documentary, “What the Bleep Do we Know?”

<sup>2</sup> J. Mehra, ed., *The Physicist’s Conception of Nature*, p. 244.

## 6. A Mystical Participatory Universe

What's fascinating about this is not the actual concept. Mystics have always understood the universe as a participatory one. Indeed, the opening verses of Genesis make it very clear that the human being created in the Divine Image has the power – and the responsibility – to shape and transform the universe.

The amazing thing is that this so-called mystical idea – which seems so counter-intuitive to linear logic – is being recognized by science as an empirical fact. This only reinforces the mystical teachings (namely of the Zohar, the chief work of Kabbalah) that at the dawn of Messianic Era there will be an explosion of wisdom – both above and below, both divine wisdom and scientific wisdom, a wisdom that will reflect the utter unity between matter and spirit.

So now, are we wired to be happy or to be sad? Or do we control our wiring?

There is no doubt that many people seem to have a despondent predisposition, and others a cheerful one. Add into the equation the hurt and deprivation many have suffered in their childhoods, and it can appear to be almost impossible to overcome the dysfunction wired into our psyches. Any attempt to change things would seem futile.

All that is true, if we are bound to our wiring. And if so, then we are like a computer dependent on its circuitry. However, we are not mere machines. We have the power to rewire ourselves and to reshape even a daunting reality. The fact is – many of our demons are our own self-destructive illusions, but even the ones that have some objective reality are also in our control.

Someone once came to the Hassidic Master known as the Tzemech Tzedek, imploring that he pray on behalf of a person who was seriously ill. The Tzemech Tzedek replied: *Tracht gut vet zayn gut*, "Think good and it will be good." Positive thinking can actually change the situation for the better.



Once upon a time this could have been taken as a religious statement, driven primarily by faith. Today it is becoming scientific fact that our thoughts define our realities.

People think, “I am so sad because things aren’t working in my life.” The truth is that things aren’t working because they are so sad. People often believe that they are not happy because they have no joy in their lives. The truth is the other way around – by being joyous you become happy.

And if that is true, then no problem that this world faces is insurmountable. Concerned about the violence in the world, work on your anger issues. Concerned about peace in the world, make peace with your own family. As your attitude changes, so will the people around you, and the cumulative effect will ripple out across the globe.

## 7. The Impossible Dream

Is that an impossible dream? With so much despondency working in the opposite direction? Can a few lemmings manage to leap against the flow and then change the course of the river?

It may seem naïve, especially in view of the selfishness around us and (let’s be honest) within us. Some researchers claim that “the average human being is about 95 percent selfish in the narrow sense of the term,” so how can human inclinations ever change? Is there any hope that we will ever see a world filled with virtue and love, with no more injustice and pain, as the Jewish prophets have promised?

Of course, Divine intervention can achieve anything. However, we are told to not depend on miracles. That means that things can change naturally, through our efforts.

In fact, Robert H. Frank writing in the *New York Times* cites research which *proves* that we are influenced by our own theories. Our personal attitudes and beliefs about selfishness and giving directly impact and define our own behavior: “Studies have found that repeated exposure

to the [business] self-interest model makes selfish behavior more likely.” Frank concludes that what is particularly troubling is “the narrow self-interest model, which encourages us to expect the worst in others, [and which] often brings out the worst in us as well.”<sup>3</sup>

We are all affected by the attitudes and expectations of those around us, and ultimately by the expectations we have of ourselves. If we have been inundated with a message that we are lowly creatures, or that we are all not much more than selfish beasts, especially if this was ingrained into us in our formative years, inevitably our life script has been written ... or so it seems.

A colleague of mine remembers his shock when he asked a student what he looked forward to in life, and the student replied, “I would be happy if I just did not get hurt in life. When a day passes and I come out intact, I breathe a sigh of relief and feel accomplishment.” This individual was hurt so many times, that his threshold for normal and his expectation for happiness was just “no new damage.”

## 8. Within the Disease Lies the Cure

But now for the good news: within the “disease” lies the cure.

Our attitudes and beliefs have the power to rewire ourselves and the universe – to higher the standard that we expect of ourselves.

We are not pre-destined nor deterministic. We are not doomed, and we are not static. Each of us has a vibrant spirit, and with will power, persistence and good support, we can unplug, refire and rewire our systems.

We have the power to stop the vicious cycle of watching others watch others watch others watching us – to stop the downward spiral of “the blind leading the blind” spiraling downward.

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<sup>3</sup>The Theory That Self-Interest Is the Sole Motivator Is Self-Fulfilling,” by Robert H. Frank, New York Times, February 17, 2005.

How often do we hear producers arguing that the low standard of TV broadcasting is due to the demand of the consumers, and the consumers arguing, that “we watch what they show us,” and advertisers salivating either way as long as they get their product planted into our heads.

Yes, we have the power to rewire ourselves – to rewire the very consciousness of existence. We have the power to stop pursuing happiness and to look around and recognize that it is already here. As long as happiness remains a commodity that we pursue (or want to purchase), our efforts to find happiness will inevitably be futile. Happiness eludes all those that make it their focus. Only when we recognize that happiness is a state of being that emerges when we focus on things outside ourselves ... only when we know that it is a feeling shaped by our attitudes ... only then do we find it.

The world will change when we change our attitudes. Expect more of yourself and you will become more. Expect more of others, and they will become more.

All it takes are a few individuals who will stand up to the prevalent status quo. Instead of going with the flow and following the current, they will be truly “independent” and lift the expectations that we have of each other to its deserved place – *that we all live up to the divine image within us!*

All it takes is you and I and a few other individuals. If ten of us can do it, ten thousand can. If ten thousand can, ten million can. After all, the six billion of us are merely six billion individuals like you and me.

As John Lennon sang:

You may say that I’m a dreamer  
But I’m not the only one  
I hope someday you’ll join us  
And the world will live as one<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Imagine* by John Lennon, 1988.

And as the Prophet Isaiah promised:

And the day will come when ... they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.<sup>5</sup>

Hopefully, the current uprisings in the Middle East will bring change in peaceful ways. We pray and hope that the unrest focuses not on anger and agitation, but on building a better, freer and more loving world. Despite the forces of oppression that brought on the present upheavals, true growth will not come by replacing one form of oppression with another form – that will only continue a vicious cycle of autocracy. True growth will come by introducing a new, mature approach of mutual respect, while maintaining diversity.

As it is in the macrocosm, so is it in the microcosm of our own personal lives. Time has come to stop being victims of the past and, instead, to take the initiative for a new and brighter future. It all comes down to the courage to change our attitudes for the better – to dare to think and act differently.

## 9. 30th Anniversary of Global Unity through Rambam Study

One of the most powerful ways of changing yourself and the world is the global study of the Rambam instituted by the Rebbe -- whose 30th cycle we concluded and celebrated just yesterday.

In the spring of 1984, the Rebbe initiated a new campaign. He called on every Jewish man, woman and child to add into their daily study schedule the study a portion of Maimonides' compendium of Jewish law, known as the Mishneh Torah, Yad HaChazakah or simply as Rambam, an acronym for his name: Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (born 877 years ago).

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 2:2-4.

Among the reasons the Rebbe gave for this innovative idea was the fact that the Rambam's Mishne Torah encompasses the entire Torah, including the laws that only applied during Temple times, and will again be pertinent during the Messianic Era. As the Rambam himself writes in his introduction to Mishne Torah: "This book gathers all of Jewish law in a concise and clear fashion." By the daily study of the Rambam, the Rebbe explained, every individual can fulfill the obligation to study the entire Torah!

Another reason the Rebbe explained was that when all Jews world over study the same teachings on a daily basis they become united as one. And today more than ever we are in critical need for Jewish unity. "One of the principal elements in the study of Rambam is the unification of Jewry," the Rebbe said. "When everyone studies the same thing on the same day, their learning is united across continents. When different people study the same topic, they will come to discuss and debate it. This friendly and scholarly debate," the Rebbe said, "will bring people closer to each other, contributing to unity among Jews."

As such the Rebbe suggested that the Mishneh Torah should be studied straight through, from beginning to end, and that this be done according to an organized schedule.

The Rebbe suggested a three-track system:

For those capable, a three chapter per-day schedule, which completes the Mishneh Torah in slightly less than one year.

For those who lack the time to study three chapters a day, a one chapter per-day program that lasts close to three years.

For those whose level of scholarship doesn't allow for the study of Mishneh Torah, the Rebbe suggested that they study every day from Maimonides' Sefer Hamitzvot, the "Book of Commandments," those commandments being studied in great detail by those participating in the three chapter per-day regimen – concluding all 613 commandments in the same course of time.

Immediately after the Rebbe instituted this custom in 1984 large numbers of Jews around the world took it upon themselves to study the Mishneh Torah daily. Torah scholars and Chassidic masters issued their recommendation to join this new study cycle. Many of the Jewish dailies and weekly newspapers began printing the study schedule for the Mishneh Torah together with other existing daily study schedules.

Yesterday thousands of people across the globe celebrated the conclusion of the 30th cycle of the daily study of three chapters of Rambam and Sefer HaMitzvos, as well as the 10th cycle of learning one chapter a day.

It's quite amazing when you think about it how this campaign has transformed so many people's lives as the study of the Rambam has become an integral part of many Jewish households.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to raise a cup and say l'chaim to the Rebbe and his tireless efforts on behalf of all the Jewish people and the world, and to all those that have participated in this study cycle, which we have now concluded for the 30th time.

Above all, as we begin a new study cycle today I would like to encourage all of you here to commit (if you have not yet) and join this daily study schedule, in one of the three ways mentioned above. As we begin the new cycle this is an excellent opportunity to start a new level of growth in your life.

Based on the Rebbe's suggestion, this is one of the most effective ways of changing your life and the life of your loved ones for the better. This is an excellent way to learn and discover our rich heritage, and this is a guaranteed way to introduce more unity into our lives, into our community, into the entire Jewish people and into the entire world. And together with unity always comes joy. So what better way to change our attitudes as we enter the joyful month of Adar?

[Add here the schedule of Rambam study in your community]. I invite you to join us in our daily study here [include times, places etc.].

May this commitment bring each of us many blessings of peace, love, unity and joy. And may all our individual efforts bring about positive change. May we see the fruits of our efforts with our own eyes and rejoice with all our loved ones, and may we we finally merit to the coming of Moshiach speedily in our days. Amen.