Long Live the Happy!—Thoughts for Parashat Pinehas, July 14, 2012

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Researchers at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and the Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology of Yeshiva University conducted extensive studies on longevity. In one of these studies, they focused on 243 Ashkenazic Jews (average age 97.6 years, 75% women) to determine whether there is a genetic basis to living long lives. Their findings were reported in an article published online May 21, 2012, in the journal “Aging.”

Dr. Nir Barzilai, director of Einstein’s Institute for Aging Research, commented that when the team began their research, they had assumed that the very elderly would be mean and ornery individuals, whose stubbornness contributed to their longevity. Instead, they found qualities that reflected an optimistic, positive view of life. “Most were outgoing, optimistic and easygoing. They considered laughter an important part of life and had a large social network. They expressed emotions openly rather than bottling them up.” Moreover, these very elderly people had lower scores for displaying neurotic personality, and higher scores for being conscientious, compared with a representative sample of the U.S. population.

While optimism and laughter don’t guarantee longevity, they seem to be factors that enable people to live longer and to live happier.

In this week’s Torah portion, we read of the festive days that mark the Jewish religious calendar. Maimonides, in his Guide for the Perplexed (III: 43), makes a significant comment about religion and happiness: "The festivals are all for rejoicings and pleasurable gatherings, which in most cases are indispensable for man; they are also useful in the establishment of friendship, which must exist among people living in political societies." Happy occasions are essential. Pleasurable gatherings enlarge our lives by linking us with family and friends, by enabling us to meet new people and interact with them in a positive environment.

Indeed, we not only have the festival days; we have the joy of Shabbat each week. We have the happiness of so many mitzoth each day. Judaism promotes a positive, optimistic worldview and lifestyle. The hallmark of Jewish religious life is

happiness!

The Talmud (Taanit 22a) relates a story that Elijah the Prophet pointed out two people who had a place in the world-to-come. Who were these outstanding individuals? They were street comedians! They told jokes. When asked why they devoted their time to making people laugh, they answered: we try to relieve people's sufferings; we offer them a moment of laughter to free them from their woes; we use humor to bring peace among those who are arguing with each other.

The 18th century sage, Rabbi Eliyahu ha-Cohen of Izmir, elaborated on the virtues of these street comedians. "Anyone who is happy all his days thereby indicates the greatness of his trust in God. This is why they [the street comedians] were always happy...This quality [of accepting life with happiness] is enough to give a person merit to have a place in the world-to-come; for great is trust [in the Lord], even if a person is not perfect in all other moral perfections" (Midrash Talpiot).

If longevity is a measure of the quantity of our lives, happiness is a measure of the quality of our lives.

Interestingly, research is demonstrating that quality has an impact on quantity.

As the Psalmist taught long ago: “Serve the Lord with gladness, come with exulting into His presence” (Psalms 100:2).

Angel for Shabbat