

Erev RH 5772

Talk Deeply, Be Happy!

Who here wants to be happier? Good! I want you to be happier, too! The world could use a little more happiness, don't you think?

Well tonight, on Rosh Hashanah, let me tell you—you've come to the right shul. Let Dr. Mosbacher heal what ails you. Tonight, you've come to hear an awesome choir on these days of awe—check! You've come to reconnect with God—check! Perhaps you've even come because you need a little more joy in your life. Well I've got the cure for that disease or, perhaps more accurately, your synagogue does!

A study recently published in the journal *Psychological Science* involved 79 people who agreed to wear an electronically activated recorder with a microphone on their lapel that recorded 30-second snippets of conversation every 12.5 minutes for four days, creating what Dr. Matthias Mehl, head of the study, called “an acoustic diary of their day.”

Researchers then went through the tapes and classified the conversation snippets as either small talk about the weather or having watched a TV show, or more **substantive** talk about current affairs, philosophy, the difference between Baptists and Catholics or the role of education. A conversation about a TV show wasn't always considered small talk; it could be categorized as substantive if the speakers analyzed the characters and their motivations, for example.

Many conversations were more practical and did not fit in either category, including questions about homework or who was taking out the trash, for example. Over all, about a third of all conversation was ranked as substantive, and about a fifth consisted of small talk.

But the happiest person in the study, based on self-reports about satisfaction with life and other happiness measures as well as reports from people who knew the subject, had twice as many substantive conversations, and only one-third of the amount of small talk as the unhappiest. Almost every other conversation the happiest person had — 45.9 percent of the day's conversations — were substantive, while only 21.8 percent of the unhappiest person's conversations were substantive.

Small talk made up only 10 percent of the happiest person's conversations, while it made up almost three times as much — or 28.3 percent — of the unhappiest person's conversations.

Would you be happier if you spent more time discussing the meaning of life — and less time talking about the weather?

It may sound counterintuitive, but people who spend more of their day having deep discussions and less time engaging in small talk seem to be happier, said Dr. Mehl, a psychologist at the University of Arizona.

“We found this so interesting, because it could have gone the other way — it could have been, ‘Don’t worry, be happy’ — as long as you surf on the shallow level of life you’re happy, and if you go into the existential depths you’ll be unhappy,” the doctor said.

But, he proposed, substantive conversation seemed to hold the key to happiness for two main reasons: both because human beings are driven to find and create meaning in their lives, and because we are social animals who want and need to connect deeply with other people.

“By engaging in meaningful conversations, we manage to impose meaning on an otherwise pretty chaotic world,” Dr. Mehl said. “And interpersonally, as you find this meaning, you bond with your interactive partner, and we know that interpersonal connection and integration is a core fundamental foundation of happiness.”

Now Dr. Mehl’s study was small and doesn’t prove a cause-and-effect relationship between the kind of conversations one has and one’s happiness. And Dr. Mehl isn’t here tonight. But fortunately, you’ve got Dr. Mosbacher in the house, and we’re going to more than quadruple his sample size, right here in this House of Friends.

I’d like to ask you for the next 5 minutes to have a conversation with someone in this room—someone you didn’t come here with; preferably someone you don’t know. This will involve moving from your seat. I’d like you to sit face to face with them. Start with small talk—your name, where your from, maybe even what you think of the weather or the Yankees if you must. But then, for the other 4 ½ minutes, I want you to have a conversation on the following topic: What brings meaning into my life, and what I am willing to do to bring even more meaning into it. Each conversation partner has 2ish minutes to share, then switch, then we’ll come back together and see if Dr. Mehl’s predicted affects have begun to take hold. So again: What brings meaning into my life, and what I am willing to do to bring even more meaning into it. Ready, set, go.

SHARE. What do you think? Are you ready to commit, for the next ten days only, to having one more substantive conversation per day than you’re used to? It’d involve a bit less small talk, a bit more willingness to probe when you ask, “how ya doin’” and the person responds, “fine.” Are you up for that? Now we’re not going to wire you or wiretaps on your phones—don’t worry. You don’t even need to sign a waiver, and you can report in anonymously. Just send me an e-mail before Yom Kippur to rabbimosbacher@yahoo.com, and be sure to put the word “happiness” in the subject line. You can share a story with me or an insight you’ve gained, or tell me how on a scale of 1-10 how the intentional experience of less small talk makes you feel. I receive enough data, I’ll report our findings anonymously on Kol Nidre.

Don’t take my word for it—try it. Try having one more meaningful conversation a day for the next week, and then let me know how it goes. To riff on Bobby McFerrin’s brilliant if slightly misguided 1988 hit, “Talk Deeply, Be Happy!” Shana tova!!