Imagine Life HMV

Positive Psychology – Dealing with Strengths

Many mental health care practitioners operate from a traditional medical model: individuals who have something wrong with them (pathology) are seeking treatment (therapy). Both undergraduate and graduate psychology students take courses in psychopathology and psychotherapy. While this model clearly works for those who are in pain or suffering, there is a more recent development in the field of psychology known as “Positive Psychology.” Positive psychology is the study of what helps individuals (and communities) to thrive. Positive psychology holds that we look at an individual’s strengths and help them build on these areas of competence to have a fuller, more satisfying life.

Martin Seligman, born into a Jewish family in Albany, New York, was initially best known in the field of psychology as the developer of a theory of depression called “Learned Helplessness.” Later in his career, Seligman pivoted fully from studying depression to become a founding researcher in positive psychology. One of the contributions of Seligman to this emerging field are six character strengths: wisdom/knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. And, in recent years, one of the biggest areas of study in the field of positive psychology has been the benefits of gratitude.

Not surprisingly, aspects of positive psychology echo many traditional Jewish ideas and thoughts:

* Pirke Avot (4:1) “Who is wise? He who learns from every man.” [Wisdom]
* Psalm (31:24) “Be of good courage and He shall strengthen your heart.” [Courage]
* Hillel: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and learn.” [Humanity]
* Deuteronomy (16:20): “Justice, justice you shall pursue!” [Justice]
* Exodus (34:6-7): “The Lord, The Lord, mighty in compassion, merciful, gracious, slow to anger, plentiful in kindness and truth; keeping kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and sin and pardoning.” [Temperance]
* Daily Amidah: “Modim Anachanu Lach… we gratefully acknowledge…” [Gratitude]

Given these six positive attributes, think for a bit about which resonates most with *you*. Let go of what brings you down, what aggrieves you, what pains you… for the rest of this discussion, focus on what you do **well** and what you might want to build upon while we review the following discussion questions:

1. What makes a day a good day for you?
2. What do you typically do to make your day a good day? Are there any particular activities, thoughts, prayers, you engage in that make a good day better?
3. Of the six character strengths – Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, Gratitude – which speak to you the strongest?
4. How has your Judaism influenced your ability to GROW as a human being?
5. Many people make a habit out of being grateful every day – this could be during the daily Amidah, a gratitude journal at the end (or beginning) of the day, counting one’s blessings – what daily habits do you find brighten your day?
6. Think about a day or an experience you’ve had that started off less than optimal but over time became rather positive. What was that event? How did you turn the outcome around?
7. How might you use a strength-based approach in your family life? Your work life? Your temple life? Your Men’s Club Life? How can you take what is GOOD and make it BETTER?