

Writing Deeply Felt Emotions: Simcha - Happiness

Session one

Opening Ritual: Welcome and Connections

Approx. 10 minutes

Select something on your phone (such as a photo or note) or something from your bag that helps you to tell a story of happiness or joy (in one minute or less).

Today's Focus

Approx. 1 minute

- Connect with others
- Explore *Simcha*: the duality of happiness
- Cultivate the craft of writing deeply felt emotions by placing opposing feelings side by side

Jewish Wisdom: Jewish history, stories, and sources offering guidance for our writing and life challenges

Approx. 20 minutes

Judaism encourages us to meet life's circumstances—even challenges—with openness and gratitude, guiding us to a deeper experience known as *simcha*. *Simcha* is a word that although may be familiar to many, doesn't have an exact English equivalent. We'll use happiness as its translation, while exploring Judaism's unique meaning for *simcha*. Our literary canon reveals that the Jewish people have been able to find happiness amid great suffering. This may well explain our embrace of the notion that sadness and happiness often exist in relationship with one another. And, when we do finally experience happiness, we are grateful, feeling it deeply.

One example of a great teacher who embodied this approach to happiness is Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810), who taught his followers to develop an intense, joyous relationship with God, defined by much singing, and dancing. He wrote:



Struggle with all your might to be only happy at all times, since it is natural to be drawn into depression and sadness



Rebbe Nachman's parables and stories encouraged his disciples to overcome obstacles in order to live with faith and joy. He himself suffered from grief, depression and tuberculosis, yet continually wrote about seeking *simcha*.

In the passage below, Rebbe Nachman offers a parable about the relationship between *simcha* and sadness. His writing illustrates how when juxtaposing two opposing emotions, the reader experiences a deeper understanding of each. Most often emotions are not experienced in a pure form—but rather in relationship to one another. Read and be prepared to put this story in your own words.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, *Likutei Moharan Part II Torah 23:1*

בְּעֵינֵי הַשְּׂמֵחָה. עַל־פִּי מִשָּׁל, שְׁלִפְעָמִים כְּשֶׁבְנֵי־אָדָם שְׂמֵחִים וּמְרֻקְדִים, אֲזִי חוֹטְפִים אִישׁ אֶחָד מִבְּחוּץ, שֶׁהוּא בְּעֶצְבוֹת וּמְרָה שְׁחָרָה, וּמְכַנִּיסִים אוֹתוֹ בְּעַל־כָּרְחוֹ לְתוֹךְ מְחוּל הַמְרֻקְדִים, וּמְכַרְיָחִים אוֹתוֹ בְּעַל־כָּרְחוֹ שְׂיֵהִיָּה שְׂמֵחַ עִמָּהֶם גַּם־כֵּן. כֵּן יֵשׁ בְּעֵינֵי הַשְּׂמֵחָה. כִּי כְּשֶׁאָדָם שְׂמֵחַ, אֲזִי הַמְרָה שְׁחָרָה וְיִסוּרִים נִסְתַּלְקִים מִן הַצַּד. אֲבָל מַעֲלָה יִתְרָה – לְהִתְאַמֵּץ לְרַדֵּף אַחַר הַמְרָה שְׁחָרָה דְּוִקָא, לְהַכְנִיס אוֹתָהּ גַּם־כֵּן בְּתוֹךְ הַשְּׂמֵחָה, בְּאִפְּן שֶׁהַמְרָה שְׁחָרָה בְּעֶצְמָהּ תִּתְהַפֵּךְ לְשְׂמֵחָה. שְׂיֵהִיָּה הַמְרָה שְׁחָרָה וְכָל הַיִּסוּרִין לְשְׂמֵחָה, כְּדֶרֶךְ הַבָּא לְתוֹךְ הַשְּׂמֵחָה, שְׂאִז מִגְדֵּל הַשְּׂמֵחָה וְהַחֲדוּדָה מֵהַפֶּךְ כָּל הַדְּאָגוֹת וְהַעֲצָבוֹת וְהַמְרָה שְׁחָרוֹת שְׁלוֹ לְשְׂמֵחָה. נִמְצָא שְׁחוּטְףָה הַמְרָה שְׁחָרָה וּמְכַנִּיס אוֹתָהּ בְּעַל־כָּרְחוֹ לְתוֹךְ הַשְּׂמֵחָה, כְּמִשָּׁל הַנִּלְ.

On the topic of *simcha*. According to this parable: Sometimes, when people are happy and dance, they grab someone standing outside [the circle] who is depressed and gloomy. Against his will they bring him into the circle of dancers; against his will, they force him to be happy along with them. It is the same with happiness. When a person is happy, gloom and suffering stand aside. Yet greater still is to gather courage to actually pursue gloom, and to introduce it into the joy, such that the gloom itself turns into joy. A person should transform gloom and all suffering into joy. It is like a person who comes to a celebration. The abundant joy and happiness then, transforms all his worries, depression and gloom into joy. We find that he has grabbed the gloom and introduced it, against its will, into the joy, as in the aforementioned parable.

Questions for Hevruta (study partner):

1. Explain the text (parable) in your own words.
2. This story honors the duality of our emotions. People often experience two or more opposing/contrasting feelings simultaneously. How would you describe the relationship between happiness and sadness according to Rebbe Nachman's story? What rings true? What is challenging?
3. How does this story deepen or shift your understanding of *simcha*? Of sadness?
4. Reflect back on the object you shared to tell a story of happiness for you. What other emotions might be intertwined with that story? How does viewing the object through the lens of two (or more) emotions impact the telling of the story?

If you have time, you may want to invite others to share their answers with the larger group.

Writer to Writer: Wisdom of Seasoned Jewish Writers

Approx. 10 minutes

Review this quote about writing deeply felt emotions. What stands out for you?



For me, it seems inevitable that various emotions come up when writing about a memory or reflecting on a recent experience. I like to use the metaphor of a prism you can hold in your hand that reflects different colors depending on how you hold it tilting towards a light source. Here's an example. I've been noticing how lately my voice really sounds like that of my mother, Connie, who died several years ago. I've always resembled her, but my voice has deepened. Especially when I laugh, a sense of her seems to move through my body and into surrounding spaces. I'm filled with surprise, joy, and deep longing- so many different emotions, like reflected prismatic colors. I'm starting to write some poetry about this.



Cathleen Cohen, poet and painter, author of *Murmuration*, *Sparks and Disperses* and other books of poetry

Judaism's understanding of *simcha* as an emotion that exists in relationship with sadness offers an opportunity for you to develop the skill of writing with depth that reflects the complexity of human experience (mixed, conflicting, and interactive emotions). By delving into this connection, you can help a reader deeply feel authentic emotions, enhancing the richness of your writing.

People rarely feel emotion in a pure form (pure happiness). To convey realistic experiences with emotional depth, place opposing emotions side-by-side. In doing so you will craft a sense of tension, complexity and interconnectedness that reflects the human experience and intensifies a reader's experience.

Consider:

- The tension between the emotions and the ways they impact one another
- How the presence of another emotion (within the same person/event, or with another person/event another) deepens the understanding of *simcha*, happiness
- What you want your reader to “feel”

Writing Prompts

Approx. 20 minutes

Before writing, reflect on the insights gathered from the Writer to Writers, Jewish wisdom, and your *hevruta*. Infuse those insights into your prompt. This exercise could pertain to a new project, something you're currently developing, or an idea you may begin here and continue to refine.

Rebbe Nachman used the setting of a wedding, which normally is viewed as a purely happy context, to reveal a Jewish understanding that joy and sadness exist in relationship with one another. Create a parable or a scene set in a context that is expected to be happy. Imagine a moment, a character or image from your lived experience that evokes both happiness and some other opposing feeling. Alternatively, imagine a scene that takes place where sadness is expected and yet happiness emerges as well.

Situate your writing in the genre you prefer, with memoir or story, poetry, prayer or song. Be open to whatever may appear on the page— this writing time is designed to be playful and a rough beginning to spark ideas you might return to later.

JWC Writer to Writer: learning from your colleagues

Approx. 20 minutes

Invite each writer to read from their work to a partner, while the other writer listens with care. (5 minutes each) Share:

- Warm feedback (something you appreciate in the writing—an image, sound, word choice, etc.)
- Something that you're curious about (something that might help in a next edit)

Join back together as a large group. Participants can share their experience of the prompt or choose to read one minute or less from their draft. Warm feedback welcomed. (10 minutes)

Next steps & Closing Ritual

Approx. 10 minutes

Today we explored *simcha* (happiness) and how you can evoke deeply felt emotions by placing opposing emotions in juxtaposition. As a closing ritual, we invite you to pack up your computers, tablets or notebooks. Share with your circle:

- What are you taking home with you? (emotions, needs, questions, or writing ideas)
- What new perspectives on writing and emotions are you carrying forward?
- You may want to work on the draft you generated today, bringing it next month as we continue to explore *simcha* and writing deeply felt emotions.

» **Next:** Session two: Showing and Telling | The Many Dimensions of Happiness »