

Writing Deeply Felt Emotions: Simcha - Happiness

Session Two

Opening Ritual: Welcome and Connections

Approx. 10 minutes

Recall a happy moment you experienced – whether it feels small or significant. Now, describe that moment with only 7 words.

Today's Focus

Approx. 1 minute

- Connect with Others
- Explore *Simcha*: the many dimensions of happiness
- Cultivate the craft of writing deeply felt emotions by both showing and telling

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.

A Jewish ritual practiced at weddings under the *chuppah* (wedding canopy) is the recitation of the Seven Blessings, the *Sheva Brachot*. The seventh of the blessings expresses hopes for the couple's future, wishing them a symphony of happiness. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said:



Happiness is not a single thing, be it is a feeling, an emotion, a state of mind, or a judgment upon a life as a whole. It is many things, the sum of which is greater than the parts.



This blessing tells the story of the multiple dimensions of happiness that await the new couple. The Hebrew language offers 7 different words seeking to describe the full experience of happiness:

Simcha (שמחה): Happiness at celebrations like weddings or bar mitzvahs.

Osher (אֲשֶׁר): Refers to a more profound and lasting happiness or blessedness.

Orah (אֹרֶה): Can mean "light" or "happiness," suggesting a radiant or illuminating joy.

Gila (גִּילָה): Describes a joyful outburst or the happiness of discovery.

Rina (רִנָּה): Implies refreshing or uplifting happiness.

Sasson (שִׂשׂוֹן): Represents a sudden and unexpected happiness, often linked to a joyful surprise.

Ditza (דִּיצָה): A sublime or exquisite joy.

The text also portrays the story of the happy couple with vivid scenes that reflect their experience.

Read the text below. Notice the many different words that are used to describe happiness. Notice the vignettes created within the blessing. Be prepared to put this story in your own words.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא שִׂשׂוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה חֲתָן וְכַלָּה. גִּילָה רִנָּה דִּיצָה וְחֻדוּה
אֶהָבָה וְאַחֻוּה וְשָׁלוֹם וְרַעוּת. מְהֵרָה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִשְׁמַע בְּעָרֵי יְהוּדָה וּבְחֻצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם, קוֹל שִׂשׂוֹן
וְקוֹל שִׂמְחָה קוֹל חֲתָן וְקוֹל כַּלָּה קוֹל מִצְהָלוֹת חֲתָנִים מְחַפְּתָם וְנַעֲרִים מִמְשֶׁתָּה נְגִינָתָם. בָּרוּךְ
אַתָּה יי מְשַׂמַּח חֲתָן עִם הַכַּלָּה:

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha'olam, asher bara sason v'simcha chatan v'chala. Gila, rina, ditzah v'chedva, ahava v'achava v'shalom v'rei'ut. M'heira Adonai Eloheinu yishama b'arei yehuda u'vchutzot yerushalayim, kol sason v'kol simcha kol chatan v'kol kala, kol mitzhalot chatanim meichupatam u'n'arim mimishteit n'ginatam. Baruch ata Adonai m'sameiach chatan im ha'kala.

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who creates **happiness** and joy, groom and bride*. **Exultation, delight, amusement, and pleasure, love and brotherhood, peace and friendship.** Soon, Adonai our God, may the sound of **happiness and the sound of joy** and the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride be heard in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem — the **rejoicing** of grooms from their huppahs and youths from their singing banquets. Blessed are you Adonai who makes the groom rejoice with the bride.

*Note: while the traditional version of the Sheva Brachot is distinctly heterosexual, there are now contemporary versions **adapted for same-sex couples.**

Questions for *Hevruta* (study partner):

1. Explain the text in your own words.
2. What is the benefit/challenge of using so many nouns that are similar yet distinct in telling the story of the couple's emotional future?
3. The author creates vignettes –vivid scenes filled with sight and sound–to show dimensions of the couple's happiness. In what ways are those scenes effective/ineffective in helping the reader feel the emotion of the moment?
4. Think back to the story you shared in seven words. Which of the Hebrew words might you have used? Was your story more showing (with a vignette) or telling (describing a moment)?

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?



Effective creative writing evokes a vivid experience of concrete physical reality, most often through detailed description, using words that elicit sensory images (not necessarily visual) in the reader's mind. That's what is usually meant by "showing." But there are exceptions to every rule. If the "voice" of a piece suggests a specific person, it may seem to be "telling." But in fact, it is still creating a vivid experience.



Poet and publisher Judith Kerman

A writing technique that allows readers to deeply experience happiness is to challenge the adage, "show, don't tell" by incorporating both telling and showing. This approach is beautifully illustrated in the seventh blessing of the *sheva brachot*.

Telling: When describing a person or event it is helpful to be specific, be selective about the details you include. Engage all the senses and choose your nouns and adjectives with care.

Examples for telling:

- The joyous bride, happier than any ever before, stepped to the center of the circle, lifting the hem of her lace gown ready to dance.
- They said about Rabbi Yehuda bar Elai that he would take a myrtle branch and dance before the bride, and say: A fair and attractive bride. (Ketubot 17a:5-7)

Showing: Invite your reader to enter the story through action, sensory detail, and emotion—not through summary or explanation. Let them feel the experience of the emotion and interpret it through their own perspective. Instead of relying on adjectives or analysis, craft scenes that allow readers to draw their own conclusions.

Examples for showing:

- The bride twirling in the center of the circle, moved to the beat of the band lifting the hem of her lace gown, cheeks flushing, heart racing, faster and faster, her laughter penetrating the groom's desire as he grabbed on to her hand, attempting to mirror her motion.
- You have captured my heart With one glance of your eyes, With one coil of your necklace. (Song of Songs, 4:9)

Consider:

- Telling more by using selected, multiple, nuanced nouns or adjectives
- Showing vivid descriptions of physical sensations, actions, and surroundings to convey emotions. Incorporate details that allow the reader to infer the emotion based on the character's experience.
- Using images that appeal to the senses (sound, sight, touch, taste, smell)

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.

In the seventh blessing of the *Sheva Brachot*, the couple is celebrated in their joy—both in the present and for the future. Using that as inspiration, write about a moment of *simcha*, a time of deep happiness in your own experience or from your imagination. Let the reader feel joy through actions, sensations, and emotions. Focus on showing and telling. Carefully select which words to use in your description. If you have brought a draft, you have been working on, apply these tools.

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 telling and showing. 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 Three: Rhythm and Repetition | *Simcha*, the Divine and Gratitude »