“Happiness Is a Jewish Value”
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

This week, the 2025 World Happiness Report was released—and once again, Finland is the world’s happiest country. Not far behind are Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden. And to the surprise of many, Israel was ranked the eighth happiest country in the world. That’s right—Israel, despite a year filled with conflict, grief, and uncertainty, made the top ten.

Now, these rankings are not based on GDP or Instagram likes or how many oat milk lattes one can get in a day. The report looks at deeper measures: social support, generosity, freedom, life expectancy, and trust in institutions. And this year, a special emphasis was placed on acts of kindness—on the ways that helping others boosts not only their well-being, but ours too.

I want us to sit with that for a moment.

We live in a world often obsessed with personal happiness as an individual pursuit—something we are told by influencers and the media that we can achieve through self-optimization, achievement, or perhaps a perfectly curated life. But the data from this report tells a different story. It tells us that real happiness is not about what we own or even what we feel in isolation—but about how we treat one another.

And that sounds… remarkably Jewish.

Judaism has always taught that joy—simcha—is not an end in itself, but a byproduct of a life of purpose, connection, and mitzvot. Our tradition doesn't talk

about happiness in the abstract. It talks about helping the widow and orphan. Visiting the sick. Welcoming the stranger. Loving your neighbor as yourself.

The Talmud teaches that the Divine Presence does not rest upon a prophet unless they are in a state of joy. And we know from experience that the holiest moments in Jewish life—Shabbat dinners, Passover seders, weddings, baby namings—are all communal. They happen with others. They are rituals of gathering, storytelling, singing, eating, and remembering. You can't do Judaism alone.

And that brings me to Temple Sholom.

This community is a living example of the Happiness Report's core findings. Here, we support one another in moments of sorrow and joy. We organize meal trains for those in need. We care for the vulnerable, give generously to those who are struggling, and show up for our members—not just when it's convenient, but because it's the right thing to do.

When one of our congregants is in hospital, someone visits. When a young family welcomes a new baby, someone drops off food. When someone loses a loved one, there is always a minyan. When tragedy strikes in the world, we gather to grieve, pray, and act.

We are constantly building bridges—between generations, between newcomers and long-time members, between those who are thriving and those who are hurting. Our Shabbat lunches, our music, our social action, our inclusive approach to community—these are all sources of deep and lasting joy. Not the Instagram kind—but IRL, In Real Life, the real kind. The kind rooted in connection, purpose, and meaning; in Torah and the findings of this study.

And yet, it's also worth reflecting on where we are here in Canada.

While still ranked among the top 20 happiest nations, Canada dropped to 15th place this year, continuing a gradual downward trend. The report

notes growing social disconnection, increased polarization, and a decline in trust in institutions as factors. Most significantly, the data shows that younger Canadians are reporting lower levels of happiness than older generations—reversing a long-standing trend.

That's something we cannot ignore. It speaks to the pressures facing our youth: anxiety, loneliness, economic uncertainty, and a fraying sense of purpose. It reminds us how important it is that spaces like this one—our synagogue—continue to offer belonging, community, and meaning, especially for the next generation. Temple Sholom is a place where people of all ages can find friendship, sacred rhythm, and a sense of being rooted in something larger than themselves.

There is sadness in our world and unhappiness in lots of places—that's part of life. But at Temple Sholom, in this community, while we recognize those emotions as inevitable, we don't accept them as unchangeable. Our mission is happiness and meaning.

And what of Israel—how can a country carrying so much pain rank among the happiest in the world? Perhaps it's because Israelis know, more than most, what it means to rely on one another. To live in community. To show up for their neighbors. In times of crisis, people step in. They cook for strangers. They rebuild together. They pray and sing and dance, even when it hurts. And maybe that, too, is happiness.

The Happiness Report found that sharing meals was one of the strongest predictors of happiness. Imagine that! Sharing food. Something our ancestors have done for generations—from Abraham welcoming strangers into his tent, to our own Shabbat tables here in Vancouver.

The science says: if you want to be happy, invite someone over for dinner.

Judaism says: if you want to be holy, make room at your table.

Our sages teach: “Gadol hama’aseh yoter min ha’oseh”—Greater is the one who causes others to do good than the one who does good themselves. That’s the kind of community we strive to be—a

place where we inspire one another toward generosity, justice, and joy.

I felt this to be particularly true this past Sunday when along with 12 families from Temple Sholom and a dozen or so members of the Muslim community we joined together at the corner of Hastings and Main in the DTES to serve meals to the hungry and unhoused.

The project was nearly 500 days in the making. It began with regular private meetings between Jewish and Muslim clergy in our MP Taleeb Noormohamed's office shortly after 10/7/23. The purpose was to maintain dialogue between the Jewish and Muslim communities, to curtail and address extremism from both communities that

endangered the other and to foster peaceful coexistence here in Vancouver. Ultimately our goal was to do something constructive together to show that a war over there did not mean we had to be at war with each other here. To show our mutual respect for human life and the dignity of all people.

So on Sunday, together we did that. We set our flags and politics aside and served G-d's human creation. And you know what it made me happy, it brought all of us so much joy. We fed their bodies, but the act of kindness nourished our own souls.

Look, we live in a city with incredible diversity, where pluralism and compassion are local and national values. But poverty, isolation are growing trends.

Happiness, as we know, isn't always evenly distributed. So let us ask: How can we, as a Jewish community, extend joy to those who are most in need? How can we embody the values of this report—kindness, generosity, connection—not just in theory but in action?

Because at its core, happiness in Judaism is not self-serving. It is a tool for healing the world. It's serving others.

This Shabbat and everyday after practice joy as a mitzvah.

Build communities of connection everywhere. Bring people together, before we all fall apart.

And remember, as the Psalmist says, Ivdu et Adonai b'simcha; bo'u lefanav birnanah. "Serve Adonai with gladness; come before God's presence with joyful song."