

Pursuing Virtue: Know Your Strengths
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Do you know who you are? If we think we do, we might bristle at the suggestion that we might not know as much about ourselves as we had thought.

That is one reason why we are here: *to learn how we can grow as individuals*, renewing and expanding our skills at being and becoming our *best selves*.

We go through our lives collecting experiences -- bumps and bruises, failures and successes. We know it is not a linear process. Some people learn from experience and grow in wisdom. Others hold onto hurts and losses and become embittered as they age. Our tradition celebrates the wisdom that comes with old age, while our rabbis also understood that wisdom deepens when we work at it. The better we understand ourselves, the better equipped we are to animate the character strengths that are unique to each of us. With the clarity that comes from an honest and true assessment of ourselves, we can live our values with clear-eyed purpose. The wisdom that is possible from a clear perspective can be transformative. This is how we find satisfaction in our lives.

But sometimes satisfaction is incomplete or illusive. That's because we are equipped with well-honed psychological devices that enable us to filter our experiences in self-protection. To truly know ourselves, we need to quiet the voices of others who have tried to define us --allowing us to unpack the

emotional baggage buried under denial and self-delusion. The wisdom of our sages on these Days of Awe are a toolbox for open-hearted, soul-open self-review.

This is a lifelong project. Year after year we dig down deeply into ourselves. Maybe the hope we crave feels elusive. Maybe the forgiveness that will heal our hearts is incomplete. Maybe our sense of gratitude is clouded by disappointment or anger. The ideals to which we strive are guideposts -- seemingly within our reach but sometimes just beyond our grasp. That is, until we come to better understand our own character strengths, and our own purpose. Is being adept at reading people's expectations and meeting those expectations -- a measure of success? It may feel that way but it is not.

Character Strengths such as *forgiveness*, *hope* and *gratitude* among others, are like muscles -- they need to be conditioned, developed and exercised. All of us contain character strengths that are stronger and some that are weaker. The fulfillment and happiness we crave is beckoning us to learn, to understand and to live by our strengths. An honest view of our lesser character strengths allows us to work on conditioning and strength-training.

At the end of the day, we are all seeking happiness -- a feeling of satisfaction and wholeness. *Happiness* is an experience of ***flourishing***. The science of Positive Psychology helps us to understand: What are the aspects of the human being that make us beautiful? This decoding of the human spirit reveals the "Beautiful Human."

Psychologist Dr. Marty Seligman strove to understand what is strong about the human experience (not just what is wrong), to move from what is wrong to what is **strong**. This is a corollary, and a contemporary addition to the wisdom of Pirke Avot, rabbinic wisdom, and *Mussar*, the Jewish study of values and wisdom for meaningful living.

Seligman identified 24 Character Strengths that are parts of the personality that are universally valued as *good* for the individual and good for society. These are our “Win-Win” personality characteristics. They help us to answer, “Who am I/What makes me tick? How can I contribute to the greater good?” Character Strengths are constellations of feelings, thoughts and behaviors that define who we are. As one observer commented, “It’s how I bring my soul to work”

In a recent article, *What Exactly Do We Mean by Happiness*¹, Michelle Shapiro Abraham writes,

“Prior to the field of Positive Psychology and studies around growth mindset, scientist believed that either you were a positive, optimistic and happy person, or you were not. However, with these new studies, psychologists now believe that the ability to *flourish* is not only something innate from birth but that we can actually be taught to *flourish*.”

¹ eJewishphilanthropy

Our tradition speaks of blessings and curses, urging us onto the path of blessings. A Midrash teaches,

There was an elder who sat at a crossroads. Before him were two paths: one path began with thorns but concluded in a clearing, and one path began in a clearing and concluded with thorns. he would sit at the start of each path and warn passers-by, saying to them: “Even though you see that this path begins with thorns, you should take this path, because it concludes in a clearing.”

Everyone who was wise would listen to him and walk along the [recommended] path. [The wise people] would get a little bit tired [at first], but they would go in peace and arrive in peace.

But those who would not listen to him, would go [on the other path] and would fail at the end.

Similarly, Moses explained to the people of Israel, saying to them: Here is the path of life and the path of death, blessing and curse. ‘And you shall choose life, so that you and your descendants may live.’ (Midrash Tanhuma Re’eh)

When are you at your best? Imagine considering something that went incredibly well and you felt you were really “in it.” You might sit with someone who doesn’t know you, and you describe the situation, unfiltered. Each of you holds the container for the story the other tells, as you each listen for strengths.

Our top character strengths called “Signature Strengths” are connected with better relationships, more achievement, more engagement and meaning in life, greater satisfaction and happiness. Each of us has

Signature Strengths that manifest across situations and time and are most linked to your personality. When we use them we feel energized and satisfied because these behaviors come more naturally. Our **Lesser Strengths** take the most effort -- and provide great opportunities for growth.

Distribute list of Character Strengths
We can each take the Via test at the website: viacharacter.com.

Jewish teachings to “choose life” and “choose blessings” correlate to the learning of Positive Psychology and human flourishing. Our tradition, urging the pursuit of holiness through “godly” behavior in a variety of ways, is amplified and actualized through the science of Positive Psychology. It teaches us how to understand ourselves and embrace virtues. This evokes the *Mussar* movement of 19th century Lithuania, which speaks of **48 *middot*** or virtues:

Mussar is a path ...to help an individual soul to pinpoint and then to break through the barriers that surround and obstruct the flow of inner light in our lives. ...The goal of Mussar practice is to release the light of holiness that lives within the soul. The roots of all of our thoughts and actions can be traced to the depths of the soul, beyond the reach of the light of consciousness... to penetrate down to the darkness of the subconscious, to bring about change right at the root of our nature.²

This year I engaged in a special project with Rabbis Without Borders of CLAL to learn Positive Psychology and the science of human flourishing in order to apply it to Jewish spiritual practice. It offers a key to unlocking our unique, personal inner light. We learned from experts in The Via Institute

² Mussar Institute website

on Character, with tools for each of us to truly know our character strengths. Positive Psychology describes the path to authentic happiness – in **Positive Emotion; Engagement; Relationships; Meaning; and Achievement**, an experience called **PERMA**.

In life, any of us can wander through life seeking happiness. Today, on this holy Rosh Hashanah day, we have a chance for discovery of who we are meant to be.

“In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl, Holocaust Survivor and noted psychologist, explains, ‘What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the *striving and struggling* for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a *potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled* by him.’ When positive psychologists speak of meaning, they refer to a deep belief that we each can impact the world.”³

Not only that; when we become fully immersed in an energized focus, *concentrating fully on the present moment*, the **experience of the activity is intrinsically rewarding**. This is what Positive Psychology calls “flow” -- when we are in the “zone.” There are few more satisfying feelings than this kind of mindful presence.

When the group of 12 rabbis in the Flourishing project took the Via Character Strength survey, we all found surprises and new insights. The survey, shaped through the study of universal traits and values, is valuable for all of us. I personally found it unlocked self-understanding that I hadn’t

³ What Exactly do we mean by Happiness, Michelle Shapiro Abraham

yet attained in other ways.

What do you think is your top signature strength? My guesses at the results were based on what I ultimately understood was *what I wanted to be* and *what I wanted to become*. This did not exactly align with what the Via science revealed about *who I am*. Many people have attained insights similarly when they take the survey.

Since my initial reaction, I came to value these insights. I was surprised to discover that my top signature strength was **kindness**. I would have thought that *Perspective* or *Perseverance* or *Love of Learning* or *Spirituality* or *Bravery* would have been my top strengths. After all, I come from a family of New Yorkers, direct when we speak-- what some might find brash. But no, my Via mentor told me, the test was not wrong. I just misunderstood the meaning of Kindness.

In fact, I had been thinking about Kindness in the context of my observations of Vermont culture and values. I have heard the term “Vermont Nice” which I have found striking. In some situations, it seems to mean more than *a pleasant demeanor*, actually conveying the value of *restraint from conflict*. A colleague pointed out that the origin of the word “**Nice**”, from middle English, conveys the sense ‘stupid’. From Old French, and Latin *nescius means* ‘ignorant,’ and *nescire means* ‘not know.’

By contrast, Kindness involves the personality traits of Empathy, Sympathy, Moral reasoning, Social responsibility. The Via character chart offers this Kindness motto: “Be helpful, err toward caring.” In Jewish terms, Kindness is conveyed as “*Chesed*,” as in “*G’milut Chasadim*,” ‘acts of lovingkindness’.

But being *nice* is more of a demeanor. In fact, in the interest of being nice we often avoid hard truths and difficult conversations; it can be the easy way out. Jewish teaching on *teshuvah*, repentance, teaches us that issues between people need to be honestly faced so they can be resolved. Feedback is a gift that helps us in our becoming toward our best self -- both for the giver and the receiver. This is a headline Jewish lesson of the High Holy Days: Niceness can be the enemy of kindness. Kindness is a choice to help and to heal. As one colleague put it, "Being nice and being kind are not always the same thing. For example, it might be nice to give a recovering alcoholic a bottle of really expensive bourbon, but it is not kind."

Kindness is a signature strength I can happily own. And this helps me to appreciate myself more and to maintain that kindness muscle as part of my being.

Kindness is related to my fourth character strength: Bravery. In fact, it can take great courage to be kind. My study of Via character strengths has helped me to understand how the balance of strengths are so important for my self-understanding; positive emotions, relationships, meaning and achievement are the result. This is the path to happiness.

This is what I am hoping we can embark on together -- that we all come to better understand ourselves and find greater satisfaction and happiness as individuals and as a community.

I was pained to see which of the strengths sat at the bottom of my list: Humility. I thought I was humble -- not an egotist, a person willing to give

credit to others. But my Via mentor comforted me: “that’s because of the profession you chose, she said, “you have to be out there in front.” That runs counters to the quality of humility.

Our sages were brilliant in their insights about human character and spirituality. But in every generation, we must own it for ourselves. Through the lens of Positive Psychology, we can mine the prayers, the holidays and the Torah for abundant insights into our own character strengths.

In our December rabbinic retreat for this project, one day we were assigned to take pick our favorite and most meaningful prayer in morning davening in light of a character strength and to present it based on the intention behind it, creating the enabling conditions for others to grow. That is how we davened Shacharit/morning service.

After our Shacharit, we journaled about the experience. I wrote, “I especially loved the kavannot and intentions of the prayers, and gravitated to the opportunity to move as prayer. At times, I felt the words to be barriers to the experience. I realize this is what novices in Jewish prayer may be feeling too. I enjoyed simplicity of melody; complicated melodies felt less engaging. But melody is a powerful tool. Personal stories bring the heart to the experience. I felt the warmth, love, compassion, yearning, connecting and courage of everyone in the room. The heart needs space to be its full self. The head needs to give it room.”

When we pray with an awareness of the underlying values and character strengths, worlds open for us. There is the experience of the Divine, for a

conversation with fullness of spirit and openness of heart. That is where we encounter the soul of all that is.

Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, “*Happiness* is not a synonym for *self-satisfaction*, complacency, or smugness. Self-satisfaction breeds futility and despair. All that is creative in man stems from a seed of *endless discontent*. New insight begins when satisfaction comes to an end, when all that has been seed, said, or done looks like a distortion....Man’s true fulfillment depends upon communion with that which transcends him. Judaism is *living* shared with God.”⁴

The world needs us, we need us, to bring our whole, true selves to living in this moment. May this be a New Year of living with satisfaction, each of us, for who we are at our core, and may this satisfaction help us to heal our hearts and repair our world.

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*.