What’s a 21st century Pursuer of Happiness to do? We’re perpetually navigating a blitz of offers to supply whatever we’re lacking that would make us happy. And not just stuff – we’re blitzed by offers to look thinner, feel healthier, grow more hair, have more satisfying relationships.

If that weren’t confusing (not to mention disheartening) enough, the blitz appears blissfully undeterred by the general lack of consensus over the definition of happiness. But not to worry, because all those things can also cure unhappiness (broadly defined as the opposite of happiness).

So what exactly are we looking for, and where are we supposed to find it?

Two intrepid Tel Aviv photographers are delving into that very mystery in a groundbreaking project, appropriately titled “My Piece of Happiness.”

“We didn’t start out looking for answers to existential questions,” explains Gili Adler, “but when you take some-
She and Mirit Har-Lev are sitting on the couch at MiLì, their airy photography studio. The wall behind them is decorated with photos of people holding small black chalkboards, each bearing a short message.

“It’s an intimate situation,” Adler says, pausing as the sounds of midday Tel Aviv traffic drift through the window. “The conversation can turn to things like life and happiness,” she adds.

About two years ago, while trying to put their photography subjects at ease, Adler and Har-Lev discovered something.

“We started the sessions by asking everyone the same questions. Basically, what makes you happy, and what’s missing from your life that would make you happy?” says Har-Lev, “At first all the answers were similar. People would say things like ‘my children’ or ‘a day at the beach.’”

The women found that if they responded to every answer with a follow-up question – all the while clicking away – the conversation would evolve and go somewhere entirely different.

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PHOTOGRAPHY SUBJECTS write down on chalkboards what brings them happiness, sometimes surprising themselves with their own answers.

Like a pair of detectives, they realized if they asked the right questions and followed the trail, they could usually help someone pinpoint the things that brought them happiness. “Then,” says Adler, “we’d ask them to write or draw it on a small chalkboard, and take pictures of them holding it.”

Clients began walking away from the hour photography sessions amazed by the fresh insights into themselves. Equally amazed were Adler and Har-Lev.

“It’s like someone holds a mirror up to you, and suddenly you see yourself for the first time in a way you never did before,” says Lior Golsad, 33, of Givataim, one of the project’s first participants. In 2011 he had left his job at an accounting firm to follow his dream of becoming a professional photographer, and rented a studio in the same building Adler and Har-Lev would move into shortly afterwards.

“I really didn’t know them at first, but we’d bump into each other a lot,” remembers Golsad. “One day we were talking by the elevator and they asked me what was missing from my life.”

The question took Golsad by surprise, after all, he was already following his dream. But he says,
“They listened, they remembered, they gently helped me explore,” and by the end of the conversation Golsad realized what he was still looking for: a sense of being at peace with the art that he’d chosen as a new profession.

“For me that meant finding a niche that inspired me, but also validated my decision to become a photographer,” he says.

With his goal now more sharply defined, Golsad discovered his niche shortly after and opened Jacob Dog Photography, a studio dedicated to photographing dogs and named after his own.

“I really credit them with helping me find my own piece of happiness,” says Golsad, who volunteers his time photographing dogs for animal rescues groups.

What seemed to actually make people happy, observed Adler and Har-Lev wasn’t always what they thought it would be. It was recognizing their own unique set of strengths, and putting them to use to add meaning to their lives.

Of course getting to the bottom of that is not as simple as it sounds. If you try multiplying personality traits by interpretations of meaningfulness, the possibilities are exponential.

Dubi Ganish, 46, from Kibbutz Revadim, might be the last person you’d expect to see holding a sign that says “Nothing” is missing in his life. A company commander during the Second Lebanon War in 2006, he was evacuating a soldier from an armored vehicle when it took a direct hit by a missile. Dubi lost one leg in the blast and is partially paralyzed in the other.

He says he had no idea of the scope of the project at the time, but he agreed to talk to the photographers, who asked him to participate after a family photo session.

“They are a person in under an hour. “It’s like they shine a light on everything, but with no judgment. And once things are out of the dark they never seem as bad.”

“They helped me clarify that what’s real and what’s most important to me – friendship, loyalty and the power of authenticity. I’m lucky to have these in my life. So, no, there’s nothing missing that would make me happier.”

Adler and Har-Lev gave their project a name and an Instagram page. They linked a short bio to each photo, and set up appointments around the country to interview and photograph people.

“Almost everyone we photographed sent us a name of someone else we should photograph; some sent whole lists,” says Adler. “There’s nothing more interesting than someone else’s story, and this is a never-ending story. It became our passion.”

The women interviewed and photographed people from every walk of life and more than a few celebrities, too. A Druze sheik poured his heart out to them in a tiny cove. The bandmates of Da’g Nachash shared their desires. Kneseet member Dr. Nachman Shai says he agreed to take part in the project because he was drawn by the creativity of it. At the end of his session with Adler and Har-Lev, he realized that only now, when his own family is leaving the nest, does he appreciate what a central role his parents had played in his own life.

“IT’s such a powerful experience, and we’re so drawn to it that we just couldn’t stop,” Har-Lev says. The women separat-ed “My Piece of Happiness” – for which they never charge – from their regular photography business, and started running self-realization workshops out of Mi/Li to finance their project.

So how is it possible that two photographers with no background in psychology, manage to get to the very essence of a person in under an hour?


As Adler says, “It’s not really that complicated. We just have to be true to ourselves.”

To see “My Piece of Happiness” on the Mi/Li website visit http://www.milistudio.co.il

To the Instagram page: www.instagram.com/my.piece.of.happiness/?hl=en