

FOUNDERS OF The Happiness Project Gili Adler and Mirit Har-Lev.  
(All photos courtesy Gili Adler and Mirit Har-Lev)



# Everyone deserves a piece of happiness

In a little corner of downtown Tel Aviv, two women are trying to make that happen

• STEPHANIE GRANOT

**W**hat'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-



*‘Those are the magical moments,’ says Mirit Har-Lev, ‘when a person can discover something completely new about himself’*

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

one’s picture, you talk to them.”

She and Mirit Har-Lev are sitting on the couch at Mi/Li, 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.

“Those are the magical moments,” says Har-Lev, “when a person can discover something completely new about himself.”

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 Givatim, 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, ➤➤



**MEMBER OF Knesset** Nachman Shai holds a sign that says, ‘Parents,’ symbolizing his feelings of loss of his children growing up.



**THIS PHOTO** is of a Syrian refugee who made it to Europe. His chalkboard says 'I want to live in peace all over the world / I'm happy now. I met the best people from Israel.'

"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

"Their concept is simple, but deep,"

Dubi says of the experience that lasted about 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 sheikh poured his heart out to them in a tiny cave. The bandmates of Da'g Nachash shared their desires. Knesset 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 separated "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?

Professor Arnon Levy, founder and academic director of Coaching Psychology Academy, shed some light on why this project works.

There's a combination of things at play here," says Levy. "They create conditions that lead to openness and self-discovery." He compares the session to what Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of humanistic psychology called a peak experience, and adds, "The fact that it's Adler and Har-Lev's passion to listen to people, and that they are helping them get in touch with their deepest yearnings on a voluntary basis, encourages people to trust them all the more."

And it's not just the session itself, says Levy. The ceremony of taking a photograph, and also the photograph itself, cement the moment of self-discovery.

"People are even more likely to remember it as a very significant moment, even if they don't make changes as a result."

A lot of people, though, are making

changes in their lives as a result of the project. Lilly Perelman 58, is chief nursing director of the hospital division of Clalit Health Services. Recently she found herself on the other side of the stethoscope.

"I kept a journal of the entire experience while I was being treated for breast cancer," she says, "although I really didn't know what I'd eventually do with it."

She met Adler when her daughter took her to a dance workshop in Cyprus. After a week of dancing and talking to Adler, Perelman says she felt old layers of armor start to melt away. Back in Israel, she contacted Adler and set up an appointment to participate in "My Piece of Happiness."

"I don't even remember what they asked me," she recalls, "but somehow, without being nosy or making me feel uncomfortable, they just unwrapped me."

It was a life-changing moment for Perelman, still the head nurse at Clalit, who decided to use her carefully documented cancer journey to realize a girlhood dream of becoming a performer. She enlisted the help of director Ayelet Ron, and last month she performed her one-woman show "Eizeh Seret-On: A Journey to Planet Cancer and Back" for the 12th time, in front of 900 people.

Although Perelman says there were other forces at work in her metamorphosis, "Gili and Mirit helped me reach way down inside of myself and pull out what I wrote on my sign, "To Dare to Live Life." When I saw that the picture of me holding that sign, I knew in that moment - no matter what anyone else said - that I could really, actually, do it."

Ironically, a devastating injury or illness can actually become a turning point, a catalyst of sorts, for someone to examine his or her life and as a result, experience a do-or-die moment when they realize they owe it to themselves to make a change.

But what about those of us who haven't experienced a catastrophic life-altering event, or had the good fortune to bump into Gili Adler and Mirit Har-Lev? How can we know if we're leading the most fulfilling lives possible, or merely being complacent? To be sure, complacency has its perks. But it can also compel us to settle for mediocrity.

The things written on the chalkboards of "My Piece of Happiness" are as diverse as the people holding them, but each contains a clue as to what makes us all tick. Call it a sense of peace, fulfillment, satisfaction, or meaning, it's a return to our earliest ideals, the things we valued in childhood and might have lost along the way.

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](http://www.instagram.com/my.piece.of.happiness/?hl=en)