



## Happiness and Other Small Things of Absolute Importance

**Haim Shapira**

**Baruch Gerfen, Translator**

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*Things of Absolute Importance is an amusing work from a provocative author determined to challenge his audience.*

This is not a self-help book. The author, Haim Shapira, makes that clear from the beginning. Instead, *Happiness and Other Small Things of Absolute Importance* intentionally poses more questions than it answers. Pulling from the writing of favorite childhood characters such as Winnie the Pooh and the Little Prince, as well as writers such as Aristotle, Tolstoy, and Kierkegaard, the book is a wide-ranging meditation on the fundamental questions of human existence.

In short chapters, Shapira discusses Happiness, Emotions, Imagination, Love, Time, and Wisdom. The tone throughout is lively, conversational, and opinionated. Quotes and antidotes are used liberally. In some cases, the quotes have been modified to reflect what might have been said: familiar stories are admittedly revised by the author.

Shapira's text can be a tease. He poses a topic, pulls together a number of quotes in support of a certain position, and then concludes that his opinion is different. So, too, does he draw upon his experience as a mathematician in an interesting way. The text includes data from various surveys, some of which feels dated, as with discussions of how men define happiness versus how women define it. Ultimately, the text toys with all of this data too, concluding that statistical studies "are valid for large groups, but there's almost nothing we can deduct from them when considering a single person." Headings like "Last Tango in Venice" and "The Marquis de Sade and the Stoics" enhance accessibility. Often, the book feels like a stream-of-consciousness lecture from a well-read author.

In the final chapter, on Wisdom and Meaning, Shapira relates his personal philosophy, influenced by King Solomon's writing in Ecclesiastes. The tighter focus provides a meaningful, thoughtful discussion. *Happiness and Other Small Things of Absolute Importance* is an amusing work from a provocative author determined to challenge his audience to embark on a "voyage to the land of Things That Matter."

KAREN ACKLAND (Fall 2016)

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