

The Origin of Depression

The numbers of depression among youth have skyrocketed in recent months. What does Judaism have to say about the importance of joy?

The CDC Report about the Healthy

In August, the CDC published a study about the impacts of the coronavirus on those who *didn't* contract it; it evaluated the emotional wellbeing of the broader population, especially the young people.

It turns out that whenever there is a rise in cases and hospitalizations and deaths, there is also a rise in the numbers of people suffering depression and anxiety. Even more worryingly, it gives rise to the numbers of those at risk of suicide.

From among all participants in the poll, eleven percent admitted to harboring suicidal thoughts during the corona months. Among the youth, the numbers were even worse: twenty-five percent of people aged 18-24 contemplated suicide. Among the unemployed, the number reached thirty percent.

When I did my own “poll” in my congregation, I heard similar things. A local children’s psychologist told me that *he* is suffering from depression from the number of teens who are suicidal. Another psychiatrist opened a private clinic in the months before coronavirus spread, and the phone has been ringing off the hook; people are begging him to help their family

members who are suffering from all sorts of mental ails due to the situation.

Spiritual Gas Stations

On Simchas Torah in 1976, the Rebbe dedicated a talk at the farbrengen to the topic of joy.

“Just as Hashem wants us to fulfill the commandment of Tefillin in a specific form and fashion,” the Rebbe said, “with detailed rules for the scrolls and *batim*, so too, Hashem wants every commandment and every aspect of service of Hashem to be done with joy. We don’t question why Hashem chose four parshios over five or three, so nor should we question why Hashem wants us to serve him with joy. He made that choice with His own free will.” (*Sichos Kodosh 5737* vol. 1 pg. 130).

The commandment to be joyful is unique. To fulfill the commandment of Tefillin or Shabbos candles, you simply need to carry out the deed. Afterwards, you may conclude your involvement and move on to something else.

Joy is different. A Jew is commanded to serve G-d with joy, and since service of G-d is not just when you do a Mitzvah at specific moments, every mundane activity including eating and drinking, must be done with the thought that this is done to serve G-d. Therefore, you must be joyful all day long!

In fact, in the *tochecha*, where Hashem states all the terrible things that will transpire if we don’t serve Him, the verse says that it will all take place “because you didn’t serve Hashem *with joy and gladness.*” (Tavo 28:47). Serving G-d isn’t enough. It

must be carried out with joy.

The good news is Hashem didn't merely give us a commandment to be joyful. He also gave us the tools to fulfill it. Occasionally, we fill up our cars with gasoline at a gas station, giving it the ability to carry on. Similarly, Hashem set up "spiritual gas stations" to fill up on joy.

These stations aren't geographical locations; they are stations in time. They are the three holidays, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. These are sources of joy and excitement which give us the spiritual energy to carry on throughout the year.

Jewish holidays are unique. Normally, people celebrate holidays for a single day, and then revert to their regular schedules. But Pesach is a full seven or eight days - depending on whether or not you live in Israel - and Sukkot and Simchas Torah are eight or nine.

I often get complaints from young parents who decided to enroll their children to Jewish schools. School begins in September, and the vacations begin immediately. Every five minutes they discover a new holiday; two days for Rosh Hashanah, a week later Yom Kippur, and then Sukkot comes along and school is closed for ten days. "When do Jewish kids go to school," they ask, "every day seems to be a Jewish holiday!"

The schedule is purposeful. During the holidays, Hashem wants us to leave our day to day life and be enveloped in a different reality. That isn't possible in a single day. Therefore, we pause our lives for a full week and ignore our regular issues, and the spiritual power those days generate, carry us throughout the

year.

The Source of Depression

But why is joy so important?

Why does the Torah place so much emphasis on it?

This brings us to this week's Parsha, Bereishis, the beginning of it all.

The Torah tells the famous story of Adam and Eve.

Hashem created the first two human beings, ushered them into the Garden of Eden, and gave them one commandment: Don't eat from the Tree of Knowledge. The snake came along, convinced Eve to eat some of it, and she persuaded Adam to partake as well.

Hashem revealed Himself and asked the eternal question: "Ayeka, where are you?" "Why did you eat from the Tree?"

Adam blamed Eve, who in turn, blamed the snake, and Hashem punished them all. The snake was reduced to a slithering creature, Eve was punished with the pains of childbirth, and Adam was told that he would need to toil for his sustenance.

The Rebbe points out an interesting question. If you pay attention to the earlier verses, we see that Adam was placed in the Garden, "to *work* it and to guard it." If he was commanded to work before any sin took place, why is work considered a curse?

To the contrary: G-d clearly created the human being with the

express purpose to work and be creative. He created the world as a place that needs to be fixed, and thereby gave us the opportunity to become His partners in creation. So why is work considered a punishment? Millions of people wake up each morning eager to go to work; it gives them an immense sense of fulfillment and gratification. Why is it considered a punishment?

When we carefully inspect the verses, we discover the answer. The curse to Adam wasn't just that he would need to toil. "Cursed will be the earth for you," Hashem says, "בְּעֶצְבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה, you will eat it with difficulty and dispiritedness." The word *etzev* doesn't just mean difficulty; it also means despair. The Sin of the Tree of Knowledge brought something new to the world: sadness.

Eve was given a similar curse. She wasn't told "You will suffer from childbirth." She was told, "בְּעֶצְבַּ תֵּלְדִי בָנִים, you will bear children with difficulty and dispiritedness." The beginning of the verse states likewise, "הִרְבַּה אֶרְבָּה עִצְבוֹנְךָ וְהִרְבַּנְךָ, I will increase your depression in your pregnancy." (Perhaps the double statement is the source of post-partum depression...)

Correcting the Sin

In many studies, women were asked, "What made you choose your husband? What made you fall in love with him?"

Often, the number one answer is, "He makes me laugh. When I'm down, he raises my spirits."

Chassidism explains that Torah came to the world to correct the

Sin of the Tree of Knowledge. Being that the sin brought the concept of depression into the world, Torah commands us to be joyful at every moment of our lives.

And as we draw closer to the times of Moshiach, when the Sin of the Tree of Knowledge will be repaired entirely, we need to abolish depression altogether. For that purpose, the Baal Shem Tov came to the world to teach us the ways of Chassidism, which is founded on the commandment to serve Hashem with joy at every moment of the day. Within Chassidic teachings, depression is the greatest offense of all. When a Jew is joyful, he has hope for better times, but the moment he loses his joy, there is no hope.

Anyone who ever visited the Rebbe knows that the Rebbe didn't allow sadness or depression into 770. Even after a tragic event, the Rebbe didn't allow people to sink into depression, and always encouraged more and more joy. A single Farbrengen in the Rebbe's presence was enough to put you on a high for a few days.

We now come from Simchas Torah. We derive our joy not from drinking *l'chaim* – although it can definitely help – but from our study and our connection to Torah. Every person who studies Torah knows it; during the study he feels joyful and afterwards he feels more uplifted.

This Shabbos is Shabbos Bereishis. The Rebbe would always say that Shabbos Bereishis sets the tone for the entire year. Now is the time to choose a Torah class – daily, weekly, biweekly, or whatever suits you best. Because a Jew who learns Torah is a

happier Jew.