

Laugh Therapy

Category: Holidays, Simchas Torah

What is the best way to overcome challenges and better your situation? Simchat Torah contains the answer.

Overflowing

“Is your cup half full or half empty?”

If a random person on the street would stop you with this question, what would you answer?

Saranne Rothberg relates that she was once waiting to cross a street when a stranger turned to her with that question: “Do you see your cup as half full or half empty?”

She responded, “Neither; my cup is overflowing.”

The fellow introduced himself as one of the advisers to President Obama. He said that he had asked this question to thousands of people, but it was the first time he had ever received such an answer.

Twenty years ago, Mrs. Rothberg discovered that she had cancer. It was a Friday afternoon; the fellow in the hospital told her that there were no doctors available, and she should therefore go home with the news and return on Monday. She didn't know how to deal with the news, but she remembered that as a university student she had read about “laugh therapy,” that laughter could literally heal people, so she returned home and began listening to all sorts of comedy and anything that would make her laugh.

As the days passed, she realized that laughter had given her the strength to cope with the bad diagnosis. She therefore decided to share her discovery with other people suffering from similar diseases. Whenever she would go to the hospital for her chemotherapy treatment, she would arrange a party that would bring laughter to the other patients. As she would receive her treatment, she would be hosting and encouraging other sick people.

After enduring three surgeries, 40 sessions of radiation and two years of chemotherapy, the doctors gave up hope and sent her home. But she was resolved not to give in. She believed that God would help her, and with her firm belief in God and lots of laughter and joy, she was lucky enough to recover. She decided to dedicate her life to bring her message of healing through laughter to the world, so she established an organization called “Comedy Cure,” which spreads the message that laughter can bring genuine healing. Many years have since passed, and she remains healthy, thank God.

She says that she can't promise you that laughter will bring the cure; no treatment, in essence, is foolproof. However, even if it doesn't work, it's better to laugh than to be depressed.

The Power of Laughter

It is interesting to note that humor helps in a wide variety of illnesses and situations.

For example, laughter is literally good for your muscles. When you laugh, you activate muscles that are not usually used. Laughter also helps you lose weight; research shows that an hour of laughter burns 555 calories; two minutes of laughter is equivalent to 15 minutes of brisk walking outdoors or on a treadmill. Laughter also lowers your blood pressure and the chances of a heart attack. It also helps cure asthma and other illnesses related to lungs and the respiratory system.

And of course, laughter has an amazing effect on a person's mental state. Research shows that when a person laughs, the brain resets for several seconds; he stops thinking and, more importantly, stops worrying. This short break has a significant impact on a person's mental state. When a person laughs on a regular basis, his negative thoughts disappear, and it is easier for him to enter a positive state of mind.

Additionally: studies have shown that when children laugh, they achieve better grades. This isn't news; the Talmud states, “Before Rava would open his lecture, he would say a joke, and the rabbis would laugh” (Shabbos 30b). Rashi explains that the purpose was to “open their hearts through joy” (see Tanya chapter 7).

Joy During the Yom Kippur War

Now, in Judaism in general, and the Chasidic movement in particular, the focus is a little different — the emphasis is bringing yourself to a state of joy.

In 1973, three days after the outbreak of the Yom Kippur war, the Rebbe held a gathering. As in all of the Rebbe's gatherings, it was a joyous occasion, and the Rebbe's talks — the main focus of the evening — were accompanied with song and l'chaim.

The news from Israel regarding the war was still very bleak. The Rebbe noted that some people questioned the decision to hold a joyous gathering while their brethren in Israel endured a difficult war. In response, the Rebbe cited a teaching that the Baal Shem Tov would often repeat to his students:

“The verse states, ‘God is my shadow.’ Just as your shadow echoes your exact moves, God likewise, echoes our behavior.”

The Rebbe noted that this exact teaching was stated in the Zohar as well. “God reflects the face of the Jew. When you show a joyous face, God reflects with a joyous face.” Therefore, the Rebbe concluded, the best way to assist the Jews in Israel was through joy — because joy breaks through all boundaries (Torah Menachem vol. 74 pg. 74 and on).

Three months later, the Rebbe held the gathering in honor of 19 Kislev, marking the Alter Rebbe's release from czarist imprisonment. By then, the situation had vastly improved, but there were still thousands of soldiers in the battlefields. Once again, the Rebbe addressed those who questioned the wisdom of celebrating 19 Kislev during such a difficult time.

The Rebbe related that when the Alter Rebbe sat in prison, they interrogated him about the ethos of the Chasidic movement. He answered all of the questions, but there was one question he didn't. They asked him why he had written in Tanya that the soul of a Jewish person comes from a different level than the soul of a non-Jew; instead of answering, he simply smiled, and the interrogators didn't press him further.

At a later occasion, he explained that joy is something that “sweetens bad decrees” — and that is why he smiled. His smile diffused the tension of the

moment. When there is a negative decree hanging over a person, joy has the ability to abolish it, and even to transform it to something better. (Toras Menachem vol. 74 pg. 285).

Going back to the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War:

On Chol Hamoed Sukkot that year, a delegation of worried chassidim solemnly approached the Rebbe with a request that he pray for the situation in Israel. The Rebbe responded that he was in a state of joy; why were they trying to bring him into a state of bitterness? (Ibid pg. 94). In other words, salvation could be achieved specifically through joy.

Come Dance!

This was characteristic of the Rebbe. The Rebbe believed that the best way to deal with a problem — is through joy.

Now, every Jewish behavior is relevant all year round, but there is always one day a year that specific behavior is paramount. The same is true of joy; we are commanded to serve God with joy every day of the year. But there is one day a year in which the joy is so immense that it empowers us to carry the joy through the year. That day is Simchat Torah. It is a day when Jews sing, dance, say l'chaim and celebrate with the Torah so much that it leaves an impact on the entire following year.

Do you want to get rid of your worries and pains? Come to Hakafot tonight. You won't merely forget your sorrow during the dancing itself. Moreover, and more importantly, the joy of the holiday will help you abolish "the decree" and transform it to something good. Your greatest fear will turn into your greatest asset, and you'll have a year of joy, health, and nachas from your children. But, there is one condition: you need to come dance.