



Adar II

The Not-So-Secret Secrets of Purim The Positive Aspects of Laughter

The traditions around Purim all emphasize the need to be happy. The Midrash says, “*When Adar begins, happiness increases!*” This year there are actually two months of Adar (making a Jewish “leap” year) to multiply the joy. It is quite perplexing why this holiday, which celebrates the threat of near extinction, should be a source of such joy. As Rabbi Irving Greenberg points out, it is the variety of the holiday cycle which is so unique. The highs and the lows - from the moments of self-criticism and contemplation on Yom Kippur to the gaiety and playfulness of Purim - all roll together into a complete picture of human emotions.

The importance of laughter and fun in dealing with stress and hardship has been recognized since biblical times; now clinical research has documented the positive impact of laughter on humans. For more than two decades, individuals with life-threatening illnesses have been offered “laughter therapy” and the results have been astounding.

Each of us knows that a good belly laugh is very refreshing and a good laugh can start the day in a great way. The healing aspect of laughter has been well established. It does not cure disease, but it can surely ameliorate some of the negative aspects of chronic conditions and increase coping immensely. There are restorative powers in humor.

The impact on emotional health is more obvious than on the physical, but both are clear. Laughter decreases depression, increases mental acuity, improves memory, and positively effects sleep patterns. Daily sessions of laughter decrease stress, improve cardio-vascular function, increase immunity, and relieve pain. The last aspect, the impact on pain, has been used successfully since the middle ages. As humans face ever more serious threats of infection, medical science is always looking for ways to improve our immune systems.

Most interestingly, the research shows that laughter with others is more effective than laughing alone. The data on sharing humor indicates not only better relationships, but an improved self-image and ability to cope with stressors. This has led to laughter groups, which are more acceptable abroad than in America.

The actual physiological sequence that allows for all of these positive changes is understood only partially. Laughter relaxes blood vessels and increases blood flow. The release of endorphins, an internal hormone that diminishes pain, has been observed. Also rapid changes in neuro-hormones related to stress have been documented. Even knowing all this, the actual mechanism of laughing on internal functions is not clear.

Laughter is innate; all humans know how to laugh without learning. Babies smile before they are a month old and laugh out loud soon thereafter. Clearly, this is a very human function that is not used often enough.

With Purim approaching, the recommendation for this month is to laugh...often and loudly and with others. Enjoy a good laugh daily, and measure the changes in your own health.

Remember when Adar begins, happiness happens.

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