



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Terumah

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Terumah - Adar

**The Two Jesters:
Is There a Secret to Joy?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

We are all aware of the ill effects that sadness has on us. But do we know the full extent of its impact on our lives? How does it affect our health, our choices and our coping mechanisms? What other consequences – conscious or unconscious – does a despondent life have?

This, of course, leads us to the converse question: How does joy affect our lives? How important is it to our health and well-being? How would our lives be different if we were full of joy and happiness? Did you know that Jews have as many words for joy in Hebrew as the Eskimos have for snow?

We all have impediments in life that don't allow us to reach our goals and fulfill our dreams. What would you give for a proven method to eliminate obstructions and unclog the blocks in our lives?

This past week we have entered the month of Adar, when we increase in joy. Apropos, a cryptic Talmudic story of two jesters and its psychological and mystical meaning offers us a revolutionary approach to joy. It explains how joy unblocks impediments, allowing us to access our deepest resources and enabling us to connect to our true inner selves.

These concepts are illustrated with two real life stories of people who changed themselves and inspired others by embracing joy.

THE TWO JESTERS: IS THERE A SECRET TO JOY?

1. Consequences of Sadness

We are all aware of the ill effects that sadness has on us. But do we know the full extent of its impact on our lives? How does it affect our health, our choices and our coping mechanisms? How many of our life decisions are compromised due to lack of joy? What other consequences – conscious or unconscious – does a despondent life have?

This, of course, leads us to the converse question: How does joy affect our lives? How important is it to our health and well-being? How would our lives be different if we were full of joy and happiness?

This is an appropriate question for we have just entered the month of Adar, when we are meant to increase in joy.

Now why should Judaism be concerned with joy – isn't it the province of religion to be concerned with, say, prayer, Torah study, commandments, and holiness?

Of course, Judaism is concerned with all those things, but it cares very much how we fulfill our religious obligations – whether while sighing or while smiling.

Why?

Because it's a matter of life and death.

2. Laughter the Best Medicine

When the editor of the *Saturday Review*, Norman Cousins, was diagnosed with a rare debilitating and painful disease (called Marie-Strumpell's disease), he was told that he had little chance of surviving.

Rather than succumb to that diagnosis, he developed his own treatment program that chiefly depended on a positive attitude, on love, faith, hope and ... laughter – yes, laughter! – induced by Marx Brothers films.

As he later wrote in his book *Anatomy of an Illness*: “I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep. When the pain-killing effect of the laughter wore off, I would switch on the motion picture projector again and not infrequently, it would lead to another pain-free interval.”

When Cousins died at age 75 – incidentally of a heart attack – it was some twenty years after that fateful diagnosis. By then, his groundbreaking theories – namely that people's attitude to life affects their health – had become part and parcel of modern medicine.

3. Judaism and Joy

Now, of course, Judaism has taught this all along. And this may be the reason why we are admonished to serve God with joy,¹ and why we have as many words for joy in Hebrew as the Eskimos have for snow. Just think about it: *sasson, simchah, gilah, rinah, chedvah* ...

The emphasis on joy is especially appropriate as we have just entered the Hebrew month of Adar, and about it the sages say, “When Adar enters, joy increases.”²

¹ Deuteronomy 28:47 and Psalms 100:2.

² *Taanis* 26b.

In this spirit, the Talmud³ relates the story of Rabbi Beroka who one day found himself in the marketplace with Elijah, and he took the opportunity to ask the great prophet, “Is there anyone here who belongs in the World To Come?”

Elijah pointed out two brothers, so Rabbi Beroka ran after them to find out more.

When he reached them, he learned that they were jesters by occupation. They told him, “We make depressed people laugh. And when we see two people in a quarrel, we use humor to make peace between them.”

4. Mystical Explanation

The deeper, psycho-spiritual explanation of this, according to the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, is as follows:⁴

These two jesters were able to connect everything they saw in a person to its origin in the higher world. By doing this, any harsh heavenly decrees upon that person were automatically annulled.

But if someone was depressed, they could not make this connection. So they would cheer him up with some humor, until they were able to make all the connections necessary.

5. Sadness and Disconnection

The psychological and spiritual energy of sadness and depression is disconnection. When people are unhappy, they are disconnected – disconnected from themselves, and disconnected from others.

³ *Taanis* 22a.

⁴ Toldos Yaakov Yosef, Parshat Nasso. Keser Shem Tov sections 37, 58, 93(c), 272, 375. Tzava'at Harivash section 107.

Witness the sad person and you see that he withdraws, recoils and avoids contact. Despondence leads to – or is a result of – insecurity and lack of confidence, which further leads to disconnection.

In turn, sadness and the disconnectedness it causes infects everything. It repels people. Who wants to be around a sad soul?

Happiness on the other hand is a connector. The happy person reaches out to and attracts others. Joy is contagious. The joyous person is filled with confidence and courage to take on new challenges.

Sadness breeds narrowness and constrictiveness – at best, it elicits sympathy – while joy elicits generosity and expansiveness.

A parable captures this idea:

A pauper comes before a king and petitions him for assistance, sobbing dramatically. In response the king provides him with a small morsel.

Then one of the king's ministers steps up. He lauds the king eloquently and exuberantly, then, in the midst of such praise, he slips in his request. To him the king provides a very generous gift, as befits nobility.

6. The Secret of Joy

This approach to joy – and to its alter ego, sorrow – is nothing less than revolutionary: joy is connection, sorrow disconnection.

When you are sad or depressed, blocks are created, obstructions that don't allow you to access your own inner strengths and your connection to your spiritual source above.

Everything in the material world has a spiritual counterpart that sustains it. But sadness blocks the flow from the spiritual into the material. Think of it as the psychological equivalent of a blockage of the artery, not allowing (or thwarting) the normal, smooth flow of blood into a particular part of the body.

Joy unblocks these impediments.

So, when you cheer someone up, you aren't just distracting them or making them happy; you are actually unclogging their blocked channels within that person's psyche, freeing and releasing their spirit that was locked within.

7. Sad World

We live in a very sad world. There is an enormous amount of sorrow and despair in our society today. Much of it is silent, which does not make it less troubling. The heavy weight of sadness pollutes everything. Every decision, every choice, every move is compromised when there is no joy. Sadness creates a climate of fear and insecurity.

If you could add up all the sadness in the universe how much would it weigh? Would it be outweighed by happiness and joy in the world?! Some say that for every piece of joy there are five pieces of sorrow...

Is there any wonder then why there is so much disconnection in our world? So many rifts and so much divisiveness - within families, communities and nations.

8. The Good News

The good news is that we can do something about it:

One of the Baal Shem Tov's students once said: "People say they are sad because they have no joy in their lives. The fact is that they have no joy because they are sad. People say that that they cannot sing because they are sad. The fact is that they are sad because they don't sing."

The first lesson in this applies to each one of us: As sad as you may be, always remember that your sadness disconnects you from your own strengths and source.

But to cheer yourself up is a very difficult thing to do.

So we have the second lesson - by cheering others up, we cheer ourselves up ... and then a domino effect takes place: we connect with others, we connect with our souls and our source above, they connect with their souls, etc.

9. Cheer Up Others

So, when you see a sad person, cheer him up. Become a jester. Tell him something humorous and uplifting.

This is not a small matter: Remember that as long as that person is depressed, he cannot be connected to his own soul and source above. When you bring him joy you dislodge many blockages and free his soul!

And you improve his mood and his health at the same time. (Not to mention your own.)

We each can and must be jesters. Especially in such a despondent world, we are in need of intensified joy and happiness, in order to counter all the dark troubles that cloud the horizons.

It is now Adar, there is no better time to start. [Amen.]

10. A Story of a Clown (Optional Ending)

I'd like to close with a real life story of a clown, a woman who should serve as an inspiration for us all.⁵

Phyllis Shlossman just had that funny streak in her nature. And she couldn't abide sad people. That's why, whenever she ate at a restaurant with her husband and children, if she noticed that the people at the next table were forlorn or fretful, she reached into her purse for her weapon.

She pulled out her special fork, swiftly extended its handle to its full, yard-long length, and deftly stabbed a French Fry from a plate on the next table. As she retracted the fork with the pilfered food, the astounded diners would follow its course to see a woman with a twinkle in her eye asking, "It looked so good. Do you mind?"

The response was always the same: first, shock, then guffaws of hysterical laughter.

Phyllis had succeeded once more in her life's mission: to cheer up people.

Phyllis was in her early 1960s when she encountered her destiny in the form of a newspaper advertisement for the South Florida Clown School. One year and a certificate later, Phyllis became a professional clown, "Ladybug." She started by volunteering as a hospice clown, then at a camp for kids with cancer. Eventually she worked both professionally and on a volunteer basis.

Then, at age 73, Phyllis was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. Although hospitalized herself, she never ceased to be a clown, never ceased to cheer others up.

Just three weeks before she died, while lying on a gurney after a painful lung-drainage procedure, she noticed a sad woman standing a short distance away. Unable to move, Phyllis deputized her daughter Ruth. "Go make that woman happy," she instructed.

⁵ Adapted from "Life and Death of a Clown" by Sara Yoheved Rigler, anthologized in *God Winked*, Makor Press, 2011, pp. 101-105.

“Mom, I’m not like you,” Ruth demurred. “I don’t know how to go over to a stranger and make her happy.”

Despite her pain, Phyllis was not about to abandon her life’s mission. “Okay, then tell her to come over to me.”

Ruth shyly approached the woman. “Excuse me,” she said. “My mother would like to talk to you.”

Perplexed, the woman acquiesced and came over where Phyllis was lying on the gurney.

“Hi, how are you?” Phyllis greeted her with a warm smile.

With the magic that only true clowns can invoke, she opened up the stranger’s heart. The woman poured out her whole story: how her daughter was sick with kidney stones, and how they had not been able to remove them, and how worried she was.

“I have just the thing for you,” Phyllis responded. With effort, she pulled out of her bathrobe pocket a set of index cards, on which she had written her favorite jokes. “I don’t have my glasses here, so I can’t read these. Would you read them for me?” she appealed.

The erstwhile stranger read the jokes out loud, and everyone within hearing distance laughed riotously, including the woman herself. Another mission accomplished.

More than 400 people attended Phyllis’s funeral. At its conclusion, a man who worked across the street from the funeral parlor approached and inquired: “I’ve never seen so many people here. Who died? Was she a big movie star?”

No, she was someone eternally more important than a movie star. She was a clown.