

LAUGHTER REALLY IS THE BEST MEDICINE

By: Debbie Shapiro

Several years ago I visited a dear friend of mine who was hospitalized in the oncology department. Despite the lush foliage and peaceful paintings, I hesitated for more than a moment before entering that area of the hospital. I would have preferred visiting the maternity ward.

My friend Esther a"h [may she rest in peace] was a real trooper. She fought for her life in the same way that a lioness fights to save her cubs – with every ounce of physical and spiritual strength that she possessed. Over and over again she succeeded in proving the doctors wrong until she finally succumbed to her disease. She had a wonderful network of devoted friends who were constantly there to give her moral support, and, most important of all, a few good jokes when the going became really tough. Some of them are still my favorites.

No matter how many times I've made a bikur cholim visit, I still enter a hospital room with a sense of trepidation. There's the fear of the unknown, and, at least with me, the very real fear of saying the wrong thing. I have a propensity for putting my foot in my mouth – and I don't mean while (trying to) do yoga.

In Israeli hospitals, four (and sometimes five) patients share one large, airy room. Although there is a lack of privacy, there is the comfort of being together with other people who are facing a similar challenge, and the results are that forced roommates often end up becoming lifelong friends!

Several years before this story happened, I spent close to a month in the hospital waiting for my baby to make her grand entrance into the world. With absolutely nothing to do except twiddle my thumbs for exercise, my roommates and I spent hours talking. I became especially close with another chareidi [religious] woman named Shaina. Our long talks were a form of mutual therapy, and, as we whispered in the darkness, hoping that the nurses would not come into the room to scold us, we laughed and cried and shared our life's story while joking that we were in a very elite Mother's camp. After our babies were born, Shaina and I were thrust back into the very hectic real world and eventually lost touch with each other.

So you can imagine my surprise when I walked into the oncology department to visit Esther, and found Shaina lying in the next bed, hooked up to several beeping intravenous pumps. Eyes wide with astonishment, she gushed, "Oh Debbie! I'm so happy that you came to visit me!"

This was not what I was expecting! I had no idea that Shaina was sick. The last time we met was at a wedding. She had looked radiant as she introduced me to her family. So without thinking (oh boy! that's something I do much, much too often) and speaking too loud for comfort, I blurted, "What a wonderful surprise to see you here, Shaina."

I immediately realized that my words were totally out of place and turned a stunning shade of purple. I had done it again, only this time it was my entire leg, not just a foot!

All conversation came to a stop as everyone in the room stared at me. The silence was frightening. Then everyone, patients and visitors alike, broke into hysterical laughter, which was followed by numerous reenactments of my blunder.

I later heard that my stupidity was the joke of the department. My two friend's room told it to the nurses, who told it to the doctors, who told it to the other patients. For days afterwards, patients would greet each other in the halls with a chuckle and gush, "What a *wonderful* surprise to see you here!"

Although I certainly don't suggest that my readers repeat my mistake, it definitely accomplished what I had set out to do – to bring cheer to a very sick young woman, as well as to many others.

One of my neighbors told me that when her father was undergoing chemotherapy, a neighborhood rav [rabbi] asked her to deliver a letter to him. She wondered what words of chizuk [encouragement] and deep messages of comfort the letter conveyed. Imagine her surprise when her father opened the letter and broke into laughter at the two very funny jokes that the rav had enclosed!

According to an age-old adage, laughter is the best medicine, and medical studies are proving it to be true. A recent study by cardiologists at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore found that people with heart disease were 40 percent less likely to laugh in a variety of situations compared to people of the same age without heart disease. Michael Miller, M.D., director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center and associate professor of medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine comments, "We don't know yet why laughing protects the heart, but we know that mental stress is associated with impairment of the endothelium, the protective barrier lining our blood vessels. This can cause a series of inflammatory reactions that lead to fat and cholesterol build-up in the coronary arteries and ultimately to a heart attack." (Maybe this is a new twist on the often given advice, "Don't take it to heart.")

The effects of laughter and exercise are very similar. When we laugh we stretch muscles, our pulse and blood pressure go up and we breathe faster, sending more oxygen to our tissues. Studies have also shown that humor may raise the level of infection-fighting antibodies in the body, as well as boost the level of immune cells. One study even showed that humor helps to lower blood sugar levels!

The medical profession now acknowledged the positive impact of humor in staying healthy and battling disease. Medical clowns are a recognized part of many departments for the seriously ill, and laughter therapy and laughter clubs, where people get together to giggle, are sprouting up almost everywhere (more about laughter clubs next week b'ezras Hashem [with G-d's help])! Even the pentagon is training military families to use laughter to help them cope with stress! (As I write this, it suddenly occurred to me that perhaps this is a unique explanation of why Purim is always thirty days before Pesach.)

Excerpted from "Behind Closed Doors: Yes, you're really normal. A column for the Jewish Woman"
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