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Adar - The Month of Laughter

With the help of Hashem, we are now in the month of *Adar Beis*. Here we will continue what we began to discuss last month in *Adar Aleph*, where we spoke about the power of *simchah* (happiness). Now we will speak about another power found in the month of Adar, "*sechok*" (laughter) [1], and how we can use this power with our soul.

Holy Laughter and Evil Laughter

The power of laughter, as with every other power in the soul, can be used for either good or evil.

On one hand, we find that Sarah Imeinu named her son "*Yitzchok*" because she had *t'zchok* (laughter) when she first heard that she would have a child; she was laughing that she had a child in her old age. This was a holy kind of laughter. On the other hand, there is also an evil kind of laughter, as one of the prophets lamented about: "*I have been made into laughter all along, and of what is this festivity about?*"

Thus, we find *sechok* (or *tzechok*) *d'kedushah* (holy laughter) by Yitzchok Avinu, and there is also evil *sechok*. What is holy laughter, and what is evil laughter?

First of all, before we explain when laughter is holy and when it is evil, it is hard to understand in the first place of how laughter can be holy. Laughter is usually associated with lightheadedness, which causes us to stop being serious; it is something that cools us off from being focused on our inner, spiritual world. It prevents us from the levelheadedness that is required for having *yiras shomayim* (fear of Heaven). How can laughter be holy, then? And how can it be that Yitzchok Avinu's name comes from the term *tzechok*, laughter?

Let us therefore see what the role of laughter is.

An Antidote For Anger and Sadness

There are two positive ways to use laughter.

(1) Laughter can take away a person's sadness. Sadness can also be solved through the power of *simcha* (happiness), which we spoke about last month; but another power which can counter sadness is through *sechok* (laughter), which is the other aspect that is contained in the month of Adar. (We will soon explain what the difference between *simchah* and *sechok* is.)

(2) Another positive use of laughter is that it can counter anger. When a person is angry and we get him to laugh, we can see that his anger immediately cools down and he is calmed. There is something about laughter that dissipates anger.

Using Laughter To Calm Down Our Anger

We will explore here the second positive use of laughter: its power to calm us down when we are angry.

Rav Yitzchok Kaduri zt"l was an elderly *Gadol* in Eretz Yisrael who was *niftar* recently. He lived to be over 100 years. When he was asked how he merited to live so long, he answered that it was because every time he was about to get angry, he laughed instead, which made his anger subside.

When a person is angry, his heart is filled with what the Gemara calls "boiling of the blood" (*resichas damim*). Through laughter, a person cools off the "boiling of the blood" which fuels anger. Let's explain how, indeed, laughter can calm anger.

The External Use of Laughter: Remembering Something Funny

First of all, we should know that this is not the only technique we can use against anger. There is an external way to use laughter and an internal way to use laughter, in order to deal with anger. The external way to use laughter, which we are about to explain, is one of the solutions brought in the works of our Rabbis.

How can a person use the external method of laughter to calm his anger? The advice is that when a person is about to get angry, he should imagine a situation which gets him to laugh. Remember something funny you once saw, heard, or read about, which made you laugh; and imagine it strongly as you find yourself about to get angry about something. You will find that this calms the soul.

The Internal Use of Laughter: Awakening Your Emunah

The internal way to use laughter to counter anger is to remind ourselves of *emunah*, when we remind ourselves that everything that happens is from Hashem. When we realize that we were wrong in how we originally thought, and we realize that we were incorrect for thinking that we had it all right, we are able to laugh about it.

This is the inner way to use the power of laughter. You thought it was supposed to be a certain way, and now you realize that it's not how you thought, because Hashem planned otherwise. "*My thoughts are not their thoughts.*" Anytime that a person wanted something and he thought that this was the logical course to take, and it didn't end up happening as he thought it would - he can remind himself of *emunah* that Hashem is in charge and that Hashem knows better than him, and this can get a person to laugh.

Such laughter will be stemming from *emunah*. One can laugh at the very fact that he had thought that things should be a certain way, and then he realized that Hashem had other thoughts in mind for him. He realizes, "Hashem is running the world, not me!" It can actually bring you to laughter - a holy and deep laughter that stems from a realization of *emunah*.

We will give a parable that illustrates this idea. If a lion and a cat get into a fight [and the cat got away alive], should the cat feel bad that the lion defeated it, and cry about this? Instead of crying, it should laugh, because it is laughable for the cat to want to win a fight with a lion. Why is this laughable? Because when things don't go our way, this was how it was supposed to happen, so there is no reason to cry; instead, it can awaken us to laugh.

The lesson we can take out from the parable of the cat and lion is: Why should we cry when things don't go our way? Whatever happened to us was supposed to happen, because Hashem runs the world. Instead of being angry that something didn't go our way, we should laugh. This laughter can calm down our anger.

However, in order to use laughter in an inner way to calm down our anger, one needs clear *emunah* and to feel *bittul* (self-nullification), to Hashem. If one does not have clear *emunah*, he will only get angrier when he reminds himself that things didn't go his way. Thus, the clearer one's *emunah* is and the more one agrees to submit his will to Hashem's will, the better he will be able to laugh at himself when things don't go his way. This is a very deep way to use the power of holy laughter.

Holy Mockery: Making Fun of Your Anger

Chazal say that "all *leitzaanus* (mockery) is forbidden, except for mocking *avodah zarah* (idol worship)." Besides for the simple meaning of this, which is also true, a person can also mock the *yetzer hora* (evil inclination) which is present inside his heart - for the *yetzer hora* is called the "strange god that resides in a person", it is called "a spark of idol worship" inside the person, and a person can make fun of the *yetzer hora* inside himself, the "internal *avodah zarah*" - when he reminds himself of *emunah*.

It is permissible to "make fun" of one's own *yetzer hora* - i.e. his anger - when his will doesn't happen; and one should indeed do so. This is the concept of *leitzaanus d'kedushah* (holy mockery), which can remove anger.

Using Both Kinds of Laughter At Once

To summarize thus far, there are two ways to calm ourselves down when we are about to get upset - an external way to use laughter, and an inner way to use laughter. The external way is to remind ourselves of something funny. The second way to is to summon forth our *emunah* and laugh at ourselves that Hashem had different thoughts and plans than we did.

We must emphasize that the external method (remembering something funny) should be used only in tandem with the inner part of the solution (reminding ourselves of *emunah*). Every matter has an external layer and an internal layer to it, and we need both of these aspects; therefore, we need to make use of both the external and internal aspects, when we use the power of laughter. If one just uses the external part and he doesn't use *emunah*, this is like a body without a soul, and it is the way of the gentile nations of the world, not the way of the nation of Yisrael. The balanced approach is to use both of these methods together in our laughter. Through that, we can merit with Hashem's help to weaken anger, by using this *leitzaanus d'kedushah* (holy mockery) and *sechok d'kedushah* (holy laughter).

What Is Simcha, and What Is Sechok?

Let us continue to discuss now how we remove sadness, which is through *simchah* (happiness) and *sechok* (laughter/mockery). Firstly, let us understand the difference between *simchah* (happiness) and *sechok* (laughter).

Simchah means that I have a genuine reason to be happy. We can find *simchah* both in the spiritual as well as in the physical areas of life. A Jew can feel happy when he thinks about the fact that he is a Jew, or when he merits helping others and being kind to others, etc. Even physical accomplishments make us happy: we are happy when we buy a house, or when we get married, or when we find something that was missing, etc. Thus, *simchah* is when I am happy with something that's here, and it's tangible.

Sechok (laughter), though, comes from something that *isn't* – not about what is. The word “*sechok*” is come from the word “*shechok*”, which means to “grind” (from the term ‘*shechikas samimanim*’, “grinding of herbs”), and when you grind, you are making something that “is” into something that “isn't”. This is also the root behind *leitzanus* (mockery) – when a person mocks something, he is nullifying its important and to make it into something that “isn't”.

Thus, *simchah* is when I am happy with what is, and *sechok* is when I am happy with something I have nullified, not with something that is here.

With *sechok*, a person is happy with something that is non-existent, because the very concept of *sechok* is that it attaches a person to a non-existent world. *Simchah* connects me to that which exists, while *sechok* brings a person into the non-existent (even when it is holy). *Sechok* (laughter) is the synonymous with *leitzanus* (mockery and joking), which is rooted in the word “*tzeil*”, “shadow” - a lack of light - an absence of something that is, and instead something that isn't.

Therefore, when we laugh or when we hear laughter, we are connecting ourselves to a nonexistent world. We don't think about what we are laughing about, we just laugh. That itself is an attachment to the nonexistent. Now let us learn about how this power is used in the side of evil and how it can also be used in the side of holiness. Whether it is used for holiness or for evil, however, *sechok* is always about becoming attached to that which doesn't exist.

Holy Laughter: Using Humor To Loosen The Body's Hold

We find in the Gemara that some of the Sages would begin their lessons with a *milsa d'bedichusa* – with something humorous. What was the purpose of this? It is because every person has a body and a soul. Our body covers our soul, and therefore there are many physical aspects of our being which prevents us from getting into the inner, spiritual light that is our soul. One of the ways to shed our physical layers is to use the power of *sechok\leitzanus* (laughter\mockery) for holiness.

How does it work? Laughter connects us to the nonexistent, which in turn sheds our physical layers. We can then immediately return to our inner world afterwards, the world of our *neshamah* (Divine soul), which is our inner reality. This is the purpose of holy laughter: it can help us free ourselves, to have “*purkan*” (freedom) from our normal physical restraints, and connect us better to our inner world.

Soon we will see how this is also used for evil and how it is used for holiness; but this is the concept of how laughter works. It loosens up our physicality, and when used for holiness, it enables us to go free from our physical restraints and to enter into our inner world of the soul.

Based upon this, let us understand the following. If someone is already connected to his inner world and he is solidly anchored there, using laughter can help him get past his physicality, and to enter into his inner world more. But if a person is not yet in touch with his inner world, or if he has a very minimal revelation of it, laughter will disconnect him from physicality, and where does he return to afterwards? He returns to the materialism where he is found in. Laughter doesn't help him at all, and it even damages him internally, because he gets used to lightheadedness and it leads him towards sin, and he gets used to connecting to the nonexistent.

This is the depth of the difference between holy laughter and evil laughter. Holy laughter was used by the Sages when they began their lesson, and it is used by a person who is already connected to his inner world, where he can use laughter in order to enter more inward into their souls; after laughter, this kind of person can maintain his connection to his inner world. But those who have no inner world to connect to are not using laughter to enter into their inner world. They are using laughter simply to

escape sadness, and when they are done laughing, they return to where they were before – and their laughter did nothing for them.

Take sleeping, for example. There are two general reasons why people sleep. A person who has no connection to his inner world sleeps because he loves to sleep. An inner person sleeps to energize his body so that he will be able to get up the next day refreshed to serve the Creator. There are some people who sleep because they want to feel the lethargy of it, which further attaches them to the heaviness of materialism and physicality. On this it is said, “*Lazy one, until when will you sleep?*” But a person who cares about his spiritual state will go to sleep because he needs to refresh his body, so that he can serve Hashem properly. He enters into sleep so that he can return to his inner world afterwards.

The same is true for laughter and mockery. Most people enjoy mockery because they enjoy the humor for its own sake and they get a kind of vitality from it. This is the evil use of laughter and mockery. But if a person uses mockery in order to free himself from the body’s hold, through using humor, such humor is “holy laughter”, because it is calming the body and helping him reveal his inner world of the soul. Thus, if a person is connected to his inner world and he uses humor to loosen up his body, this is “holy laughter”.

How indeed can we know if we used laughter for the right reasons or not? He should see what happens afterwards. What was he like before the laughter, and what is he like afterwards? If a person finds that he is more frivolous about his *ruchniyus* after he is finished with his fit of laughter, it is a sign that he didn’t laugh for the right reasons. But if a person is able to return to being serious about his *ruchniyus* even after laughing, it is a sign that he has laughed for the right reasons, and then his laughter was holy.

A Dose of Humor In The Home

There is another important point to mention about this. The Chazon Ish wrote that there must be a pleasant atmosphere in the home, and that a little bit of humor is necessary for this. We need to create a calm atmosphere in our homes, because there are many stressful situations that arise in the home with our spouse and our children. With a good dose of humor, these stressful situations become easier to deal with – both for ourselves and for the rest of the family. This is a more basic level which can be worked upon, whether one has reached holy laughter or whether he hasn’t.

It takes wisdom to know exactly how much humor is needed in the house – what to joke about, and what not to joke about. This requires some thinking. But the point is that we need to induce some amount of humor into our home, and we need to figure out how much humor we need in the home, as well as where to draw the line.

The Laughter Of Purim

Now that we are approaching the day of Purim, we need to reflect: what kind of laughter should we have on Purim, and what kind of laughter should we avoid?

The holy laughter that is contained on Purim represents the second kind of holy laughter we described here, which is when we use laughter to ward off anger when things don’t go our way. Through the story of *Megillas Esther*, we keep seeing how everyone’s plans were foiled. Achashveirosh wanted to have his way, Vashti wanted to have her way, and Haman had all his grand plans of destroying all of us. But in the end, Hashem’s plan prevailed over all of their plotting. This is the deep laughter we can laugh about on Purim.

We should draw forth our holy laughter on Purim from the story of the *Megillah*, and after that, we can

access this power of laughter in our own souls. When one reaches this deep place of laughter in his soul after studying the events of Divine Providence in the Purim story, this is the holy laughter of Purim, where we use external characters as a way to enter inward.

But if a person does not draw his laughter on Purim from this source, and he just laughs on Purim like everybody else found in our streets on Purim, who are laughing an evil kind of laughter – such laughter is rooted in the terrible *kelipah*^[2] that is Amalek, because it is nothing but evil *leitzanus*. Amalek's defining trait is *leitzanus*, as the verse describes about Amalek: "זד יהיר, לץ שמו" – "A rebellious, arrogant one; a scoffer is his name."

To our chagrin, most of the laughter on Purim that takes place is not "erasing" Amalek – it is instead the very laughter of Amalek, who laughs an evil, mirthless laughter. Only after revealing deep *emunah* can a person laugh on Purim in a way that erases Amalek. But if a person is 'connected with Haman' [through frivolous laughter that doesn't emanate from *emunah*] on Purim, his laughter on Purim is not being "*moche*" (erasing) Amalek, and he is rather being *mechayeh* (sustaining) Amalek, *chas v'shalom*. Therefore, as Purim draws closer, we should reflect into what kind of laughter we want to have on Purim. Do we want inner laughter or do we want superficial and evil laughter?

The holy kind of laughter which brings a person to have more *emunah* is the laughter that brings a person to the true *simchah*. It is when one laughs at himself, by nullifying his own will to Hashem's will, where he makes *leitzanus* out of his own "inner *avodah zarah*" – and then he comes to experience *simchah* in *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, as it is written, 'שמחו צדיקים בה', "The righteous rejoice in Hashem."

In Conclusion

May we merit from Hashem to avoid the evil kind of laughter, all of us together, and to instead reach the holy kind of laughter, which erases our anger and sadness - and through this, we should be *zoche* to connect ourselves to Hashem Himself, in these times of celebration and *simchah*. Amen, and Amen.

Questions And Answers With The Rav

Q1: How can Yitzchok Avinu have both the middos of "gevurah" (restraint) and "sechok" (laughter)? Why isn't this a contradiction?

A: Excellent question. Chazal say that "Who is strong? The one who overcomes his inclination." When a person overcomes an aspect of his character, any emotion or thought, he gets rid of the inner "*avodah zarah*" within him – the spark of idol worship which is the antithesis to *emunah* in Hashem, the "other gods" which a person serves within himself: the drives of his *yetzer hora*. Thus, Yitzchok Avinu overcame these "other gods", and this was his *gevurah*, which revealed the depth of *sechok*.

Q2: Does it start with *gevurah* (restraint), or with *sechok* (laughter)?

A: Without *gevurah* a person wouldn't be able to have *sechok*. But it is *sechok* which enables a person to have *gevurah*. Without *gevurah*, a person cannot persevere. Through *gevurah*, a person is able to have *bittul* (self-nullification), which is also known as *yiras shomayim* (fear of Heaven). The depth of *gevurah* is for one to be prepared to nullify his will, which brings a person to have *sechok*, and *sechok*

brings a person to *simchah*. So *gevurah* brings a person to *sechok*, and when *sechok* is actualized, this is the depth of *gevurah*, and this brings a person to complete *simchah*. The *sechok* is the completion of the *gevurah*.

Q3: Can the Rov explain what the “sechok” will be in the future when Moshiach comes, which is what we say in the possuk, אז ימלא שחוק פינו (“Then our mouths will be filled with laughter”)?

A: The *sechok* of the future will be that there will be no more free will, and then we will realize that all the things that ever happened in history the world are all a joke, because we will see that it was Hashem who made it all happen. This will be the complete, ultimate laughter which will emanate from our *emunah*.

Q4: How do we balance seriousness (working hard on ourselves) and laughter (based on emunah that everything is in the hands of Hashem) in our life?

A: That is a very good question. It is complicated. To give a brief answer to this, there is a verse, **לְאָדָם מַעְרָכֵי לֵב וּמָה' מַעֲנֵה לִשׁוֹן** (“To a man belongs the arrangements of his heart”); the depth of our power of *bechirah* (free will) comes from the heart’s search for the truth and from the will for holiness. The rest is up to Hashem. Our entire *avodah*, from a deeper understanding, is to perform deeds that purify our heart which brings us to the greatest possible purity of heart we can reach. All that we can do is to choose to act correctly when we access the depth of our heart, and that is our role in *bechirah*. When a person truly purifies his heart, his actions will surely be the will of Hashem. But the actions we then do are not really from our own free will; they are done by Hashem, for Hashem “does” everything.

If so, being that Hashem does everything, what is the depth of our *bechirah* and our *avodah* on this world? The depth of our *avodah* is to purify our heart as much as we can, and to perform deeds from a purified heart. But our actual *avodah* is always **"מערכי לב"** - it is only that part which is “to man”, in our hands to do. That is entire role on this world, and it is only this aspect which we can get reward for. Although it is ultimately Hashem Who does all actions, it is still a result of our free will, therefore, we will get reward for it. Therefore, a person has to try his best, and the rest is up to Hashem.

Q5: How can a person know if his motivations are pure or not?

A: This is a complicated matter, and there are two factors involved with this. Part of our motivations we can clearly identify as holy, and we can clearly identify other motivations that are not holy. All of that is found within our conscious (*muda*, or *hakarah*). However, we also have subconscious motivations (*tat-muda*, or *tat-hakarah*), and even deeper than that layer is the area of above our conscious (*al-hakarah*, or *al-muda*).

The areas of subconscious and above-conscious are hidden from our consciousness and it is subtle *avodah* to get to know them, and there are several methods explained of how to access it. Firstly, though, we need to begin with identifying our conscious motivations. We can know clearly what we want and what we don’t want, what we like and what we don’t like. Using this area of our consciousness, we can feel if we are having a pure motivation for something or not.

Now, in order to tap into our subconscious and above-conscious, this is a very deep and complicated matter to know, and our greatest leaders worked their entire lives at uncovering their subconscious and above-conscious. In general terms, Rav Dessler zt"l explained that we are able to know what our subconscious motives are by paying attention to our quickly passing thoughts. These include thoughts that we like to push away sometimes because we are uncomfortable with such thoughts. Those thoughts make their appearance sometimes and we tend to quickly push them away, and all of this takes place very quickly and we often don't register it. But if we pay attention to those quickly passing thoughts, we are able to discover the thoughts that are coming from deeper in our soul - the area of our subconscious. These are thoughts which we usually think have nothing to do with us. They can be either be positive and holy thoughts, or they can be more shameful and evil kinds of thoughts. When we discover those thoughts, we gain an entirely different awareness towards what's going on inside ourselves.

Most people only recognize themselves from the most superficial area of their conscious. There is almost no one who completely recognizes his true self. However, the more a person goes deeper into himself, the better he can recognize himself. There are many other ways as well (besides for the one we mentioned here), that are explained by our Rabbis of how a person can get deeper into his subconscious.

There is another way brought by our Rabbis of how one can know his deeper motivations: through our dreams at night^[3], which show a person his deepest desires that he had during the day. This is based on the verse, "*On my bed at nights, I sought that which I loved.*" Dreams show us what we thought about during the day, as Chazal state, that a person only dreams about at night that which he fantasized about during the day; and in addition, they show us what our deeper subconscious desires are. Even when we dream at night of total fantasies, those fantasies are like the 'waste products' that are produced from our thoughts and desires, so even the fantasies tell us a lot about ourselves. However, getting to know ourselves through dreams requires much specific guidance.

There were other ways as well which our leaders used in order to know their subconscious. Reb Yisrael Salanter writes about several different ways of how to know it. But these are very subtle matters.

Q6: If someone is down or depressed, *is there anything wrong with trying to get him to laugh?*

A: This is a very general kind of question, and generally speaking, the answer is, yes. However, usually when people do this, they end up falling too far into the laughter and then they end up back in depression afterwards.

There is a kind of therapy where people use laughter as a way to heal people from their problems, but the problem with this kind of therapy is that the therapist himself will become too caught up in his own laughter, and in the end he will also need therapy. Only a person who is solidly anchored to his inner world can know how to use laughter to heal others. This is what we find in the Gemara, that there were people who used *badchanus* (Jewish humor and entertainment) to cheer others up, and Eliyahu HaNavi said that these people merit *Olam HaBa*. But with most people, as soon as they use *leitzanus* to cheer up others and make them happy, they fall too much into the laughter, and they have a spiritual downfall from it.

There is a well-known story that once a distraught person came to his Rav to seek advice from him, and his Rav told him that he should go to a *badchan* to get himself cheered up. The person then said to the Rav, "That *badchan* is me."

Q7: Can laughter be used to heal people from [emotional] illnesses?

A: I will explain this briefly; this question is really leading to something else. We should understand that there are some people who are very much 'down in the dumps', and laughter can help such people. But, everything needs to be used properly and be given its proper boundaries. When people overdo laughter and joking, firstly, they fall too far into their laughter and joking, and in addition, they are getting others to think that laughter and joking should be a basic part of life. They don't know how to place boundaries on the power of laughter and joking.

If laughter is just being used as a form of therapy to heal someone, that is one thing; but what usually happens? Laughter is made into a part of life itself. When laughter is used within its proper boundaries, it is holy. As soon as it is overdone, though, not only does laughter not help, it is damaging. In a case where someone needs laughter as part of his therapy, if this is the only thing that can help him, then by all means, the person helping him should use laughter to help him, without question.

If someone is in a little bit of a better situation than this and he is only minimally depressed, there are two abilities he can use to be helped: to awaken inner *simchah*, and to also use external *leitzanus* (joking and humor). But when people get used to *leitzanus* as a way to heal themselves from pain, they come to view it as a part of life, and he is brought down from a higher spiritual level into a lower level of living.

Another example is when people rejoice with the *chosson*^[4] and *kallah*^[5] at weddings. Most of the time, by *simchas chosson v'kallah*, people think that gladdening the *chosson* and *kallah* means to make *leitzanus* in front of the *chosson* and *kallah*. This is not using *leitzanus* as a way to heal people; it is simply an example of how people use *leitzanus* as a basic part of their life, where they bring down people from a higher spiritual level that they could have remained on. When people think that *simchah* (happiness) means *sechok* (laughter) and *leitzanus* (joking), it is because they don't know when and where the power of *sechok* should be used. Once people engage in *leitzanus*, there are "no strings attached" anymore, and then people think that *simchah* means *leitzanus*.

The common denominator between the scenarios of laughter therapy, gladdening a groom and bride, and *simchas Purim*, is that many people erroneously think that "*simchah*" means to act with *leitzanus*.

^[1] Sefer Yetzirah (5:5) lists "sechok" (laughter) as the defining characteristic of the month of Adar.

^[2] kelipah - impure spiritual "husk" or "shell" which conceals holiness

^[3] See Rosh Chodesh Avodah_009_Kislev_The Meaning Of Our Dreams

^[4] groom

^[5] bride

Source: <https://bilvavi.net/english/rosh-chodesh-avodah-013-adar-power-laughter>