

Shanah tovah. May we all be blessed with a year of health, Torah, and prosperity. This year, my High Holiday sermons will all focus on a different source of spiritual power that you can use in your personal lives. Today, I'm going to talk about the spiritual power of laughter.

We start with the story of a man named Maurice. Maurice went through weeks of having chest pains, and he wrote them off until one day, he knew he was having a health emergency. Sylvia, his wife, calls 911 and the ambulance took him to the hospital. The hospital did the tests, found nothing wrong with him, and sent him home.

Maurice went home, but the chest pains became even worse. He felt an ache in his jaw, shooting pains down his left arm, and he was sweating. Sylvia, who loved Maurice deeply, was very distraught and called 911 again.

The ambulance took him to the emergency room, and again the doctors were unable to find any evidence of heart damage. But this time they recommended that he see a cardiologist for a full battery of tests just in case they were missing something.

Maurice and Sylvia go to his cardiologist, who orders a full EKG, an echocardiogram, a stress test, and a CT scan. A week later, he invites the couple back to go over the results. Strangely enough, the doctor asks to speak to Sylvia alone.

The cardiologist sits Sylvia down and says, "Ma'am, the good news is that there is nothing physically wrong with your husband's heart. In fact, he has the cardiac function of a man half his age. The bad news is that he is suffering from an acute form of psychological stress, and that stress is causing these chest pains and heart attack symptoms.

Sylvia says, “So what should I do? Should I take him to a psychiatrist and get him on antidepressants and Xanax?”

The cardiologist says, “No, not just yet. The drugs won’t help until we relieve his immediate stress. What you need to do is give him two months without any stress at all.

Cook gourmet meals for him every day, pick up his dirty socks, do all his laundry, clean the house all by yourself every day, be pleasant and cheerful, dress beautifully, lose some weight so you look better, laugh at all his jokes, be very romantic if you know what I mean, never criticize or yell at him for any reason, and simply do whatever he tells you to do when he tells you to do it.”

“If you give him this respite,” the doctor said, “then your husband’s central nervous system will be able to reset itself and then he can try some medication and therapy.

Sylvia goes back into the waiting room and sits next to Maurice, who by this time has turned white with fear. Maurice says, “Honey, what did the doctor say?” Sylvia says, “He says you’re dying.”

As Americans, we tend to think of laughter as something not so serious, something that isn’t all that important, especially when there’s work to be done. But it turns out that laughter is a source of intense spiritual power. Learn to harness the power of laughter, and you will benefit immensely.

Today, I am going to describe for you the three-fold connection between laughter and Rosh Hashanah, between humor and the Jewish New Year.

The first connection is that laughter averts the severity of the decree. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we recite the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, the most famous and most important prayer of the High Holy Days.

That's the one where we say B'Rosh Hashanah yikateivun, uv'yom tzom kippur yehateimun. On Rosh Hashanah, the decrees are inscribed, and on the Fast Day of Yom Kippur, the decrees are sealed. In the meantime, repentance, prayer, and righteousness reduce the severity of the sentence.

Having said that, these are not the only three things that reduce the severity of the decree. Laughter also belongs on the list of things that reduce the severity of the verdict, the pain in our lives.

How does laughter avert the severity of the judgment? The answer is that laughter is an analgesic, a kind of pain medication for the soul. In fact, laughter does cause the brain to release amino acids known as endorphins, and these endorphins attach themselves to the same receptors that pair up with the pleasure and reward center in the brain.

The Torah portion for the first day of Rosh Hashanah tells us about the day that Sarah used laughter to reduce her own spiritual pain. If you are a woman past the age of childbirth, imagine how you would feel if you woke up one day pregnant. Now there is a reality TV show on The Learning Channel called 70 and Pregnant, but just think how you would feel.

I imagine that you would be, shall we say, shocked. Sarah was also shocked and surprised, but rather than panic, she used humor to mute her discomfort. Instead of saying, "Oh my God, how am I going to raise a child when I'm 90 and my husband's a hundred? This is terrible, what am I going to do!?" she laughed to herself and essentially said, "Oh, that is hilarious. Here I am older than dirt and I'm going to have a baby and Gramps over here is going to be its father."

We know that that Sarah's laughter was no sin because later on in Genesis, in today's Torah reading, Sarah's laughter becomes public. In chapter 18, she laughed to herself. Now in today's reading, she's much more open about it and says, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me!"

That is, after all, why she named her new son Isaac, Yitzhak, which means laugh. She named her baby boy, the second generation of the Jewish people, "Chuckles ben Avraham," and she healed her own pain.

The Talmud in Tractate Makkot tells a story about the great Sage Rabbi Akiva, who also once used laughter to console himself and others. The story is told that Rabbi Akiva and four other notable sages went up to Jerusalem to see the ruins of the recently destroyed Temple.

When they reached the top of Mount Scopus and saw the ruins, they ripped their clothing. When they reached the Temple Mount itself, they saw a fox scurry out of the wreckage. The four other Sages began to cry, but Rabbi Akiva broke out into hysterical laughter.

The crying colleagues said, "Akiva, how can you laugh at a time like this? Our Holy Temple, once the domain of the High Priest where God's Sacred Name was pronounced, is now the domain of a fox."

Rabbi Akiva's answer was, "I am laughing because now I know we have hit rock bottom. Things can't possibly get any worse, which means they can only get better." His fellow sages stopped crying and said, "Akiva, you have consoled us."

I encourage you to follow the examples of Sarah and Rabbi Akiva. Use laughter to mute the discomfort in your life. Humor is especially important when times are tough. I recall that when I had a CT scan for my health problem back in 2007, I

asked the nurse once whether the machine could cook my burrito and scan me at the same time.

Now that I've been cured for years, the comment is not all that funny, barely worth a courtesy laugh. But back then, it was funny, at least to me, and it helped me get through a tough period of my life. My friends joined in with the jokes, which I can't share with you because they contain inappropriate content. But trust me, laughter eased my spiritual pain and it can ease yours, too.

Golfing great Greg Norman, as you may have heard, recently had a very close call. He almost lost his hand in a chainsaw accident and came within a millimeter of a major artery. He used humor to ease what must have been a very scary situation. He said, "Well, at least I can play tennis."

It turns out that even Jews who were in the concentration camps during the Holocaust used laughter and humor to ease their suffering. A professor in Israel named Dr. Chaya Ostrover wrote a book entitled "It Was Humor That Kept Us Alive." The English translation will soon be published by Israel's Holocaust Museum, Yad Vashem.

The book describes the jokes that Holocaust prisoners would tell even in the shadows of the crematoria. From our perspective, most of the jokes are not funny at all. They're all kind of macabre and horrible, so I'll let you read the book for examples.

Suffice it to say that for victims of the Shoah, their ability to laugh was the only way to live and die with some measure of dignity. Gallows humor was the one thing the Nazis couldn't take away from them, and they used it to lessen their pain.

If people facing extermination can use laughter to improve their lives, then certainly we can use it to ease our suffering, which pales in comparison to what they experienced.

Have a good laugh about your aches and pains. Allow yourself to chuckle occasionally about the tzuris in your family. Doing so will help you put things in perspective, and the proper perspective leads to spiritual peace.

So that's the first connection between laughter and Rosh Hashanah, the idea that laughter averts the severity of the decree. Now we're ready for the second connection, and that is the link between laughter and the shofar.

Normally, the shofar is described as a cry. It includes the cry of a healthy person, loud and strong, the cry of a baby, short and staccato, and also the broken, gasping cry of a sick person. But it occurred to me last week that the shofar can also be compared to laughter.

The tekiah blasts are like a gut-busting guffaw. The teruah blasts are like a cute giggle. The shevarim blasts are like the kind of laugh that is so hard that you have trouble getting your breath.

The Shofar can and should be used to cry out to God for mercy. But it can also be used as our people's laughter. As shofarot sound across the planet, it is as if the Jewish people is laughing at anything and everything that is funny.

What are we laughing about? We're laughing because the world is going to Hell in a handbasket, millions of people are dying of hunger, diseases like Ebola are running rampant, ISIS is chopping American heads off, and all the UN can do is condemn Israel. Way to go, boys!

We're laughing that Hamas shot missiles into Israel and destroyed the power plant that was supplying Gaza with electricity. Again, way to go boys!

We're laughing at the news that the ultra-Orthodox rabbis of England have announced that they may stop accepting conversions performed in Israel because they're worried the Israeli rabbis won't be strict enough.

Seriously? That's like the religious man who dies, goes to heaven and God offers him a sumptuous banquet. Please, order anything you like, the Holy One says. The religious man says, "May I see your certificate of kosher supervision?" God says, "What are you talking about, I don't have one." The man says, "Fine, I'll just have the fruit platter."

Finally, we're laughing because laughing and making people laugh is what Jews do best, apart from eating and complaining of course. There are two quintessentially Jewish sounds. One is the shofar and the other is laughter. I won't say that we invented laughter, but we definitely invented comedy as it is known today.

Look at a list of history's great comedians, and you'll find that the list is predominantly Jewish. Laughter is a by-product of suffering. Only people who have suffered can be funny. The shofar allows us to combine both sounds, the sound of Jewish people pleading for survival, and the sound of the very same people laughing and bringing laughter to others.

Laughter and humor are so important to Jews that we believe it to be essential to our identity. That is the conclusion of the Pew Report, the same report that recently served as a wake-up call for non-Orthodox and especially Conservative Jews.

The researchers examined what made up the Jewish identity of American Jews.

Remembering the Holocaust was the number one factor, leading an ethical or moral life was number two, working for social justice was third, being intellectually curious was fourth, and virtually tied for fifth place were caring about Israel and having a good sense of humor.

Imagine that. American Jews think that humor and laughter is just as important to Jewish identity as the State of Israel. Hey, maybe they're right. Personally, I was rooting for synagogue membership and observing Jewish law. Alas, my horses came in a distant and dismal sixth and seventh place.

Although I wish my choices had done better, I cannot disagree that laughter and humor is part of our ethnic DNA. I don't know if there is a laughter gene, but if there is one, I wouldn't be surprised if Jews have multiple copies of it. We're the only people on the planet from whom laughter and humor exude from our very being.

Even the word Jew is funny. Jew, Jew, Jew.

And if you come to the Dr. Michael Fink Memorial Lecture on November 11th, you'll hear Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin give a presentation on Jewish humor, one that promises to be both entertaining and enlightening.

The third and final connection between laughter and Rosh Hashanah is the idea of sweetness. We pray for a sweet new year, and laughter is the perfect emotion to accompany that sweetness. We want sweetness so much that some deeply religious Jews won't even eat salad dressing on this holiday because it contains vinegar, which is sour.

Laughter is the sweetest of feelings, even sweeter than love itself. Love is wonderful, but it's also complicated, hard to find, and a challenge to maintain.

Laughter, in contrast, is purely sweet like a bag of chocolate or a fried snickers bar at the state fair, not that I know what that tastes like.

But there's a problem. There are forces in our society that are trying very hard to take our laughter away from us. Whereas we were once a sweet society that laughed a lot, now we are well on our way to becoming a bitter and dour country that has lost the power of laughter.

It's bad enough that we lost some great comedians this year. Robin Williams and Joan Rivers made us laugh, and the world is definitely a less sweet, less humorous place without them.

What concerns me more is that we are losing the ability, and even the right, to laugh. Make or tweet the wrong joke or comment and you could lose your job and your friends, or your business could be boycotted. Tell a joke on campus that someone finds offensive, and you'll find yourself suspended or expelled.

In some countries like Canada and the United Kingdom, someone offended by your sense of humor can sue you and win a mountain of cash. In other countries, such as Sweden and Austria, such jokes are flat-out illegal, prosecutable offenses.

In the Muslim world, riots resulting in stampede deaths have resulted from the publication of political cartoons.

Now you may be asking, "Why would we want people walking around cracking offensive jokes? Isn't a good thing to protect people from getting their feelings hurt?"

The problem is that we are throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We are all so afraid of offending each other that we have gone silent in the humor

department. We stand on edge and walk on eggshells treating other people as potential land mines instead of fellow human beings. Good-natured laughter does not cause hatred between racial and ethnic groups, it eases the tension. As a result of this anti-humor trend, life is losing its humor, and that's sad. Kids these days don't know any good jokes, and if they knew any they wouldn't know how to tell them.

I haven't laughed hard at a Saturday Night Live skit in years, ever since they went into politically correct mode. The days of Eddie Murphy are long gone. He would never be allowed to do what he did back then. Now it seems that the only legitimate target of humor is Governor Christie's weight or anything about Sarah Palin. Everything else is apparently offensive and racist.

Why do some people want to take our laughter away from us? It's all about control. A vocal minority in this country and the world wants to control how we think. Laughter is the most basic expression of liberty, and these forces hate freedom because freedom denies them control.

If they take away our laughter, they will change how we think, and if they change how we think, they won't have to change the laws because it won't be necessary. We'll simply comply and do as we're told like good little robots.

Laughter is one of the sweetest of human experiences. When we reflexively choke it off because we're afraid of offending someone, we damage what it means to be a human being.

Everyone needs to relax and stop feeling like a victim all the time. Laughter in 2014 is like alcohol in 1921 during Prohibition. It's enjoyed secretly in the dark, if at all. Laughter in 2014 feels like George Orwell's 1984. We're self-censoring not only our humor but our opinions because God forbid someone should be offended.

We all hope sincerely for things like health, prosperity, and happiness. I want you to add laughter to the list. My Rosh Hashanah prayer for all of you is that no matter what, whether you get what you're praying for or not, that you be able to embrace the magic of laughter.

If you are blessed with a great year, may your laughter make it even better. If you are dealt a challenging year, may your laughter make life easier for you. Either way, we are going to have a sweet and happy new year. I just know it. Shanah tovah.