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“Dealing with Stress the Jewish Way”

A lecture by Edward Hoffman, Ph.D., given at the San Francisco Jewish Community Center on Feb. 8, 1988

By Jennie Cohen

The following list offers Jewish beliefs, customs and practices to help us cope with a myriad of challenges and situations:

1. HAVING A SPIRITUAL OUTLOOK

"People who see life as having a larger purpose, as something with meaning, have an easier time dealing with stress than those who believe it is by random chance that we are here," Hoffman said. The former are better able to put events into perspective, realizing there is more than just their own situation to think about. A spiritual outlook gives people a great amount of strength to deal with overwhelming circumstances.

"In my reading of the Jewish sages, I found the teaching that if we view problems in life as challenges for our growth and development, we are better off than feeling overwhelmed by them," Hoffman said.

A central teaching from Kabbalah is that each person is here on earth for a particular reason, with a particular task. The problems one encounters are meant for one's own learning. They are a part of that person's mission; what he or she is here to accomplish. Everyone has a different task to accomplish.

2. HAVING A SENSE OF PURPOSE OR SELF-IDENTITY

"When one knows one's purpose, one can feel most fulfilled and will have the greatest strength to cope with difficulties," said Hoffman.

"In our secular society, many grow up without much sense of purpose," Hoffman said. "This is what leads people to cope with stress in ways that ultimately prove self-destructive, such as drugs and alcohol. When we know our purpose, it becomes less enticing to leave this purpose and turn to things that are temporary in their impact or effect."

When one feels worried and depressed that is usually a sign that one has moved away from one's purpose. In the Jewish tradition, feelings of depression or chronic anxiety are seen in a spiritual context. Depression is a helpful clue to show one that something is off balance.

Mystics and great thinkers of many cultures have linked stress to health issues. They recognized that the mind and the body are not separate. If one is chronically feeling stress or tension, it will be bad for the body and may eventually cause illness.

"Each of us needs a certain amount of time for ourselves each day to cope with stress and to help us be aware of who we are and what our purpose is," Hoffman said. Jews are living in a busy Western society where one does not have much time for oneself. People feel that there is not enough time in the day to do the things that they want to do. The Jewish sages would say this is a bad situation for one psychologically and spiritually. One cannot develop a spiritual outlook with the world if one does not put aside some time each day for oneself.

3. SELF-REFLECTION

Some of the great Chasidic masters said one should put aside one hour each day for introspection. Hoffman agrees with this and adds that besides a brief period of quiet time daily, each person needs to put aside part of a day every week to answer the following type of questions: Where am I going with my life? What kind of person have I been? How have I been treating others? Have I forgotten my own needs?

In the Jewish tradition, this is the purpose of the Sabbath and it is an important way to keep stress from becoming overwhelming. Also in Judaism, there are special times of the year, built around the holidays, which are meant for self-reflection. One of those times is in the autumn, right before the High Holidays. The 28-day period prior to the Jewish New Year is the most important time for self-reflection. It is difficult to get into a heightened state, saying prayers that have been said for centuries, culminating with the blowing of the shofar, if one just walks into the synagogue without preparation.

Another time is in the spring during Passover, the holiday which commemorates the exodus out of Egypt, from slavery to freedom. The Kabbalists viewed this holiday in symbolic terms. The task of this holiday is for each individual to examine what is keeping him or her in bondage or darkness, Egypt being the symbol of darkness. What is preventing him or her from moving ahead in a spiritual way. Everyone is enslaved by different things such as food, alcohol or work. One needs to confront these issues. This is an ongoing process that every Jew should do every year.

Then it becomes a personal experience, not just an abstraction or something with only historical significance.

4. CREATING GOOD HABITS

In a lot of Jewish writings, there is an emphasis on habit. As a way to deal with tension, the sages expressed the importance of creating good habits and doing away with self-destructive ones. Until something becomes a habit, it is not part of one's lifestyle and it will not be significant in alleviating stress. If one has to drag oneself out to exercise, for example, it has not yet become a habit.

5. KEEPING A JOURNAL OR DIARY

Another powerful way of keeping a perspective on one's life is to write a log, not only of what one is experiencing but also of one's dreams.

"Many of the great Jewish sages kept journals. They would write down quotations from sacred books, the Bible or commentaries, the Zohar or other books," Hoffman said. "They would write down comments of colleagues and friends and would record what happened to them." Some also kept a journal of their dreams.

6. DREAM INTERPRETATION

As long ago as biblical times, the Jewish sages viewed personal dreams as a source of inspiration and guidance. Some of the Jewish sacred texts have said that one needs to interpret dreams for a sense of personal direction.

"Jewish mystics have said that dreams are one of the only vehicles in our life where we get wisdom that we haven't earned," Hoffman said. Dreams need to be taken seriously because they can be an easy tool to help one cope with the tensions of daily life.

7. READING SACRED TEXTS

Being grounded or connected to the sacred in our tradition is very significant in helping one cope with stress. There are no excuses today about a lack of accessibility because many of the books have been translated into English. Exploring the texts can be a powerful foundation. When one has a problem which seems to have no solution, one can see how the great sages of the past handled similar situations.

An example of this activity would be a group which meets weekly. The members read a Chasidic story and then talk about how it relates to issues in their own lives, answering questions of meaning and direction, confusion and despair, hope and visions.

8. HAVER AND HAVEROT

"In our tradition, which is group oriented, we have study partners and study groups called Haverot", Hoffman said." Rather than trying to do everything on your own, [sacred text study with others] is something that will link you to those who have gone before us."

It is healing and comforting to know that the same books and writings have been studied and discussed by one's great-grandparents and people before them. It helps one not to feel trapped in his or her own culture and time.

Within the Jewish tradition, concerning sacred and spiritual books, even if there is only one person willing to be a study partner [Haver], to share experiences, feelings and opinions, that is sufficient.

9. COMMUNITY

One has to make the effort to reach out and go beyond oneself. This is especially important in today's world where it is easy to feel alone and cut off from society.

"Jews have been at the forefront in our culture of creating support groups for many kinds of problems," Hoffman said. The idea that people have to be independent, not needing others, is not a Jewish idea. A supportive community has always been important and this is especially true when one experiences difficulties.

10. LAUGHTER AND TEARS

Being able to laugh at oneself and acting silly have also been central to the Jewish consciousness. Historically, humor was a positive way to alleviate tension during the worst circumstances. It is no accident that a high percentage of the leading comics in this country are Jewish. A tzaddik, a righteous person, can be serious when that is needed but also has a light, cheerful outlook. "In the Jewish

tradition, a healthy person is one who is flexible and can laugh easily," Hoffman said.

"Tears and crying are also a very good way to release tensions and stress. This is very difficult for men in our society," Hoffman said.

In his reading about counseling in the Chasidic tradition, Hoffman found that if the Chasid was relating some terrible misfortune, the Rebbe would cry along with the Chasid. It is not a Jewish belief that keeping oneself rigid and never releasing tears is a sign of health and strength. "In our society, we as Jews live in a non-Jewish, secular culture. We need to learn this over again," Hoffman said.

11. ATTENDING DAILY MINYAN

After the lecture, two more stress relievers were revealed. One man in the audience said that attending the daily prayers at his synagogue was a big help to him. Hoffman agreed that prayer in a group setting can be uplifting and meaningful. It is also an important way to release tensions and to feel part of a larger entity.

12. MEDITATION

Another man in the audience wanted to know if one is supposed to wait until one is at least 40 years of age and is knows Torah before learning how to meditate. Hoffman said there are two ways to answer that question.

Historically, there have been a broad range of meditation techniques. In the Jewish tradition there are many levels, some simple and others that are more abstract. As with any discipline one learns the beginning levels first and then one can grasp the higher levels. There are meditation techniques for beginners which are perfectly safe. What Hoffman cautions against is getting into very abstract, difficult techniques without a teacher.

Part of the Hasidic view is that today many Jews have learned something about mysticism or spirituality through studying Eastern methods. They have learned about breathing techniques and have practiced Yoga. Mentally and physically they are more open to the Kabbalistic techniques. What may have been forbidden in the past is now considered possible because of people having a prior background with other traditions.

13. JEWISH HEALING PRAYER SERVICES

Even though healing services were not mentioned in the lecture or discussion afterward, this list would not be complete without it. When I lived in San Francisco, I attended these services twice a month for about two years.

The primary purpose for the service was to provide spiritual strength for Jews who were coping with illness, grieving a loss, healing emotional wounds i.e. children of Holocaust survivors and for caregivers and other helping professionals. However, other Jews who were not in any of those groups, attended for the spiritual strength and community support.

The Jewish Healing Prayer Services were a combination of several of the 12 practices listed above plus a couple more. Incorporated in them were prayer, meditation, sacred text study, singing, chanting, giving *tzedakah* (charity, righteousness), sharing blessings experienced and challenges faced (community) and expressing emotions (laughter and tears).

There were special prayers for healing – for the physical body and the soul – and the mourner's kaddash. For at least an hour, one could let go of the imperfect physical, material world which is temporary and focus on the spiritual part of oneself which is eternal, unchanging and perfect.

Everyone experiences stressful situations at one time or another. I have gotten relief from all of the suggestions listed above except attending daily minyan, the only one I have yet to experience. The Jewish tradition contains a wealth of valuable information which can help one cope with all types of stresses.

Dr. Edward Hoffman is an adjunct psychology professor at Yeshiva University and the author of "The Hebrew Alphabet: A Mystical Journey" and "My Bar/Bat Mitzvah Journal," both by Chronicle Books.

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