

Cholesterol And the Jews

I. Cholesterol

Sit any 3 or 4 of us down together for lunch or dinner and sooner or later someone will mention cholesterol. It's the latest rage in my age group. I secretly set my stopwatch as soon as we are at the table, and when the word first comes up in conversation, I note the time. Average time for people in their late 30's to early 40's is 4 minutes, 27 seconds, though it is usually sooner if the meal is Italian.

There's always 1 person there who's a classic Cholesterol Basher, who's read the latest article saying, "Well, you know, they're beginning to say it's not really *that* critical a factor."

There's always at least 1 who really plays dirty and hits hard, who, with gloating in his voice spouts all the details of the latest study on decaffeinated coffee (the last bastion of my physical enjoyment), how the scientists have proven you're dead meat if you have more than 1 cup a year.

And there's always 1 success story at the table, who, with gloating in his voice, says, "I brought mine down from 303 to 186 in a year. Carbs (=carbohydrates to the un-initiates), lots of pasta, rice, millet, and cous-cous.

There's always 1 person there who tells you the deadly tale of the development of his or her oatbran muffins from rock-solid bowling balls to fluffy and almost-tasty, complete with variations: raisins, crushed pineapple, blueberries.

And there's always someone who eats everything: a half-dozen eggs a week, at least 10 doughnuts, chocolate (white, dark, milk, semisweet, bittersweet, everything), and still stays well below the line. (The danger zone runs anywhere from 200 to 240 depending on which Yuppie reads what studies.)

There's always someone who pooh-pooh's it, but, when you ask what his or her "numbers" are, he or she will say something absurdly low like 140. (Few human beings, no gibbons, and not a single Malayan jungle lemur has *ever* had numbers that low.) I even dined with someone with a cholesterol count of 102. (He looked like he could barely lift his fork, his face was ashen-tending-towards-pallid, he slurred his words...but his numbers were low, for sure.)

By then the host or hostess has brought out the chopped liver, and that's when you *really* get to see:

who is honest and who a hypocrite,
who shall live and who shall die,
who by fire and who by water,
who by sword and who by pestilence,
who will say, "I'll pass on the liver" and who will be the True Snarfer.

It is hard to get any words of Torah into the conversation because they haven't discussed "The Ratio" yet, i.e., the ratio of high density something-or-others to something else, which shouldn't be more than 4.5.

II. Gingivitis

Gingivitis is the new rage, Beyond Cholesterol.

Now that advanced tartar-control toothpastes, fluoridation, and new-fangled electric toothbrushes whose bristles whirl differently than ever before are beating back Demon Tooth Decay, the dentists — tired of having to read their own old, outdated magazines in the waiting room for lack of patients — try scare tactics with gingivitis.

So, if it is a long lunch or dinner, we turn to that obsession, as Diner #1 sadly notes, “Joe’s in Mass General, been there for a week.”

Diner #2, “Oh, no! Lordy, Lordy! Is he OK? Heart attack? Stroke?”

Diner #1, “No, gingivitis.”

Silence, dead silence.

We don’t even know where the best gingiva transplants are being done. We don’t know if our insurance covers it. We don’t know if there’s a cure. It spreads a pall on the meal. We don’t even know whether or not low-impact aerobics could have prevented it.

Poor Joe...gingivitis done him in. It is all so sad.

We all make a mental note to visit him during the week, and to brush more carefully next time.

III. Torah and Mitzvahs

Bingo!

Proverbs, Chapter 3:

Child, do not forget my Torah-teaching,
Let your mind take note of my Mitzvahs;
They will give you many days,
Years of life, Shalom....
It will be a cure for your body,
Good medicine for your bones.

Torah and Mitzvah work are good for the body. (You were thinking “cure for the soul”. As Tonto used to say to the Lone Ranger — when they would study Torah — “Atta To’eh, Ish Lavan-Wrong White Man!”)

Here are three quick examples from Jewish tradition:

1. Binyamin HaTzaddik feeds a woman and her children who are on the verge of starvation. He is the director of the local community Tzedakah fund and, seeing that there is nothing left in the fund, he buys the food with his own money. Heaven gives him an additional 22 years of life. (Bava Batra 11a)

2. Rabbi Prayda has a learned-disabled student. He reviews the material 400 times, and at one point, when the student loses his train of thought, he goes over it yet another 400 times.

Heaven gives him another 400 years of life, *and* his entire generation merits life in the Next World. (Eruvin 54b)

3. Pharaoh's daughter bathes in the Nile. One Jewish text says it was because she had leprosy or some similar horrible disease. When she rescues the infant Moses from the river — the minute she touches the little boat his mother put him in, she is cured. (Exodus Rabba, Exodus 23)

And there are many, many more examples in Rabbinic literature.

IV. Head in the Books, Head in the Clouds

I am often accused of being “somewhere out there”. They — the all-purpose “they”, i.e., the scoffers and the wags, the armchair critics, street corner faultfinders and Monday morning kvetches — say I spend too much time inside the Talmud and other faraway books and don't really have a grasp of Real Life. The accusation is compounded by other catch-all accusations of “Poet!”, which I am, but by which they mean, “How can you expect a poet to know anything really real or recommend anything practical?”

Well, all right.

But here's something from *American Health* magazine, March, 1989:

“Helping other people brings real physical benefits as well as psychological ones, according to epidemiologist James House and his colleagues at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center....They studied 2,700 people in Tecumseh, MI, for more than a decade, to see how their social relationships affected their health....The article reported that, in this study, doing regular volunteer work, more than any other activity, *dramatically* [italics mine] increased life expectancy.”

Note the word “dramatically”.

And furthermore, good news for us males:

“Men who did not do volunteer work were 2 1/2 times more likely to die during the study as men who volunteered at least once a week.”

So much for the pooh-poohers and all followers of the principle that, when you really get down to it, when Torah comes up short, turn to science. Well, we turned to science, and it looks like, if you want to live a long life — barring encounters with an 18-wheeler in the wrong lane or incredibly lousy genes — tutoring learning-disabled kids once a week or building houses for homeless people or wrapping and delivering Passover food packages for people who can't afford a Passover meal, might just get you all those Senior Citizens Goodies that are waiting for you down the road. Discounts at the movies, passes on the buses, cheaper mid-week fares on the airlines.

Well, all right then! Let's get down to it!

V. A Few Things I Am Not Saying

I am *not* saying, “Substitute rescuing Ethiopian Jews for dialysis.”

I am not recommending *pro bono* legal work in place of chemotherapy.

I am only pointing out that the All Holy Scientists substantiate what Mitzvah workers already knew, namely, that you can live longer if you make this kind of work part of your life. The front-line Mitzvah people didn't need a more-than-a-decade study to prove it; they could see it...lots of lowered blood pressure, peace-of-mind yielding a different-paced, less depression and loneliness, less eating their kishkas out over little things, more perspective on what counts and, consequently, nicer EKG readings. They knew it all along, University of Michigan Survey Research Center or no University of Michigan Survey Research Center.

I am also *not* saying that people should do Mitzvahs because it's good for your health. People should do Mitzvahs because they are Mitzvahs. *If* it turns out that there are many side benefits, that's fine and good. There are lots of benefits besides good health and long life — good feelings, self-dignity, tax benefits, etc. But above and beyond all that are the benefits for the beneficiary, the one who needs the ride to a community program and who would have otherwise stayed home alone were it not for the volunteer driver; the loving touch the visitor gives the resident of the old age home; the special attention a slow-to-learn child needs to make it through to bar or bat mitzvah, the *pro bono* time and effort to prevent a senseless eviction of a poor person. For sure there are benefits for the one doing the Mitzvah deed, but most important — I stress *most* — is that *they* need it.

It's nice, existentially speaking, that things work out this way: the one in need has the need satisfied, and, in addition, all kinds of other benefits accrue. But even if the Mitzvah doer didn't have all those supplementary goodies, Mitzvahs are still Mitzvahs and should be done, willingly, wholeheartedly.

VI. Violin Music in the Background

(Violin music in the background, soft voice), “Are you feeling a little draggy? Lost your pep? You may have Iron Deficiency Anemia.”

[Author's note, “God forbid!”]

“Well, take Geritol....”

[Author's note, “Gezunterhayt — go ahead, take Geritol. But don't forget to buy an extra item of food for Tzedakah when you grocery shop, and buy cough drops for people in shelters when you pick up your Geritol, and make a point to go down to the demonstration at City Hall to free Jews in Arab Lands, and, while you're at it — don't forget to write a healthy check for Tzedakah.”]