



Based on NPR's long-running radio show, THIS I BELIEVE, an eclectic group of City Congregation members offered their own reflections and joined this international conversation. Presentations were shared at Shabbat, Nov. 20, 2009.

If It Hurts, You're Not Laughing Hard Enough

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As my dad lay dying, moments away from his last breath, my sister and her then boyfriend and my husband and I sat around his deathbed making jokes. My mother was in the kitchen, insisting she had to clean up from dinner, which for her mostly consists of finding precisely the right size Tupperware container. My mother is obsessed with things being in the proper size container. One serving of leftover squash cannot possibly go into a four-serving-size container. Five strawberries must be in a five-strawberry-sized bowl. And so we sat, I, Jack, Sally, and David, listening to my father's agonal breathing, and laughing over the fact that after he was buried, every year, as he decomposed, my mother was going to have to dig him up and put him into ever smaller and smaller containers. We found this hilarious. And then he died. That was not funny; it was heartbreakingly sad. But we did laugh plenty at his funeral. (We were happy it was a sunny day, as my father had always said he wanted a rain date, because he felt it was depressing enough schlepping to a cemetery in good weather, and he didn't want his friends to have to trek to one in a downpour.)

And years earlier we had laughed when my parents had a house fire that nearly wiped them out. When we discovered all twelve of my mother's rare Lalique black glass charger plates shattered amidst what was left of the kitchen, while the cheap daily dishware still sat on the shelves, we decided the firemen had determined the owners of the burning house weren't going to be doing any entertaining any time soon, and so had pulled the flaming fine china cabinet off the wall rather than dousing it with a hose. And we laughed when my dad had his first bout of cancer, and then a variety of other ills ranging from bursitis to gallbladder removal to hip replacement. In fact, my parents had to cancel so many trips due to my father's various surgeries that my sister and I made them a game as a gift one holiday season called "Organ," where you'd spin a dial to see if this turn you got to go to Egypt or Japan or whether it was back to the hospital for another operation. And Jack and I laughed (though maybe not as hard) when I miscarried my first pregnancy (a blighted ovum; it sounded like something drawn by Edward Gorey); and we even managed to laugh through most of the insane treatments and three years that it took us to finally get pregnant again. And laughter's gotten us through financial tribulations, and the New York kindergarten entry process, and the threat of bed bugs, and too much else to list.

I just read a novel in which one character posits that it was the devil who gave man a sense of humor. "Why would he do that?" asks another. "So we laugh at our problems instead of solving them," replies the first. But I disagree. This is what I believe: that a sense of humor is the only thing – well, plus smarts and gumption – that will see you through the hard stuff, and it's what heightens times of joy. In my high school yearbook the quote next to my picture, which I came up with myself thirty years ago, said, "Laughter is the finest sound." I believed it then, and I believe it even more now.