

A Spoonful of Sugar...Or Margaritas

Posted May 17, 2012 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Copyright ©2012 Judith Z. Abrams

The topic for this study was suggested by an experience I just had. If you are squeamish, I'm waving you off now.

I had a mammogram/sonogram. The people were nice as could be but, even so, the procedure is a pretty uncomfortable one. Ask any woman of your acquaintance and she will probably be able to give you the details. In a moment of weakness, I opined that a pitcher of margaritas might make the whole thing a little more bearable.

And that got me thinking about the idea of anesthetic in general and what our sages had to say about it. Of course, God bless them, the sages did have something to say on the topic. When a convicted criminal is led out for execution, they are eased upon their way:

Someone who is being led out for execution is given a grain of frankincense in a cup of wine, in order to benumb his senses and thus minimize his suffering. As the verse says, "Give strong drink to him that is ready to perish and wine to those with heavy hearts (Proverbs 31:6)"

The prominent women of Jerusalem donated this drink and brought it to the condemned people as they were being led to execution. If the prominent women did not volunteer this drink, then who provided it? It stands to reason that the community must provide it. (B. Sanhedrin 43)

The term "prominent women" is only used in one other place in rabbinic literature: B. Ketubot 106a. In both places, they are leading women of Jerusalem engaged in charitable work. So the "ladies who lunch" spend at least some of their time easing the suffering of condemned criminals on death row. Amazing!

Discussion Questions:

1. I am amazed by the mercy shown the condemned killer. He is helped, even though convicted (and that, believe me, takes some doing). Could this reflect a societal opposition to the death penalty? Certainly the sages hated it: they said that a court who hanged someone once in 70 years was a hanging court and had to be disbanded. Why do you think the sages were so against the death penalty? Why were they?
2. Who are these women? Think about what characteristics they might have? It's not just the money ... which they spend as they see fit ... it's their political stance and their role in public affairs. Are you surprised to see women with this kind of power? If so, why? And if not, why not?
3. Just because a medical test is uncomfortable, doesn't mean we are free to avoid it. Getting a mammogram is unpleasant but when you compare it to cancer ... it's a walk in the park ... take my word on that one. Do we maybe need a meditation or a prayer that might help us cultivate this attitude as we go through such tests? Anyone want to give it a shot?

I look forward to your answers and discussion, as always!