

Rabbi Jonathan M. Brown

“Coping with a diagnosis of cancer:

Woody Allen, a robust faith, and finding the silver lining”

When Rabbi Raskind first suggested that I address this topic, I had two concerns: first, whether it was something that a significant portion of the membership of B'nai Abraham wanted to hear about, and second, whether there was any way to tie it to this week's parashah, Vayyishlach. I could find out how many because of the topic simply by asking you to raise your hands, but there's no way how many members stayed away for the same reason. On the other hand, it turns out that very few Torah portions are as relevant to my topic as this one. And it's that relevance that we will explore as we begin our conversation.

In Parshat Vayyishlach, we encounter our forefather Jacob just after he and Laban have parted company, Laban to return to his home in Haran, and Jacob to return to his home in Beersheba. The difference being that before Jacob can really begin his journey westward, he must encounter his brother Esau, of whom he is still deathly afraid. Twenty years earlier, you will recall, Jacob ran from his brother Esau who had threatened to kill him after the period of mourning for their father Isaac was over. Rebecca had thought it prudent to send her favorite son way, far away, to her brother in Haran.

At the beginning of his journey, heading for an unknown destiny with his mother's brother and their family, and at the end of his journey, facing what he thinks may be his mortal enemy, Jacob does what almost every human being I does when confronted by an unknown future, by an anticipated threat, or by a diagnosis of a potentially life-threatening illness: he prays for a successful outcome. Twenty years earlier, when Jacob awoke from a dream in which he saw a ladder extending from earth to heaven, he offered a conditional prayer to God, a proposal, really, promising to serve God and tithe his possessions for Him if God protects Jacob, provides for him, and brings Jacob back from his sojourn with Laban *shalem*, whole.

As our parashah begins, point God has more than fulfilled His part of the bargain, but Jacob still needs reassurance. This time his prayer is not a proposal, not at all conditional. After reminding God of the merit of his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham, and he humbly says: *Katonti mikol ha-hasadim*—I am unworthy of all the bounties You have offered me till now. Only then does he state what he wants, saying: “Deliver me, I pray Thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, else, I fear, he may come and strike me *Eym al banim*, mothers and children alike;” in other words total destruction, and no heirs to survive me.

Both of Jacob's prayers, the conditional one, and the straightforward

request, are typical of cancer patients facing difficult prognoses and unsure outcomes. Working as a chaplain at Johns Hopkins back in 2002-3 I would sometimes hear a patient bargaining with God: promising to 'be a better person', 'I'll attend church every week and tithe' or 'I'll come to synagogue every Shabbat and give Tzedakah generously, if God would only heal me.' And I would hear other prayers that simply sought healing for the patient and/or the well being of the family members.

Prayer is predicated on the firm belief that there is a God who not only hears prayer, but also responds to prayer, and, if we are deserving, God will help us heal and restore us to our families and the way our life was going prior to whatever the latest crisis is.

There is a verse in Psalm 91 which eloquently sums up this expectation of God's intervention in the healing process: “Because you took the Lord, the most high, as your haven, no harm will

befall you, no disease touch your tent, For God will order His angels to guard you wherever you go.” That a person on a dangerous journey might expect guardian angels at his side is exactly the position we are in when we have to face a cancer diagnosis, and it is a very supportive thought indeed.

Experiencing cancer also requires us to go on a journey within the larger journey that is the pattern of our lives. From the diagnosis through the treatment, and on, hopefully, to recovery, where recovery is possible, or to remission when recovery is not an option. And we must learn to lower our expectations of what may happen to us to a level consonant with the reality of the severity of our particular cancer.

I happen to be a person who has become intimately acquainted with not one, not two, but three forms of cancer, and while I refer to myself as a person who has cancer, I do not choose to refer to myself as a ‘survivor,’ though I do not begrudge anyone else who chooses to be so considered. I also have a hearing loss. Both the cancer and the hearing loss are embraced as part of my story, a change, and a diminution that I have to adjust to.

My story is told in detail in a book I urge you to acquire, if you or a family member is given a diagnosis of cancer, because the volume was created to provide you with the kind of spiritual support that our forefather Jacob sought and obtained during his time of need. The book is called *Life, Faith, and Cancer: Jewish Journeys through Diagnosis, Treatment, and Recovery*, and contains the experiences and the collective wisdom of twenty rabbis, cantors, and educators.

Each chapter has a different Jewish focus. Mine was the celebration of Jewish time, and helped me bring the insights of Abraham Joshua Heschel and the healing power of celebrating Shabbat into my own life story. I and several other contributors also resonated with the verse from Psalm 90: Teach us to number our days, that we may get us a heart of wisdom.

Now I want to ask you a question. Actually, two questions. The first is: What goes through your mind when you hear that someone you love, someone you care deeply about, has been diagnosed with cancer? And the second is only for those who’ve experienced an oncologist saying: “I’m afraid you have cancer.” What went through your mind when you heard it? Did you think that, just like some patients in a hospital react when a rabbi walks into their room whether they’re in the ICU or not, that they must be really at death’s door. Did you think that you or your loved one had just made a date with the *malach ha-mavet*, the angel of death?

But all cancers are idiosyncratic, and many are very slow growing. It has been my fate, or perhaps my *mazal*, to have contracted two of the slowest growing forms, and so I have learned to hear the word cancer and know that I’ve just been reminded to make a commitment to live a fuller life! Another of the participants in *Life, Faith, and Cancer*, puts it this way: Cancer forces us to face our mortality, and presents us with an opportunity to deepen our wisdom, and to suggest that the physical and emotional consequences of cancer that we see in others and feel in and on our own bodies, can be used to inform our very begin and gain insight into how we ought our lives. In the midst of the challenge, we must consciously create a new way of living that acknowledges how things have changed, but also helps us find a way to embrace that change. In that sense we reflect God’s image, the Creator who, tradition tells us, had to change the world 974 times before arriving at the present universe.

It has been almost a decade since I first learned that I had prostate cancer, and needed to decide what sort of treatment to undergo. Since I chose surgery, I had six weeks of recuperation to think about my new circumstances, and I asked myself: “Is God suggesting I might consider a different way of serving His people, different from being a congregational rabbi? When I convinced myself that was the case, I decided I would train to be a hospital chaplain, and enrolled in a Clinical Pastoral Education program at Johns Hopkins, which has provided me with tremendous insights into human nature and enhanced my own ability to help people frame their difficult experiences by finding a silver lining for it.

Here's an example of how that lining can be found. One of the patients I visited in the cancer unit at Hopkins in the fall of 2002 was absolute furious with God. She couldn't believe that she had received a diagnosis of breast cancer when she saw her physician the day after Yom Kippur! How could God do that to her! She had just completed the Ten Days of Repentance, sincerely regretting any sins of commission or omission, and offering forgiveness to those who asked for it, and receiving forgiveness from those she approached.

It took me a while, several visits in fact, for me to help her see the silver lining. God wasn't revoking her being listed in the Book of Life that she had been sealed in on Yom Kippur—indeed He had provided her with the coping strengths and the spiritual insights to assist her in making the remaining time she had to live more focused and meaningful. There are only a few circumstances where this approach will not work, so long as the patient is able to communicate and understand what you are saying.

Over the long term, those who have found a way to greet each with enthusiasm and appreciation create the good life. Lately, I have found it helpful to consider each new day a blessing, and at least twice a week, to say the following prayer soon after sunrise:

In the morning, before this day's journey begins,
I offer thanks before You, God,
That just as You found me worthy
To gaze upon the sun in the east,
So I will merit seeing it in the west.
And when darkness descends
May it be your will to grace me
With another dawning of light.

And it truly makes no difference whether I can actually see the sun out of my living room window or not. It's the sense of gratitude that I'm expressing for the new day, for God's having restored my *neshamah*, my soul, to me, so that I could be *shalem*, whole, again. And no matter what challenges the day may hold in store, I am sustained by the sense of serenity I obtained during that morning prayer time.

A commitment to Torah is also helpful in response to a diagnosis of cancer, as we can learn from a recent issue of the Reform Judaism Magazine, which contains a section called "Focus on hardship and hope". The Torah is as much a part of my treatment for an aggressive form of prostate cancer as are the drugs, the radiation, and the love and support of my family and friends. Along with my current daily doses of radiation, I always take at least a couple of stiff shots of Torah, too. Medicine and science aren't enough. They don't treat the whole person.

Cancer has forced me, like Abraham in the book of Genesis, to leave the house of my father, to spurn comfort and security, to journey through an unknown wilderness. But that's OK. To become the man I'm meant to be, I know this dark pilgrimage is necessary. And there are other books in the Hebrew Scriptures, which provide comfort. When facing a challenge like a cancer diagnosis we find solace, tears, and wisdom from the Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes. But Genesis, with its births and rebirths, suits me these days. So many of our matriarchs and patriarchs in the books of primal tales, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, and Joseph, are remade in the absolute hope of renewed covenants between themselves and God. And Adonai doesn't change your name—Abram to Abraham, Sari to Sarah, and, as in our parashah, Jacob to Israel, and then just abandon you. I too feel that I am being remade in hope." End quotation

Name changing. That's a very ancient Jewish custom to 'ward off' the *malach ha-mavet*. I will never forget the very first patient I visited at Hopkins as a chaplain resident. He was Jewish, and wouldn't you know, from Cincinnati, as I am, and a graduate of Walnut Hills High School, as I am. He had a pretty grim diagnosis, and asked me if I might perform a ceremony changing his Hebrew name, which I do not now recall, to Hayyim, which of course means life. I created the

ceremony and read it with the patient and his wife. It seemed to have a very calming effect on him. I do not know what happened to him after he left the unit I was responsible for, but I can surely attest to the positive effect of this sort of ritual.

Some of you may be sitting there wondering how Woody Allen got into the title of this message. Well, pay attention, because now I'm going to tell you. Woody Allen has what you might call an 'insouciant' attitude toward death, when he tells us that: "I'm not afraid of dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens." Or "I don't want to become immortal by doing good deeds. I want to become immortal by not dying." Lots of luck, Woody, we all will be gathered to our ancestors on a day not usually of our own choosing, and in a manner unknown.

Truly, while knowing that death is near evokes the fear of pain and of being alone at the moment we expire, those fears can almost always be allayed by medical science on the one hand and loving family and friends on the other. What cannot be readily allayed is another pervasive fear—that of not having lived a meaningful life. That lapse you can't make up for in the last few weeks you have on this earth, though Judaism teaches that *teshuvah*, repentance, can always be attained, even up to the last moment, and we can be comforted by the knowledge that our death atones for all of our sins.

Jacob's story is framed by the journey he took from Beersheba to Haran and back. He is indelibly changed during that journey, and I now point to a curious effect of the wrestling match he engaged in with the divine being: "When his assailant saw that he had not prevailed against Jacob, he wrenched his hip at its socket, so that the hip was strained, and Jacob would be limping away from the battle."

When we do battle with cancer, we often end up diminished in some physical aspects of our beings, but strengthened in our moral and spiritual ones. And because we are created *b'tselem elohim*, in God's image, we are given the opportunity to focus not on what isn't working properly anymore, but rather to revel and be immeasurably grateful for those many aspects of our persona are still in great shape, and how many opportunities still await us to make a difference in other's lives.

Consider the words of this paragraph in the *Shacharit* service:

Praise be to you, Adonai,
Our God, Sovereign of the universe,
Who formed the human body with skill,
Creating the body's many pathways and openings
It is well known before Your throne of glory
That if even one of them is wrongly opened or closed
It would be impossible to endure and stand before You.
Blessed are You, Adonai, who heals all flesh, working wondrously.

Baruch attah Adonai, Rofey kol basar u-mafli la'asot!

The bottom line is simple. Curing a disease is not always possible,

But healing can almost always be attained through finding the silver lining, a robust faith in God's power to heal, the support of family and friends who serve as God's *malachim*, God's messengers, and faith in the One who created you, cares for you, and will never abandon you.
Ken yehei ratzon—

So may it be.