

Sermon delivered on August 31, 2013 at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

by Rabbi Jeremiah Wohlberg

“Standing On The Edge of Life And Faith As The New Year Begins –

‘Uvacharta Bachayim’ – and Thou Shalt Choose Life”

Shabbat Shalom.

Our collective יום הדין is upon us this coming week – The Day of G-d’s judgment מי יחיה ומי ימות – the Days of Awe.

But I had my personal יום הדין on April 25th of this year – After being rushed to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital by EMS Ambulance, and with all my vital signs failing and family members called to gather from afar, my Heart Aortic Valve was replaced and a number of heart bypass were performed. And now ברוך השם I’m feeling fine! (As I prepare with Mimi to leave tomorrow for Israel through שמחת תורה!)

During that period of time in April-May and thereafter, I had a dialogue with G-d and with myself that Rav Avi and Rav Steven thought might be of value to all of us as we prepare to enter the New Year – so, I share it with you – I call it: “Standing on The Edge of Life and Faith as the New Year Begins – ובחרת בחיים – And Thou Shalt Choose Life!!”

An event such as that which experienced doesn’t first happen and then go away – It makes a lasting impression. So, I have two thoughts to share with you that I learnt from illness – First it taught me something about G-d. I knew I might die – I was fully conscious and aware of just how sick I was and yet not for a moment was I afraid. And I do believe that is in large measure because of the faith I had in G-d. As the Psalmist puts it in the 23rd Psalm: “*Gam ki elech b’gei tzalmoves lo irah raw ki attah imodi* – Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me.” I felt that I was in G-d’s hands and whatever would be, would be. No, I didn’t have any out-of-body experiences, I didn’t have any visions of the Divine...but while lying in the hospital bed I did not feel alone. G-d was also there – *Rav Avi and Rav Steven, singing Esa Einai.*

Don't get me wrong! This G-d of ours... I have so little understanding of how He operates. While I was recuperating, if anyone asked me how I was feeling, I always responded, "*Boruch Hashem* – blessed is G-d." But you know what? *I don't even know what that means!* If it's G-d that I'm thanking for making me better then isn't that the same G-d who made me sick? And if he was responsible for both, why didn't he just call it a "wash" and make the whole thing not happen?

I've been privileged for 3 years to mentor graduating Rabbinic students at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. I tell them...there are lots of things that happened to me in 47 years as a pulpit Rabbi that make no sense to me. One day I go to a shiva house of a beautiful, bright 28 year old graduate student of our shul, then back to the hospital to see a 19 year old lying there critically ill... he died the next week. I officiated at the funerals of a 60 year old who fell and suddenly was gone, a 65 year old whose liver gave out and another 60 year old who didn't even fall... he just dropped dead! And as a Rabbi, I'm supposed to understand, to explain?

Yes, G-d puts so many questions and doubts in our heads. And if you find that surprising for a Rabbi to say, it's not just me! It's the Rov – Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik זצ"ל, my teacher and one of the halachik giants of the 20th century writes, "Everyone is allowed to be unsure about G-d. We all have times when things about G-d are unclear to us." The truth of the matter is, I really have no idea what role G-d played in my illness, or in my recovery. All I know for sure is that G-d did create a world in which there are viruses and bacteria and tumors and plagues and diseases and accidents. And those things choose their own victims. At the same time, G-d created a world with doctors and scientists and biologists and radiologists and all the others who have been blessed with wisdom to help heal those who have fallen ill. It was my marvelous doctor who healed me! But it was G-d who created my doctor, and for that I say: "*Boruch Hashem.*"

No, belief in G-d doesn't spare us from harm. You can believe all you want, you can be Sabbath observant, inspect your lettuce, come to the synagogue every day, live morally, give charity... but if a Hitler comes along, or if a drunk driver comes along, or a virus or bacterium comes along... tragedy lurks. What belief in G-d *can* do is give you the faith and strength to withstand a tragedy when it hits; to let you know that you are not alone this world; that G-d is hovering over you and loves you. Questions, doubts about G-d? Sure! But our tradition teaches: "*Hevey dan et kal adam l'kaf z'chut* – Judge every

man on the scale of merit... give every man the benefit of the doubt.” If I am prepared to give that to every man, I’m certainly prepared to give it to G-d.

Elie Wiesel re. שקד – Belief/Faith versus Random Change – It’s good to give G-d the benefit of the doubt. That was my pre-High Holiday dialogue with G-d!

Which brings me to my second point. You’ll be better off if you also give *yourself* the benefit of the doubt! I must tell you: if someone had asked me last year if I could go through what I went through... if I would be able to handle it, I would have had to say “no.” I have a very low threshold of pain. I hate needles... I can’t even watch someone else get one. By my, “roughing it” means staying in only a four star hotel! The thought of spending days without enough strength to talk to or move my body, with every few hours someone taking blood from my veins, poking a needle in my stomach, having a mask over my face, IV’s going in and out of my body, unable to sleep and just lying there waiting for the next x-ray or breathing machine or blood test... no way, Jose! But you know what? I found out that I really didn’t know myself that well. It turns out that there has never been a better patient than me! I mean it! Not one word of complaint, no kvetching, questioning or doubts. I left that to my wife! Here is where I had an out-of-body experience... while lying in that hospital bed, I gave my body to science, to the doctors and nurses. And I said to them: “It’s all yours! Don’t ask my permission, just do whatever you want – pick it, poke it, pack it, prick it, prime it, prune it, pummel it, pulverize it, pickle it – I don’t care! Just do what you have to do to make me better.” And they did! And I owe each and every doctor and nurse a deep, deep sense of gratitude. Not only did not know what I was capable of, I didn’t know what *they* were cable of! No, some of them I had to teach a thing or two. Like the doctor who, looking at my chest-x-ray, told me that it had really started clearing up although there was a *shadow* on my other lung which they had just noticed. And I said, “Doctor, let me explain something to you. I’m Jewish. To a Jew, a “shadow” means a “spot; a “spot” means a “mass;” a “mass” means a “tumor;” a “tumor” means “malignancy;” a “malignancy” means “inoperable cancer.” He said. “I’m sorry... maybe I should have just said, “There is something there we’re going to have to look at.” I said to him, “Doctor, you don’t understand... I’m Jewish. To a Jew, “something we’re going to have to look at” is a “shadow.” And a “shadow” is a “spot;” a “spot” means a “mass;” and the “mass” is a “tumor;” and the “tumor” is a “malignancy;” and the “malignancy” is inoperable.” He then said to me, “You know what? On further consideration, I’ve decided your lungs are totally clear!”

Yes, there were doctors and nurses who learned a lot of things from me about the human body that even I can't repeat in a synagogue! But there were many more doctors and nurses who taught me so much; not only healed my body, but helped heal my spirit.

And let me tell you who else had the power to help me heal. I lay in the bed at night and I knew I was in trouble. I had a very serious conversation with myself – the most serious of all: was I going to make it, and what if not? I was going to be 76 years old! By today's standards that's not old! It's today's 40! And I'm in fairly good shape. But I thought of all the others in their 60's who I have buried. So, what's going to be? What if this is it? And I thought about my life, and I must say I have had a pretty good run. My brother, Rabbi Saul, says that engraved on my tombstone should be the words: "He pulled it off!" Yes, fabulous shul, great wife 54 years, two children – who are a daily source of nachas, two beautiful children-in-law who are like children to me, two brothers with whom I am so close. If this is it, I can't complain! Dayenu! But, then I thought about eight other people. I thought about my eight grandchildren. I could see each one right there in the room with me. I could almost feel them, touch them. And I said to myself: I have not had enough of them yet! I want more, and I'm going to get it! And I said to G-d: I don't know what you're thinking... But I'm getting out of here! And that's when I vowed to myself: No more thoughts about death. *Lo amut ki echyeh - I will not die - no, I will live!* *Uvacahrta vachayim - choose life!* I am going to do everything possible to live; that the doctors can do whatever they want! From that moment on, I was not going to allow a negative thought to enter my mind. I only thought positive things! I thought: "Good, it happened to me and no one else in the family. I can handle it." And I thought: "Good, I am going to lose some weight from all this." And: "Good, this is going to make for a good sermon!" I only thought good things and good times because I had so much good still left to look forward to in my life. And so, yes, I found out things about myself I didn't know before.

I know a lot of things now that I didn't know before I took ill. I know a lot more about myself... and a bit more about G-d. And more about my wife and children and grandchildren and what they mean to me. And I hope that my words this morning on the eve of a New Year will help you to better understand yourself, your family and our G-d. Perhaps it will move you to try and be sensitive to each other more and judge each other less. I learned this year that the words, "Here today, gone tomorrow" are not a cliché. They are the reality of life. You never know what the future may bring. The words of the song are so true for all of us: "For all we know we may never meet again. Before you go make this moment

sweet again.” Yes, you gotta do what you gotta do *now!* זה היום - this is the day! ... and feel good about it! Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all! And it makes it so much easier to love others, as well!

I close with words I heard from my father, Rabbi Dr. Harry Wohlberg, ע"ה. Dad explained why we traditionally wish each other “*Ah Gut Yahr - Ah Zees Yahr*” -- “A Good Year - A Sweet Year.” It seems so limited! Why not wish a great year - a fabulous year - a perfect year?

The answer - Great - Fabulous - Perfect - #10 - is very rare if not impossible. We need sweetness to be the antidote to the vinegar that enters every life. We need sweet charoset to soften the bitter moments of maror!

Be happy with a good year. Good is good enough.

Uvacharta Bachayim - choose life!

Let us learn, without illness, to cherish every single moment of life – to say ברוך ה' and to wish each other a Good Year – A Sweet Year!

Amen.