

What Cancer Has Taught Me
Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt

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As the Yiddish saying goes, "*Mentsch tracht, und Gott lacht*: Man plans, and God laughs."

How true. How true.

I have always thought of myself as healthy, not invulnerable or immune to illness, but as someone with a lot of energy, stamina and strong will power. Tumors, a growth, chemotherapy, going bald were all foreign to me. (Ok, three out of four.) Cancer wasn't something that I thought would ever happen to me. It just wasn't in the plan. This was something for which I have offered comfort to others, but I did not think that I would ever be on the other side, the one afflicted with the ailment. Yet *mentsh tracht, und Gott lacht*.

Imagine my surprise when I learned that the pain I was feeling in my back wasn't a kidney stone, as I originally suspected, but a rapidly growing tumor. After a series of tests and many scary, sleepless, worrisome nights when I imagined the worst, I was diagnosed with lymphoma. I was reluctant to ask too much, and refrained from getting a second opinion, mainly because I was afraid I would be told the old Rodney Dangerfield line. "You want a second opinion? You're ugly, too!"

I was and to be perfectly honest, still am in a state of shock, finding it hard to believe that this was happening to me. It was all so startlingly new and unexpected. When the doctor told me I had non-Hodgkins lymphoma, I knew so little I asked, which was better: Hodgkins or non-Hodgkins? When he told me, "Hodgkins" I asked, "Can I switch?" As the course and schedule of treatment was being explained to me I asked the nurse to show me the patient chart. I wanted to be sure the name on the file said, "Stuart Weinblatt." I was in denial. I couldn't believe that the person who was about to undergo a regimen of rigorous chemotherapy was me. The obvious takeaway is: listen to your body. If you experience an ongoing unusual pain, do not ignore what your body is telling you. Check it out.

But I want to speak this morning not just about the physical condition, but personally, more personally than I usually do on this Rosh Hashana - not because it's about me, because I know that there are many people who have faced illnesses with a more dire prognosis and where the prospects for recovery or successful treatment are not as favorable. Rather it's about what I have learned from this experience, and to share with you what has helped to sustain me through this challenging time, the spiritual dimension. As you can imagine one of my first thoughts when diagnosed during the summer was -- I sure hope to get at least one decent sermon out of all of this, for ultimately, the lessons learned parallel and reflect the essential themes of these Yamim HaNoraim.

Lesson Number One: Be in the moment.

We never know what life has in store for us. One thing though is certain. None of us will live forever, and none of us knows when our number will be up. Think about all the things you want to do, but keep waiting for the right time to do – don't wait too long.

I am reminded of the story told by Rabbi Hayyim of Zans about a poor woman who had trouble providing for her many children, but was excited because one day she found an egg, and thought all of her problems had been solved. She explained to her children that rather than eat it she would take the egg and place it under a neighbor's hen so she would then have a chicken. But rather than eat the chicken, she explained she would use it to make and hatch more eggs and chickens, which she will then sell to buy a cow which in turn will yield more cows and calves, which she will use to purchase a field. And as she was proudly dreaming out loud her grandiose plans, and feeling so confident in her wisdom and prudence, the egg she was holding fell and broke, shattering all her plans and dreams.

The Hasidic master taught that too often we are like this woman. We allow things to slip away, or through our hands, thinking that we have all the time in the world to do what we intend to do rather than acting today to use our days wisely to do what we should do and to act on our dreams.

Whatever it may be -- that trip to Israel you told me you are going to take one day, that course you have always thought about taking, the hobby you want to learn, spending more time with your children, setting aside time to study, learning a new skill, doing some volunteer work, or even the desire to start attending services more regularly one day, whatever it may be – don't keep putting it off.

I think the central message of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer that proclaims that “on Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live, and who shall die, who by fire and who by water...” is to force us to come face to face with the reality of our mortality. The prayer reminds us of the fragility of life.

Rather than taking it literally, I think the richness of the language lends itself to interpretation and that it was always meant to be understood figuratively, not literally. Hearing it each year summons us to live each moment to the maximum, to recognize that any moment could be our last.

The prayer recognizes that there are some aspects in life which are in our control and where we determine the outcome. The kind of people we are, the virtues we aspire to acquire, the character traits we seek to live by, what values we embrace, how we respond to the hand that is dealt us – Judaism asserts that these are the kinds of things that are in our grasp. Our tradition then lays out for us the path we should follow and things we should try to do and how to live our lives.

The reason this prayer is so dramatic, powerful and haunting is because it lets us know that in addition to there being things within the purview of our control there are also

those aspects which are truly beyond our dominion. Some events that occur to us are random. Life is comprised of both elements: the things we can affect as well as the unpredicted events -- and you never know when to expect the unexpected. Consequently we live in the crucible of the tension between the two. I have learned that you never know when that unplanned, unanticipated thing will happen, suddenly altering all your plans. One day you are perfectly healthy, and the next you find out you have cancer. *Mentsch tracht unt Gott lacht.*

Since as I have now learned first-hand we never know what fate awaits us around the corner, and which doors are about to open, and which will close, it is important to maximize and enjoy life and every moment as much as possible. My message from my ordeal is that every moment is precious and should be cherished. Take time to appreciate the beauty in our world. Enjoy music, literature, nature, art, the arts – whatever beauty there is all around us, be it created by God or by human beings. There is truth in the old trite adage, stop and smell the roses. Spend time with the ones you love – now. Don't put off what you have been wanting to do or wait until retirement or some distant elusive moment to begin living.

But at the same time, as much as I advocate for living in the moment and to enjoy life, lesson Number One has an important corollary: Do not live just for the moment.

Life that revolves around satiating your own desires and making yourself happy so you will feel good is ultimately shallow, meaningless and purposeless. Life needs to be about much more than ephemeral things such as self aggrandizement, seeking immediate personal gratification, or acquiring material objects you desire. It is most worth living when you live with purpose, when you are connected to something bigger than yourself, such as family, friends, community, and especially when you recognize and live your life as part of a people that walks with God and as a member of a people who has a mission.

These two contrasting and conflicting notions, about living in the moment, but not just living for the moment are crucial. If you do one without the other your life is unbalanced and incomplete. Combining the two elements is what puts life into the proper perspective and makes it worth living.

Rabbi Abraham Twerski writes, "If the purpose of a human being's existence is contentment, to maximize self-gratification and self-centeredness,...God would not have endowed the human being with so superior a mind." He is saying that a mind, like a life, is a terrible thing to waste. We are imbued with intelligence and intellect so we can improve ourselves, so we can do good deeds, make our world a better place, and fulfill God's will; so we can create beauty, and develop relationships with others. This is how we find meaning and transcendent lasting values that outlive us.

Our prophets taught us to dream and to work for a better world. Our rabbis introduced the importance of taking responsibility for others and of being a part of a community. Our mystics and later philosophers inspired us not to think only of ourselves, but to work for social justice and equality. Our heritage imposes upon us the imperative and

obligation we each have to work for *tikun olam*, to perfect the world. These ideals are some of the finest and noblest gifts bequeathed to human beings.

So while we should live in the moment, do not shortchange yourself by living only for the moment.

In my reading about my disease I came across an anonymous poem entitled, "What Cancer Cannot Do". It goes like this --

Cancer is so limited...

It cannot cripple love.
It cannot shatter hope.
It cannot corrode faith.
It cannot eat away peace.
It cannot destroy confidence.
It cannot kill friendship.
It cannot shut out memories.
It cannot silence courage.
It cannot reduce eternal life.
It cannot quench the Spirit.

In many respects in each instance it does the converse, the exact opposite and strengthens each of these qualities and attributes.

The notion of the spirit, as well as of our obligations and greater responsibilities to others brings me to Lesson Number Two: God, faith and prayer.

There are times during my life when I have been angry with God, when I have argued with God, when I have sought to understand His seeming silence and indifference. I usually feel that way when I see the suffering of others, such as when a family is devastated by a cruel wanton act of terror in Israel, or other moments of destruction and devastation, or harsh cruelty, or when religious fanatics succeed in carrying out plots to kill innocent people in the name of God; or when a young woman who finally found happiness and love is suddenly struck with a fatal illness.

But not this time. I have felt neither anger nor antipathy towards God as a result of my ailment. I didn't ask, "why me?" I didn't accuse God of being unfair. Rather, I have found much peace, serenity and comfort in turning to God in prayer. In part it is because as our tradition tells us, the hand that wounds is the hand that binds. I have prayed the traditional prayers of our liturgy. I have recited psalms and traditional prayers and I have also expressed the outpouring of my emotions in words and thoughts that I have composed on my own that come from my heart.

The Torah reading for this, the first day of Rosh Hashana tells us that when Hagar is all alone in the wilderness God hears the cry of the child, "*kee shema Elohim et kol hana'ar ba'asher hu sham*, God hears the child where he is." This is the God I believe in, a God

who hears our cries. As Reb Mendel of Worka said when commenting on this verse, "God hears even the silent cries and pleas of the anguished heart, even when no words are uttered."

There were times when I was afraid, especially when the uncertainty of what was the cause of the pains and my loss of weight and appetite weighed heavily on me and my imagination would run wild. I recited then as I do every night the prayer my father would say with me before I went to bed when I was a child. I later learned it was the 23rd Psalm, "*Adonai roee lo ehzar*: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." Saying this prayer implanted and reinforced the belief that God accompanies us so that even in our darkest moments we are not alone.

Psalm 27, a psalm we recite at this time of year affirms: "The Lord is my light and my help, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, whom shall I dread?... O Lord, when I cry aloud; have mercy on me, answer me.... Look to the Lord. Be strong and of good courage."

Our tradition offers a treasure trove of meaningful passages. "*Memaamekim keratecha*; Out of the depths I call You O Lord....*Esa Einai el heharim, ma'ayin yavo ezree*: I lift up mine eyes unto the mountains, from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord... He will guard you from all harm..." The prayers have been like faithful companions accompanying me along the way. I do not believe that reciting them will change my fate, as if saying them is like waving a magic wand. But praying has brought me solace and reassurance. It has linked me with those of my people who preceded me and those who will come after me who have turned and who will turn to this source of wisdom to find comfort.

Before each of the operations or treatments, I have said a prayer. I reached out and held the hand of the doctor or nurses, or whoever else was in the room. One of them went something like this:

Ribbono shel olam, Master of the Universe:

Beyadecha afkeed ruhee: Into your hand I entrust my fate.

Bezechut avot, Based on the merit of my ancestors, and with trust in You O God who heals the sick, I ask that you guide those who are agents of healing. May I be worthy of a *refuah shlemah*, a complete healing, and may my prayers as well as of those who love and care about me be answered.

Holding the hands of others brings me to Lesson Number Three: Never underestimate the love and support of one's community, one's family, friends, and loved ones.

I have always felt and thought that I am blessed to have a unique relationship with my congregants and congregation, different than what many of my colleagues have. There is a certain connection and closeness we have, and never has it been more evident than now. I want to take this opportunity to publicly acknowledge and express my gratitude for the outpouring of love and affection, the calls, letters, cards and emails that I have

received from so many of you, most of you – actually from everyone except for ..., and I have already forgotten his name.

Bruce Genderson, our president, informed me that the Board even passed a resolution wishing me a *refuah shelemah*. I was especially touched and moved when he told me that the motion passed by an overwhelming vote of 17 – 4, with 2 abstentions.

In truth each and every note, call, word of support, visit or act of kindness has brought its own unique message of encouragement. Do not assume that one can ever receive enough or too much support or comfort, or that since others are helping you are exempt or that your concern is not appreciated. The Talmud tells us that the mitzvah of *bikur cholim*, visiting the sick reduces the illness by 1/60th. A wonderful story in Masechet Berachot of the Talmud is of Rabbi Yohanan who healed people, yet when he was ill, he could not heal himself, for he needed the assistance of others.

In all honesty, and not with any sense of false immodesty the outpouring of concern has been gratifying, as I had no idea the extent to which I have been privileged to share and touch the lives of so many. I have learned from the response that Lennon and McCartney were right when they wrote, “and in the end the love you take is equal to the love you make.”

In addition to friends, congregants and members of the community my family, including my siblings have shared the concern and anxiety. My children have brought me so much joy and have helped to give me what to live for. Early on Ezra said to me, “Dad, you have to get better, so you can be at Talia’s bat mitzvah.” He then immediately corrected himself and said, “not her bat mitzvah -- at her wedding.”

My wife Symcha has been an amazing tower and pillar of strength. Through her worries and anxiety she has shown so much wisdom and strength as well as genuine unbridled concern and infinite love. The look in her eyes, even the tears she has shed have shown so much depth and has reminded me of the power and beauty of what it means to be in a loving relationship. It is true that love can grow deeper with the passage of time and in confronting challenges. Before we knew the actual prognosis, and there was a remote possibility that maybe all I had was an infection, I turned to my wife and asked, “Symcha, if it turns out to be nothing, will you promise to still always be this nice to me?”

The truth is that a time like this forces you to think about what is really important in life, what our priorities are, and who and what we cherish the most. We most appreciate those who are precious and dear to us when we think about what life would be like without our loved ones in our lives. And that is part of what the High Holidays is meant to remind us of, all of us, as well. This is a time to realize who and what is most important to you. Hold close those you love. Spend time with those you hold dear. And let them know by words and deeds how much you care about them as well as how much you appreciate and love them.

In certain respects we don't really know what we have, what is most precious to us and treasured, until we realize that all is a gift from God, and that all that we have is passing and ephemeral, as the Psalmist puts it, "we are like a breath, our days like a passing shadow."

So remember to be good to your loved ones and to take care of each other.

I hope that I am worthy of all the good wishes and prayers said on my behalf. I rescheduled my first and subsequent procedures so that I would be able to attend Wednesday morning minyan before going in to the hospital. As I was about to leave for my first infusion one of our members, Ami Sheintal said to me, "You know Rabbi, with all the prayers every one is saying for you, the chemotherapy is really just a supplement."

I cannot help but think how much more I wish I could be there and how much more I wish I would have been there for each and every member who has ever turned to me for comfort, and regret if I have ever disappointed anyone in a time of need. I hope that I will come away from this experience a better person, more sympathetic and empathic to the pains of others. After my first treatment, when I was feeling very weak I reached out to speak with a colleague who had battled lymphoma just a few years ago. I asked him, "How do you keep hope alive?" I was feeling that down. He said to me, "Stuart, you will come out of this a better person. You will be a better rabbi." Then he added, "and even if you aren't, people will think you are." That is my hope and prayer, to come out of this a better person and rabbi.

So what do I ask for on this new year? I pray that each and every one of us will be blessed with good health and that the new year will be one of meaning and fulfillment. As for me, my hope is to have fortitude and strength to face whatever awaits me. I share the simple wish of the Psalmist, "One thing I ask of the Lord, for this I yearn: to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, to frequent His sanctuary."

That, and no more surprises.

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, Maryland
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potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org*