

## A Sermon of Thanks February 5, 2011

I preceded my Rosh Hashana sermon a few months ago with a simple question. I asked, "Nu, so how was your summer?" By then I had shared with you the news of my diagnosis. Facing the abyss of uncertainty of my prognosis coupled with the fear of the unknown, but with faith in God, I did not know what to expect.

In a similar vein, I ask once again a simple question this morning: Nu, so how was your fall and winter?

In many respects the two questions are bookends. With the passing of these seasons, a period of time which seems like a blur, a chapter in my life has come and gone, and a new page is turned.

I feel like *Avraham avvenu*, Abraham, our patriarch, about whom our midrash says he transcended to the other side. I feel like one who has had a burden, a heavy weight taken off of my shoulders. I feel like the children of Israel looking at the *Ohel Mo'ed*, the Tent of Meeting, when they see that the cloud has been lifted, and they can now move forward.

I feel all of these things, but most of all I feel grateful, grateful to God for restoring me to health, grateful to all of you who have shown so much love, and grateful to my family for all they have done these past few months.

In last week's Torah portion, "Mishpatim", we read that one who harms another has an obligation to pay for his health care, *ve'rapoh yerapeh*, "he shall provide for healing." This is the justification given in the Talmud by the rabbis that permits us to seek medical care. Even more, Judaism encourages and requires us to seek the best medical care we can get.

There is an old Jewish joke about a man who travels from his *shtetl* to the big city of Warsaw to see the most famous specialist in the world for his medical condition. After the visit the doctor tells him the charge for the visit -- 50 rubles. The man is shocked and objects that the fee is too much, saying he is a poor man who comes from a poor village. The doctor immediately adjusts his rate, and says no problem, he will charge half the amount, 25 rubles. The man holds his ground, and demands to know how the doctor can in good conscience charge so much for an office visit. Things get progressively unpleasant. After further bickering back and forth, the patient says, "Look doctor. I am not a rich man. I tell you what, I will pay you what I can afford - two rubles, and that's it." The doctor is justifiably upset and asks, "If that is all you can afford, then why did you come to see the most expensive doctor in all of Warsaw?!" And the man says, "Doctor, you don't understand. When it comes to my health nothing is too expensive."

Based on the passage in the Torah as explained in the Talmud, "Massechet Baba Kamma" our sages conclude that although God is ultimately the healer, we are required to seek remedies for illness. We cannot say, "If God wants me to be ill, I will be ill, and if

God wants me to recover, God will heal me without medical intervention.” Healing is so important in Judaism, that our religion teaches that doctors do the work of God, and are partners of the Holy One. No offense to anyone here, or what any of us does for a living, but I hope our best and brightest will always aspire to work in the medical profession and that our most caring and compassionate will want to do this work.

I was fortunate to have outstanding medical care. My doctors, David Jacobs, Lenny Bloom, as well as the hematologist who treated and restored me to health, Dr. Bruce Cheson at the Lombardi Center of Georgetown University Hospital and his team, along with the nurses who administered the chemotherapy are *malachim*, messengers, God’s agents of healing.

In a similar vein as in the previous story, a man is given bad news by his doctor who tells him he has only 6 months to live. The poor guy doesn’t know what to say, and then when he gets the bill he says, “This is terrible news doctor. But I must tell you I can’t afford to pay your bill, especially not so quickly.” So the doctor says to him, “Ok, tell you what, I’ll give you a year to live.”

I am tempted to go on and continue with a series of medical jokes, but I think you might like to hear something a bit more profound this morning, such as about how I reflect on what I have experienced. Knowing that I have to save a little ammunition for the High Holidays, I still would like to share a few insights with you this morning.

I realize and feel that I was truly blessed to have a network of friends and congregants who shared the experience with Symcha and me. You were there every step of the way, with cards, notes, and expressions of love. Many showed your concern in a number of ways, some by sending or preparing meals, so Symcha wouldn’t have to worry about this. Others conveyed their feelings just by the worry and anxiety I saw in your eyes. To tell you the truth, at first it wasn’t easy to be on the receiving end of such generosity, especially for my wife, Symcha who is such a giving person, and who prefers to do for others than to accept any help. But when we saw the outpouring I began to realize that this was all part of the healing. I realized that we are connected, that we are a community, and that we were in this together. So we learned to be on the other end. And by the way, this is not just about or for me. Even now one of our beloved members, Barbara Sandler, who I visited yesterday is in the hospital, knows that she is not alone, because she is a member of a caring community.

Knowing that so many prayers were being offered by so many people was truly gratifying and uplifting. At one point I got a little worried that I might be in danger of overdosing on the prayers. Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav tells us that humans have the capacity to reach out in three directions – to God, to other human beings, and to ourselves. He taught that when you reach in one of those three, you encounter the other two.

At one time or another all of us make innocuous comments that we might not really mean. How often do you ask someone “how are you?” and don’t wait to listen to the answer. “Have a nice day” is another innocent, harmless, but more often than not, not

particularly sincere comment. When people have a birthday, we wish them a happy birthday, and then often add the words, "and many more." When I celebrated my birthday this past December and people wished me a happy birthday, and said "and many more" I felt like it had a whole new meaning. I know that it is just a phrase, a throwaway line. But I took it seriously, and felt people really meant it.

Before I come to the conclusion of my sermon, one important matter not yet settled has to be resolved: the hairstyle. As promised, I am going to let those of you here today vote on which way you think I should go: the shaved look, or as it is now.

We Jews have at least three blessings associated with reaching a milestone of sorts. One is on the occasion of the bar mitzvah of a child, traditionally one says, what is referred to as the *baruch shepetarani*. The full blessing praises God, *shepetarani me'onsho shel zeh*: literally, for relieving a parent for "the punishment for this one." In other words, thank God now that this child of mine has reached the age of majority, I will no longer be held responsible or accountable for his punishment. Now what he does is on his head, not mine.

The other one is the one I said this morning after the Torah reading, *birkat hagomel*, thanking God *shegamalanee kol tov*, who extends goodness even upon the undeserving. It is a humble expression of gratitude that recognizes that although we may not be worthy, we appreciate being restored to health. The prayer is said on four occasions: completion of a long journey by sea or land, upon release from captivity, and after recovery from a major life-threatening illness. I especially love the translation in the Bokser siddur, as it captures the essence of the emotion one feels at a time such as this:

"Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who dost shower Thy blessings upon me, even beyond my merits. Thou hast been gracious unto me and hast delivered me from peril. I shall ever praise Thy name, and strive to be worthy of Thy continuing love."

I identify fully with this sentiment, which leads me to the third prayer recited when we reach a particular milestone, one that is surely familiar to all of you, the *shehecheyanu* prayer. It is the ultimate prayer of thanks, and so I ask you to please join me in reciting these words which express gratitude for reaching this moment: "*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech HaOlam, shehecheyanu, vekeeyamanu vehegeeyanu lazman hazeh*. Blessed are You O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe who has kept us alive, preserved us and enabled us to reach this day."

Thank you God, and thanks to each and every one of you for all your love and concern. Amen.

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