

Overcoming adversity – Yom Kippur morning Sermon 2015-5776

The first time someone told me to my face that they had cancer, I froze. I was 16 years old and I had no idea what to say. It was not ideal circumstances. I was standing in a dance club at the time, and only 8 months after I had first met Debra. We had spent the previous summer together at Camp Biluim, part of the Young Judea camping system and I had a huge crush on her which evolved into a great summer friendship. Debra had long flowing red hair and freckles, was funny, friendly and a beautiful person both inside and out. After camp she went back to her home in western Canada. This was before the days of cellphones and Facebook, a time when it was much harder to keep in touch.

That spring there was a camp reunion in Toronto and all the campers coming in for the party. When she approached me at first in the hall I didn't even recognize her. She had shaved her head. Not even considering illness, I said hello, we hugged and I

asked her why she had shaved her amazing, long red hair. She told me she had cancer. It was like the air was sucked out of the room. We both stood there in complete and utter silence. I literally did not know what to say. Thoughts raced through my head. Was she recovering or was she dying? Is there something I'm supposed to say? Is this the last time I will talk to her? I didn't know anyone with cancer, let alone someone 16 years old and full of life.

After what seemed like an eternity of me staring at her, I said "oh" and then another person came over and she drifted away. I didn't see her the rest of the night and I have not seen her since. It will forever bother me that I didn't say anything. What kind of person am I that I could not say anything? I wish I could go back to that moment in time and say something that would have made her and me feel more comfortable. Even if in my 16 year old brain I didn't know the right way to respond, at least I could have

said, “Debra, I have no idea what to say right now to you, other than I am sorry, and maybe you could tell me what I should say”. Maybe that would have broken the ice and she could have explained more. Or maybe she didn’t want to talk about it at all.

I think about that moment often and always regret how I behaved. And while I hoped to never have to face another person telling me they were diagnosed with cancer that is sadly not the case. In the past 6 months 8 people that I care about deeply have told me they have cancer. And I bet I am not alone. In fact I am sure that each person here knows someone who either has cancer or had cancer. Maybe you’re thinking about them right now.

Yom Kippur is the day we face our own mortality. We are asked to look at our lives and consider where we have been. Traditionally, when we lay bare our soul, it is as if we were dying on Yom Kippur and then coming back to life. We don’t eat, we don’t put on makeup or shave, we wear a white shroud, we don’t

wear leather. Then we open the aron hakodesh (the word for ark and coffin in Hebrew are the same) and we take out the torahs until the aron is empty. What more vivid imagery could we imagine on this day. Then we recite the *unetaneh tokef* prayer, and ask God who will live and who will die this year.

Kama y'averoon, v'chama yibaeroon, mi yichye, u'mee yamoot

How many will pass away from this world, how many will be born into it. Who will live and who will die, who will reach the ripeness of age and who will be taken before their time.

The prayer ends however with a nechemta – a positive coda. The last words are, *u'tefilah, u'teshuva, utzedaka, ma'avirin et ro'ah h'gzerah*

that repentance, prayer and righteousness will temper God's decree.

While we are all subject to the vicissitudes of life, when we encounter illness and tragedy we are reminded that through prayer we can ask for forgiveness and we can perform acts of loving kindness. In other words prayer has the power to alleviate some suffering.

One way is by letting God into our life. Paul Tillich, in his book The Shaking of the foundations writes, "The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is God. that depth is what the word God means". When we speak of God, think of what is most important to you from the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without reservation. Then you will have found God and a source of hope and meaning. Let your concern for others come from that place of depth.

The other thing that prayer can do is to remind us that God does not say the illness will go away, but that it is possible to

temper the harshness with sweetness, with kindness. When we love and care for the important people in our lives we can ease their suffering.

Thus when we hear about or come face to face with a loved one with a devastating life-altering illness, the right thing to say to show our love and concern is, "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care." Or "I'm sorry to hear that you are going through this." Or "If you would like to talk about it, I'm here." Sometimes even the simplest of expressions can be meaningful. In fact, saying little and listening more is probably the best advice I ever got.

We should not attempt to solve the problems of our loved ones in one conversation. You are not the one curing them. You do not have to reassure them that they will beat this thing. There is no need to tell them about all the other people who once had cancer. Telling them not to worry can be counterproductive. In

fact they probably are very worried and ought to be. You needn't explain that things will get better. You don't want to discount their very real fears and feelings. It may be tempting to tell them that you know how they feel because you once had a severe illness or operation. But the truth is you don't know exactly how they feel.

Cancer Care Ontario published an article stating that what you want to do is be there for them, whatever that entails. If you know the person pretty well you can even try humor. But let them take the lead. If they make a comment about their appetite or hair you can join them in a laugh and it might help relieve stress. But don't do this unless you know for certain that they can handle it and will appreciate it. You certainly don't want to focus on their appearance. But you could say "I like your outfit" or something positive.

I wish I had known all this when I was 16 years old. Not only about how to talk to girls, but how to help someone in distress and how to respond when someone says, "I have cancer".

I know I cannot go back in time and do it right but I am trying to learn from that moment so that I can be there when people come to me today and say I'm facing a terrible disease or a loved one is in the hospital or my marriage is collapsing or I just lost my job. Our job is not to fix problems but, by being a better listener and asking simple caring questions, we can be there for friends and family.

Joseph Mezler in his book, "Facing Illness, facing God" writes about Rabbi Yochanan, a great healer in Talmudic times. He was part of a select group of sages that could take a sick person by the hand and allegedly heal them. One day a colleague fell ill and Rabbi Yochanan visited him. In his suffering Yochana grasped the

man's hand and "lifted him up". What does that mean to raise him up? Did he physically lift him up? The Rabbis reveal that it was not by way of a magic touch. Rather he helped when his friend was falling into despair by the simple touch of a friendly hand offered in affection. Yochanan might not have been able to end his friend's pain but he could counterbalance it with a comforting touch.

Traditionally our community is what people turn to especially for joyous moments. That is the hallmark of our synagogue and of our Jewish community. When you have a marriage, a baby or a bar mitzvah, you of course want to celebrate it with the community. When it comes to an illness, a loss or a turn for the worse, sometimes people turn completely inwards and shut out the very community that can be the most helpful. But statistics show that people are generally healthier when they are more involved in their religious community.

Apparently people heal faster and better when they know they are being prayed for. There is no scientific evidence to back up this phenomenon but we base it on faith.

There is a beautiful story of Elijah the prophet. The Rabbis in the Talmud are having a discussion about the Messiah.

"The Messiah --where will we find him? The answer, outside the gates of the city, they will find the Messiah sitting among the poor lepers. So Elijah went and sat among the lepers. Elijah teaches us that he cannot go out and heal the lepers but rather even among the most sick there is the potential for beauty. He sits with them and helps them bandage their wounds one at a time even if he cannot heal them.

The Talmud thus teaches us the value in a visit. In fact the Rabbis say that if someone comes to visit you it takes away 1/60th of your illness. It may seem negligible but it can have an effect.

Another way to help those suffering from illness is to take personal action and raise funds. It seems that we get emails all the time from people who are involved in some fundraiser. It used to be just a walk but now it's a run, a bike ride, climbing the CN Tower, hiking, bowling, playing hockey, dumping a bucket of ice water or shaving your head. I even saw a fundraiser where a group of people were planning to pull a small airplane across the tarmac of an airport.

For those who are ill, knowing that there is a group of people out there doing things for them is inspiring. Knowing that money is going into research and trials gives hope and courage. As a person who has done most of these fundraisers I can tell you that taking action is helpful. If you can't figure out how else to help, raising money and awareness definitely makes a difference.

Lawrence Zimmering has headed up a team to fight cancer for over 5 years now. Along with Larry Hyett and around 75 others, they have done the Ride To Conquer Cancer to support the

work of the Princess Margaret hospital. Riding a bike from Toronto to Niagara Falls isn't easy. This year, after years of Larry and Lawrence telling me to join, I finally decided to try it. Larry lent me a great bike and Lawrence added me to his team. Cycling 230 km over two days is not for everyone. I began training in May, but even on my best day I could barely handle 50 km. The ride itself is 115 kilometres the first day, and then 105 more the following day.

The weekend of the ride approached but Jacob Handler was having his bar-mitzvah that Saturday morning. So what did I do? I brought my bike with me to shul of course! We'd have a beautiful ceremony in the morning and then I would join the riders who left from Toronto. As they headed towards the midway point in Hamilton they would go right through Oakville. So I arranged for my personal chauffeurs Bonnie and Emma Hyett to drive me to up to Dundas and drop me off so that I could join the ride.

On that ride the fact that there were thousands of others also riding to conquer cancer gave me such a lift that the kilometres just flew by. Each rider had their name attached to their bike so you could call out words of encouragement. And the most amazing thing was the cancer survivors who were also on that ride. They each had a special yellow flag attached to their bikes. How could I get tired when there was a survivor pedaling along beside me. It was an incredible experience, riding with so many people, with so much support along the way, from the motorcycle gangs who blocked intersections for us, to the police and medical staff, to the volunteers at pit stops every 25 km who provided food, water, first aid and encouragement. On the second day with about 2 hours to go it started to rain and didn't stop. But it didn't really matter. We kept cycling and I felt a real sense of accomplishment when I finally crossed the finish line. I wasn't riding alone. I was accompanied by my 100 sponsors who

helped me raise close to \$3000, my 50 teammates who raised \$100,000 and the thousands of riders who together raised 19 million dollars. Rabbi Heshel once said that when he walked with Martin Luther King Jr in Alabama for black equality, his feet were praying. I guess I could say my pedals were praying when I crossed that line.

We all know that life has many obstacles and we want to help others find their way when faced with these great challenges. It is time to avoid the silence and find the right words to say to people who are suffering. Raise them up and lend them a healing hand. Take action as best you can. *HaYom Harat Olam*, "Today has endless potential." Today, the now, each moment, is eternally filled with potential and possibility; even when we are confronted with great sadness and loss. May it be God's will that we join together with the holy one to help each other through the toughest times to a place of healing and love. Ken Yehi Ratzon.

