

## ***Above the Roar of the Sea: When the Rabbi's Wife is Diagnosed With Cancer***

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“What patients seek is not scientific knowledge that doctors hide but existential authenticity each person must find on her own. Getting too deeply into statistics is like trying to quench a thirst with salty water. The angst of facing mortality has no remedy in probability.” So writes Paul Kalanithi of blessed memory in his searing memoir, *When Breath Becomes Air* (p135). Can we not say the same thing about theology and theodicy, our theories about God and the nature of suffering? What we seek when we suffer is not some theory of God hidden away by theologians that, once properly understood, will explain and soothe our pain. The angst of facing mortality has no remedy in abstract theories; a cancer diagnosis - in oneself or in someone you love - requires honest testimony.

So this High Holidays I can only share my own journey from one year ago - a moment speaking on the High Holidays that honestly is just a fog, a vague memory because while I stood on this bimah and tried to teach, my heart was with Jennifer at home - from one year ago to today. I cannot speak for Jennifer - ever :-)) but particularly about what it's been like to have breast cancer. I can only testify about the particular pain of watching and worrying for your life's partner; I can only reflect on what insights I've managed to glean; I can only share how, successfully and not, I related to God in the year that has passed.

I begin with a confession, a part of my experience about which I don't feel proud and which I share more as a mistake to learn from than an example to follow: during the year, I experienced self doubt about my suffering. I felt like a “half-sufferer,” I could not silence a voice that minimized the amount of sympathy I would allow myself to feel - the voice came not from Jennifer, not from you, nor from anyone around me except myself. It said things like: “I am not the one who has cancer; Jennifer does. She is “truly” suffering. I am not confronting my mortality, she is.”

The voice also told me I wasn't having a “true” cancer experience. “Breast cancer, after all, is quite survivable these days,” it said, until it isn't. Trying to be of comfort, the voice of an actual person told Jennifer and me that she had heard that “doctors have become so adept at handling breast cancer, it is as routine as the flu or a cold.” Suffice it to say that this didn't feel like a flu or the cold. I felt scared, exhausted, stretched thin by adrenaline and doctor's appointments. I remember talking to the kids. I tried to reassure them it would all be okay - and wondered if I was lying to them. Jen had dark moments. I had mine. But that awful, accusatory inner voice compared my suffering to people who “have it worse” and made me feel like an imposter, like maybe in feeling all the exhaustion and fear and sadness, I was just being overly dramatic.

In a book, *Intoxicated By My Illness*, written during the months before he died, Anatole Broyard begins:

*So much of a writer's life consists of assumed suffering, rhetorical suffering, that I felt something like relief, even elation, when the doctor told me I had cancer of the prostate. Suddenly there was in the air a rich sense of crisis - real crisis...*

Broyard felt a sense of *real* crisis, but I did not allow myself any “relief” or “elation.” The voice inside me denied that my crisis was “real.” When I wanted to cry out, that terrible voice accused me of being overly dramatic, told me my suffering was more “assumed” or “rhetorical” than “real.” Okay, things were hard, but I was only “half suffering.” Along with my pain, I felt a sense of guilt, as if by taking time or energy for myself to fall apart or rebuild, I was taking something away from Jennifer or others whose illnesses push them statistically closer to death than breast cancer.

Our tradition has a name for that voice - Satan. Yes, Satan. S-A-T-A-N. Or, in Hebrew, Satan - SIN - TET - NUN SOFIT. No, not the character from the Church Lady on Saturday Night Live, not a little red figure with a pitchfork on your shoulder. In the bible, Satan starts out meaning “adversary” but by the book of Job and in rabbinic parlance, Satan means “Accuser,” a prosecutorial angel who argues against you before God, pointing out your worst qualities and weaknesses. Satan isn't someone modern rabbis talk about very much - I imagine I may be the only rabbi in America giving a sermon that includes Satan this Rosh HaShanah - but Satan lurks around the Jewish sources. Jewish tradition is to blow the shofar every day of Elul - the month leading up to the High Holidays - as a way of stirring our hearts to repentance. We blow the shofar every day of Elul except yesterday, the day before RH. Why not yesterday? To confuse Satan. To throw him off, make him think that he counted wrong, that he missed Rosh HaShanah somehow.

What lesson did I learn from this accusatory voice? Don't believe it. Don't diminish your suffering. Don't compare it with others. There is no contest of suffering. Each of our suffering is unique because each of us is unique and special to God.

One Jewish claim for which I can never offer conclusive proof but upon which I will stake my life is: God cares about each life, each person, each soul. Heschel wrote: “God is not detached from or indifferent to our joys and griefs. Authentic vital needs of man's body and soul are a divine concern.” In my best moments, I was able to silence that voice and accept that my journey was no more and no less deserving of God's compassion. I was able to hear the song that my teacher Reb Mimi sang to me at the moment of my ordination as rabbi: “חסדי ה' כי לא תמו כי לא כלו רחמי” God's lovingkindnesses are never exhausted, God's compassion never ends” (Lamentations 3:2). I was able to allow myself to believe that I too was deserving of God's love, that God cared infinitely not just for everyone else, but for me too.

Another memory from this past year? Shopping. If illness feels like a great drama of highs and lows, shopping reminds you that life continues in all its banality. Most days in most places most people were nice. But once, someone in the supermarket was a real jerk and, when they were, I thought to myself: "If that person only knew that I just came from my wife's chemotherapy at Duke Cancer Center, they'd be ashamed of themselves." Walking the aisles looking for mustard or waiting in line to check out, I felt like a spy carrying an important secret, like I was on some special mission that - if people only knew - they wouldn't be so careless with my feelings. I felt a sense of entitlement or self-importance like people should move the hell out of the way for the guy whose wife has cancer.

But after a while, I started to wonder, no, not to wonder, but to realize: how many other people were carrying a secret suffering with them behind their eyes in the supermarket aisle? How many people did I pass looking for 1% milk who were struggling with depression? Or grieving for a loved one who died too soon? How many people shopping for bread were an exhausted and lonely caretaker? Or had a child struggling with alcoholism? And, how many times had I been careless and callous with the feelings of a stranger, wrapped up in my own narcissism? "Do not wrong the stranger in your midst" the Torah tells us. Perhaps the verse comes to teach us not only about the careful treatment of new immigrants, but about all of the strangers in our lives, to remind us again that a good life is measured in how much kindness we give to the world.

I think back too on my experience of prayer this year. Did I pray more often or more intently? Surely I included Jennifer in my prayers with an added urgency and the gratitude I feel for the hundreds - if not thousands - of people around the world who included Jennifer in their prayers is beyond what I can express. But...what did I pray for? A small part of my prayers was - for lack of a better term - to cover our bases. :-) If indeed God does control each cell of the universe and could intervene somehow to heal her, well, there was no harm in saying her Hebrew name one more time or with just a little extra umpf! But that vision of God - a vision depicted in the Une Tane Tokef prayer we just finished - when it's taken literally - that if I pray harder or give more tzedakah or do more teshuva, then God will spare my life - that is a vision that has driven many people away from God, not brought them close. So I "covered my bases" - I gave in to my own superstitious side by praying a little harder for Jen, but it's also an idea that I found myself having let go of.

I've lost a lot of people close to me - my grandparents - who all died before my 27th birthday - my friends - Jay, Joel, Alicia and Karin to cancer, my friend David Knauert whose death, in some ways brought me to Durham and to Beth El - and so many others. Believing God killed them for something they - or I - did or didn't do, or that their deaths were justified according to some logic that I will understand one day - such a vision of God nearly drove me away from God years ago. This past year, I took comfort in a different part of the Jewish tradition, one where the rabbis acknowledge "the world goes according to its way" - cancer happens, accidents happen and I did not need to hold God directly responsible for those things.

Metaphors about God are all insufficient - in the kaddish this week we emphasize that God is “I’eilah u’leilah” - above and beyond any words we can use to describe God. But words are all we have. There is one image of God I’ve been relating to that has been helpful this year. It comes from an admittedly strange place: a Jewish book for parenting teenagers by Dr. Wendy Mogel called *The Blessings of a B Minus*. Mogel argues that too many parents make a mistake by trying solve our teenagers’ problems for them. Practicing “helicopter parenting” as it is known - swooping in and saving our children from themselves before they fail - is an abdication of our responsibility as parents. Mogel argues that instead of micromanaging our children so they achieve momentary success, she proposes a different and beautiful image of good parenting: a mother or father who is around, available to answer their questions and give the best advice we can, someone sitting in the living room - not directly involved - but available so that, when they need to cry, we are there to dry their tears and to sit beside them until they are ready to get up and move on again. That is how God has felt to me this year. Available, helpful, but not someone who I have looked to to solve every problem or make every hurt go away.

It is true - when we are young, parents sometimes punish us if we misbehave. We get grounded if we skip school. So I continue to find some richness in asking myself whether some bad things that happen to me are perhaps from God, are perhaps something from which I am supposed to learn and grow. But just as not every bad thing that happens to us as children is caused by our parents, not every bad thing that happens in this world need be thought of as a punishment caused by God. If we get cancer, it need not be a punishment from God any more than falling down on the playground is a punishment from our parents – sometimes painful, difficult things just happen.

A good parent knows bad things happen - is paying attention and available, can dry our eyes, can help us find strength to continue when we don’t think we can anymore, and a good parent sometimes might even be able to help us understand not why bad things happen but how we can grow from them. I believe God is paying attention, that through our amazing community, God gave us strength, and I have learned - my soul has grown - from this experience.

Sometimes I imagine myself like a teenager sitting in my room, alone and in pain, and then finally coming downstairs, sitting on the couch and leaning not so much on Avinu Shebashamayim - Our Father in Heaven - but more on Eimeinu Sheba’Olam - Our Nurturer here in the world. I see myself coming downstairs and laying my head on God’s lap and just checking in for a few minutes. I might say, “hi,” and God might say, “hello dear one.” and God might ask me, “So how are you this year? What do you want to talk about?”

I want to conclude this sermon by trying to answer what I might say this year if God asked me, “What do you want to talk about?”

*Hey. I’m actually doing okay. Last year was hard. Not an easy year. I’m grateful Jennifer is feeling better. Thank you for whatever role you played in that. It’s still hard though. I love the people in this room, but I know there are other people sitting here this year who are scared, just*

*like I was a year ago, not knowing what the future holds for them or someone they love. I wish it didn't have to be that way. I hope those people find You, not because You are going to cure everyone but it helps a lot just to know You're here, that noone is ever alone.*

*Thanks for Beth El - it's a good place. We're not perfect but, in our best moments - and we have a lot of those - we bring each other food, we take care of each other. We dry each other's tears. Yes, I know we argue sometimes - that's what families do - but we do it out of love, because we care. I hope we are making You proud.*

*I feel different than I did a few years ago. I can really say now how grateful I am You brought me into this this world. This is a crazy life You've given us. I don't know if You knew - I guess You did but I never told You about this before. Sometimes, up in my room all by myself, I couldn't say that, couldn't feel how lucky I am to be in the world. Life just hurts so much sometimes. Sometimes all the love I felt for my friends who died just turned to pain and I thought loss was all there is. I forgot about love and sometimes it hurt so much that I didn't want to go on anymore. Sometimes it felt like there was only darkness all around, like rushing waters. King David once wrote a poem about this I like. There were some campers who recorded a beautiful [melody](#) to it that I like listening to sometimes:*

### תהלים Chapter 93 Psalms

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| א " מֶלֶךְ, גֵּאוֹת לִבֵּשׁ:<br>לִבֵּשׁ יי, עַד הַתְּאֲזָר; אֶף-תִּכּוֹן תִּבְּל, בַּל-תִּמוּט. | <b>1 Adonai is sovereign, robed in splendor, girded in strength; the earth stands firm, not to be dislodged.</b>      |
| ב נִכּוֹן כִּסְאֶךָ מֵאֲז; מֵעוֹלָם אֶתָּה.   | <b>2 From earliest time You were enthroned; You are eternal.</b>  |
| ג נִשְׂאוּ נְהָרוֹת, יי--נִשְׂאוּ נְהָרוֹת קוֹלָם; יִשְׂאוּ נְהָרוֹת דְּכָיִם.                  | <b>3 The rivers rise up, Adonai, the rivers raise up their roar, the rivers raise up their waves.</b>                 |
| ד מִקְלוֹת, מַיִם רַבִּים--אֲדִירִים מִשְׁבְּרֵי-יָם; אֲדִיר בְּמָרוֹם יי.                      | <b>4 Above the roar of the vast sea and the majestic breakers of the ocean, Adonai stands supreme in the heavens.</b> |
| ה יְעִדְתִּיךָ, נֶאֱמְנוּ מֵאֲד--לְבֵיתְךָ נֶאֱוָה-קֹדֶשׁ: יי, לְאָרְךָ יָמִים.                 | <b>5 In Your house, beautiful in its holiness, Your testimonies endure, Adonai, for all time.</b>                     |

*There You were - above the roar of the sea, beyond the breakers, and because You were there, I'm still here, and even though the year's been a hard one, I'm grateful to be here again. I*

*wouldn't trade my life for another, even though I don't know what this next year is going to bring.*

*[SILENCE]*

*I'm going to get going now. Thanks for the chat. Pretty neat journey, this thing called life. I'll do my best to make You proud. Yeah, I know, I know. I'll try to stay in better touch too. Love you too. Shana Tova.*