

Sermon Yom Kippur 5766

Rabbi Jay M. Stein

If there is one issue that has racked our congregation in this past year it is cancer, and I refuse to whisper it. There is no disease that has killed so many in such a painful way as this and we must find a cure. There isn't a family in this congregation that doesn't know or love someone with cancer. We must learn how to cope with it and begin to find a cure. We need to be a community of people who are ready, willing and able to do whatever is necessary to alleviate the pain of those suffering with some form of cancer. We must learn how to assist those who are closest to the victims and, are therefore, victims in their own right.

Let me tell you a story, or rather a composite of a number of stories. A young woman in her mid-thirties was diagnosed with breast cancer 15 years ago - her children were 4 and 6 years old. She undergoes proper medical protocol and her cancer goes into remission. For 13 years she lives cancer free, but in the back of her mind and sometimes even a little further in her consciousness, she has thoughts that the cancer could come back. In all likelihood, because of her original symptoms it will and if it does, her chances of survival will be drastically reduced. So, the only question is, when will it come back.

Sure enough the cancer returns and by the time it is discovered, it has metastasized to many of her organs and her spine. For the next two years she wages a valiant fight, taking many trips to the hospital, receiving chemotherapy, radiation and hormone therapy. The cancer has slowed but the pain increases and soon she is unable to leave her home. Cancer takes her life but has not won. It is a sad, miserable story but far more tragic is the number of times this happens **in our** congregation – not just in the general population. Unfortunately, this is a tale with which we are all too familiar. Maybe the details are different, the age of the person taken might be a little younger or older, the person may have children who are grown or may have no children at all. Possibly there is a spouse, but maybe not yet. Maybe it is your cousin, your aunt, your sister, your mother or even your daughter. The odds are it is someone you know or to whom you are related and if it isn't cancer, it is another disease such as aphasia, stroke or heart disease. The parallels are close.

We are all affected by disease but right now cancer seems to be the dominant one. Science has made such advances in the past decade that we feel we are close to a cure. In recent history, science has given us a sense of hope that religion has been unable to do. So many survive today where there was once no hope. Early detection through advance screening increases our ability to fight - and we are winning, thanks to organizations like Susan G. Komen. We are surviving – we are beating this disease thanks to greater awareness and funding. It seems that around every corner there is a new chance, a new drug, a new trial, a new answer or a new protocol. Just this past week a new vaccine for cervical cancer was announced and is in trial. Unfortunately, we are all too familiar with the vocabulary of illness. Trials should conjure up thoughts of Olympic trials but they do not. Protocol should be about how we approach royalty with the proper etiquette, but it is not. Cancer has taught us so much about the way the human body works and how cells can become dysfunctional. We hope our loved one is similar to others who have beat it, but because their prognosis is so bad we know of the tragedy that cancer can ultimately bring.

Let me teach three important lessons that I have learned from my mother-in-law, *zichronah livrakha*, who fought this battle. Three very personal lessons - may her memory remain for a blessing – she taught me over the past five years as well as our last time together. Three important lessons that come from a person who suffered and succumbed. Three lessons that have changed the way I feel about cancer and about our role in the fight and what each one must do when we find out that a dear friend, brother, sister, father, mother, son, daughter or cousin has cancer. Three lessons that if we take to heart will give us a sense of purpose and direction as we leave this sanctuary today. Three important things that you already know.

- First, the very sick are not afraid of dying.
- Second, what scares the very sick is pain and isolation.
- And third, prayer and community make a difference.

Now let me tell you what I mean.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, the famous author of *“When Bad Things Happen to Good People”* says, the very sick are not afraid of dying, some even welcome it. The moment when someone finds out they are terminally ill is devastating. For days they may walk around in a daze unable to focus on the outside world. They may become introverted and that may last for days, even weeks. But then the battle begins. The fight with all of its strategies is waged. Many people are able to concentrate on the details. The doctors’ appointments, the treatments, the drugs, their interactions, their side effects and the day-to-day survival. Sadly, towards the end, often there is pain, but rarely is there fear of what will happen when they die.

Time and time again I am amazed by the person who, in their last hours, asks me to come by and sit with them. They express gratitude for the life they were given, for the special moments with their children, the great friends and the caring spouses. Although they would like more time with them, they are ready for the next step whatever it may be. They often tell me they are ready to be rid of the struggle to breathe or to be free of the pain that seems to be unrelenting. Some question why the end has not come yet, but rarely are they afraid of what will be.

So we shouldn’t be either. The lesson we should understand is that we can help them as long as we don’t drag them into something they aren’t feeling. You don’t have to be cheery all of the time. It is all right to be sad – it is healthy to cry together. It can be wonderful to hold each other, but know they might not be afraid of dying, and therefore, you should not be afraid for them.

What does scare them is pain and isolation. Today there is so much that can be done for pain management – protocols that never existed before. In many ways the most humane advances in science today have come in the arena of how we can offer relief to those who are suffering from debilitating pain. So what is left is isolation and it is in that area that we can prove most effective.

Elizabeth Kubler Ross wrote in her book *On Death and Dying* found that people, when they find out that the patient is incurable, begin to withdraw. We as family members don’t know what to say. We don’t know how to behave and we stay away.

We don't have a lot of experience with people who are dying and I pray that we don't ever get good at it, but we must not stay away. Make lists of things to talk about if it means you will go to see them. You can make conversation about anything you want. The weather, sports, politics, television or you can just let them decide. But you need to go to them - not just make a phone call, although that is better than nothing.

A few years ago there was a study conducted by the University of Wisconsin where the subject was asked to place their foot in a bucket of ice water and hold it there as long as they could. The ultimate result of the experiment showed that a person could hold their foot in the ice water twice as long when there was someone else in the room than when they were sitting by themselves. The study seemed to prove that a person could endure twice as much pain if there was someone else there.

Some people like to complain, some would prefer to never complain, but regardless, we all need to know there is someone there who is willing to be with us, no matter how bad it gets. No one wants to be left alone. That is why the Torah teaches that the High Priest must visit the leper twice a week during their affliction. Chapter 13 of the book of *Vayikra* describes leprosy in excruciating detail and it is gruesome, yet there are no details about a cure. Quarantine is all there is, with the exception of the High Priest who was required to visit regularly. The text uses the phrase *V'ra'ah haKohen*, and the Priest saw. There were no ointments, no salves, just the ability to see, to be with the people, to acknowledge their suffering and not abandon them. Though the Biblical mindset is a primitive one in which there was great fear about contagious disease and the necessity for being removed from the camp, the Torah makes the point, removed but not forgotten.

You can imagine the tremendous healing effect of having the single most important person in the community come to visit. That is the lesson we must learn. *V'ra'ah HaCohen* - and the Priest saw the person not the infliction. *V'Raah haKohen*. And the Priest saw, because he came to visit and because he came to visit, he brought some relief at least from isolation that is so often the greatest companion to illness.

Ed Feld in a wonderful work entitled “*Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*” tells the story of a woman in a concentration camp. On her birthday the woman became very depressed. Sensing the hopelessness of her situation she began to give up all hope of survival. Then a friend came over to her and handed her a birthday present, it was a half rotten raspberry wrapped in a leaf. And it lifted her spirit. It was just enough to get her over the hump and it is to that gift, that gesture of friendship, that berry, that she credits her survival. Just knowing that someone cared about her gave her the strength to continue on, and she lived to tell the story. Just knowing that someone else knew she was alive, that she was a person that she still had breath in her, gave her fortitude to last in the most inhumane of circumstances.

And one final story, one that has affected my life in innumerable ways. In *Love’s Executioner*, Irving Yallon, a world renowned psychiatrist, tells of the following patient. A woman entered a clinic to be treated for obsessive overeating. The staff set out a course of action and, with her cooperation, determined that seeing a psychiatrist would be a valuable addition to her regimen. Cautiously she went to see Dr. Yallon for a year. Upon seeing her for the first time, he immediately recognized his aversion to obesity. He decided that if he was going to treat this woman, he would have to make a conscious decision to work with her without any prejudice. After a year of treatment and remarkable progress, the woman lost over 120 lbs. They arrived at their final session together and at the conclusion of their hour, Dr. Yallon turned to this woman and asked, “Is there anything else you would like to talk about?” – to which the woman responded yes. You have treated me well. You have listened to me and you have offered constructive advice, you have always been there for me and I feel that without you I could never have made this journey. I looked forward to our weekly sessions and as you can see, I am a different person than I was a year ago. But I do have one question. Why did you never touch me? I see how you greet people as they come into your office and I see how you say goodbye to others. Over the course of the past year, why haven’t you hugged me once, or touched my arm tenderly like you did the others? Immediately he realized that, although he was making a conscious decision to treat her with the utmost of respect and to hold his own issues in check, he did not. Over the course of her life she had grown exquisitely sensitive to rejection and she was aware of how the doctor felt towards her.

People know. People who are ill know how those around them feel and we must make every effort to learn how to deal with our own insecurities and must understand that we are all *Nivrah Betzelem*, created in the image of God. No matter how argumentative, no matter how disfigured we are, we are *Nivrah Bitzelem*, created in the image of God.

In this congregation it is the custom to have the name of each sick person called individually. It is an acknowledgement that there is someone thinking about them and that we are doing everything in our power to help them. It is also a public declaration that they are sick and they need us to rally behind them. We call their names to let them know we are thinking about them and we call their names to let others know they must give of themselves to help those in need. Once we hear their names we can no longer hide behind the excuse that we simply did not know they were not well.

Have you been able to fill a person's last hours, days, weeks, months with love? Because love leads to healing and care leads to healing, we must heal the breach between the victim, the sufferer and their family and friends. Also, if you are suffering with illness, I tell you prayer heals. Make prayer part of your life, believe in it and it will work. God's energy will be released in you and you will be enveloped *tahat kanfei haShekhinah*, under the wings of God.

For those of you who are "fighting the fight," remember the words of the prophet Isaiah who says, *Yarutzu v'lo yiga'u*, run and you will not grow weary. This is a struggle and know we are here for you every step of the way. We are with you and we will not leave you. Isaiah says that God will give us strength. May this be a resolution we make today – the holiest day of the year. May we have the conviction to add a sense of worth and value to one person's life this coming year. If we do, we will feel God in the house, we will feel the Almighty every day as today.
Shanah Tovah and Gut Yontiff.

Now we begin the yizkor service.

Some who have passed away were friends and relatives, some set examples of how to live and some have taught us how to die....Rabbi Avi Weiss was by my mother-in-law Soni Tick's side

in her last days. Just a few months ago at her funeral he reminded us of one tender moment in those last days in the hospital.

He said, “As life ebbed from Soni, I asked Soni, “Soni could you give me a brakhah?” Silence for a long second and then thoughtfully and beautifully Soni said, “May all the blessings you’ve given to others, may those blessings be upon you.” That’s Soni’s legacy. Always sharing blessings with others. That’s her legacy – the loving, the empathy, and the blessings. And after the blessing, as we surrounded her, we sang of God’s presence, of God’s angels being present and we sang:

בְּשֵׁם יי אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִיְמֵי מִיכָאֵל, וּמִשְׁמַאֲלֵי גַבְרִיאֵל, וּמִלְפְּנֵי אֱוֵרִיאֵל, וּמֵאַחֲרֵי רַפָּאֵל,
וְעַל רֵאשֵׁי שְׂכִינַת אֵל.

In the name of God, with the angel Michael to her right and the angel Gavriel to her left, the angel of Uriel before her and the angel Raphael behind her, and at her head the tenderness of God.

The loneliness of losing a loved one is unparalleled in the continuum of human emotion. In sickness we seek support and in grief we seek comfort. So we pray now for God’s presence that we never have to be alone. We pray that God’s angels surround us. We imagine the angels Michael, Raphael and Gavriel surrounding us. I add now to those angels the name of my mother-in-law Soni, Shayndel Golda, and I encourage you to add your loved one’s name to the list of angels that surround you. I pray in the dark hours in which you miss your father or mother, sister or brother, husband or wife, son or daughter, that you feel their wings embrace you. This year there are more angels than there were last year as our loved ones make their way to God’s side. And although we feel alone at this moment, we are not. As we offer the words of Yizkor, may the presence of those we love and have lost rush to our side and envelop us with tangible emotion. May the Yizkor we offer now strengthen the bonds we have always felt but miss so much. May the Yizkor of this hour remind us we are alive even if our loved ones are only in spirit.

Some of the ideas developed in this sermon grew out of a discussion with Rabbi Jack Riemer; I thank him for that inspiration. – RJS