

YOM KIPPUR 5774

“Lessons Learned from a Summer School of Pain”

Sermon by Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner

While recuperating from severe back pain this summer, I was pleasantly surprised by a visit from a board delegation, who came to my room at Baptist Downtown. “How thoughtful for you to come! Pull up some chairs.” I exclaimed. “Actually Rabbi, we’re here on official synagogue business. We decided at our most recent Board meeting to wish you a speedy recovery by a vote of 23 to 12, with 6 abstentions.” Needless to say I was thrilled to hear that 100% of the board attended the meeting . . . though I still wonder about the six abstentions.

From Memorial Day until almost Labor Day this summer, sciatica pain was my constant companion. Ranging from moderate to unbearable, it led me to two orthopedic procedures and one back surgery, and compelled me to step aside from leading the Center’s Israel trip in July. Blessed with good health for most of my life, I had never experienced debilitating pain of this magnitude ever before -- and wondered whether or not this was an omen of having turned 50 in June. Simple tasks, like putting on socks and shoes, became daunting; taking a shower while standing was an exercise in agony. Yet I discovered a great deal about myself through this ordeal. It’s this learning curve I wish to share with you.

But first a disclaimer . . . my sciatica of the past several months hasn’t made me a *maven* on all matters of pain. There are those who have endured chronic pain so much longer than I; and there are those who continue to suffer with no end in sight. I do not pretend to understand what they’re compelled to endure, though I am humbled by their courageous refusal to be defined by their pain. I can speak only for myself, though I am hopeful that my reflections may resonate with you.

Complacency is the factory-setting of the human condition; it’s generally what we revert to when we have nothing to complain about. Sure, we pay lip service to health often enough, but such expressions become ritualistic and rote; the phrase “thank God” more a conversational response than a prayer. But when a pea-sized cyst compresses a nerve in one’s spine, the pain cuts through complacency like a hot knife through butter. Not only do you long for relief, but you feel a loss of the wellness you once felt so effortlessly. Like the refrain from *Big Yellow Taxi*, Joni Mitchell’s 1970 hit song, “Don’t it always seem to go, that you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone”: in struggling to limp you remember how easily you once could walk. Perhaps that’s why our daily liturgy contains what I call “*orthopedic berakhot*.” We breeze through such blessings at morning *minyan*, but in the past several months these expressions of gratitude have echoed through my head on a daily basis: בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם -- Praised are You, Lord our God, Sovereign of the Universe . . . מוֹתֵיר אֲסוּרִים, who releases the imprisoned; זוֹקֵף כְּפִיפִים, who straightens the bent . . . הַמְכִּין מִצְעָדֵי גִבּוֹר. . . who guides our steps. Pain can serve as gratitude’s proxy. In the moment you are denied God’s gift of pain-free mobility, you appreciate such things more keenly, and in so doing, become a better human being. Of course, after living with no pain for awhile we slip back into our factory setting of complacency, which is why life reminds us again and again about the necessity of gratitude. Any life lesson worth learning once is worth re-learning over and over.

A story is told in the Talmud about how Rabbi Yoḥanan helped heal his colleague, Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba, by taking his hand and raising him. Some time later Rabbi Yoḥanan became

YOM KIPPUR 5774

“Lessons Learned from a Summer School of Pain”

Sermon by Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner

sick, but was restored to health through the outstretched hand of his friend, Rabbi Hanina. If Rabbi Yohanan had the power to heal others, why couldn't he help himself? The Talmud's answer is short and sweet: אין חבוש מתייר את עצמו מבית האסורים - The prisoner cannot free himself from jailö (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 5b).

There's nothing more important to the healing process than the participation of the patient herself. It's not simply a matter of following doctors' orders, but believing in your ability to recover, to overcome. Yet no prisoner can free himself from a jail without the help of others. This summer countless folks furnished me with a powerful antidote to pain: your care and compassion were like keys to my jail cell. So often I've been called upon to care for others . . . and suddenly the tables were turned. I'm supposed to care for you: almost overnight I became a patient struggling with my own fragility. How can I adequately convey how each Facebook message, each greeting card, each wish for a speedy recovery helped me? No, your prayers were not analgesics or opiates; they didn't make the pain go away. But they were my spiritual Celebrex, an anti-inflammatory medication, that remedied my inflammation of anxiety at being unable to function as a rabbi. You see, when you're already feeling helpless, it's oh-so-easy to feel vulnerable about almost every other area of your life. The message you sent me was: "We care and want you to know that you make a difference in our lives; because we care, you need to take the time to heal." In ways I myself don't fully comprehend, your good wishes raised me up and helped restore me to health. I mean this quite literally.

I have also learned there's a world of difference between pain and suffering: Pain is something that happens to us; suffering is something we cause ourselves. There are those who experience pain without suffering, while others choose to suffer even in the absence of pain -- "Good morning, Pooh Bear," says Eeyore, "If it is a good morning, which I doubt." We all know Eeyores for whom the glass is perpetually half empty, and for whom a good day is merely one in which disaster has yet to strike.

By the same token, however, there are people with pain who choose not to suffer. "The best way to get rid of the pain is to feel the pain," argues physician and holistic healer, Deepak Chopra. To transcend pain you must first accept the reality of its presence. In that moment you begin to understand you're something more than what you feel. Your pain belongs to you, but you need not belong to it. There is a wholeness and a healthiness underneath and beyond the pain.

This isn't about being a tough guy, a stoic; it's not about denying that you hurt. I won't tell you it was easy finding humor in my pain . . . I had my share of groans, moans, *krechtzing* and *oy veys*. Still, there was something laughable in my wife putting on my socks, shoes and tying my shoelaces as if I were a pre-schooler -- especially when you're 50 years-old! "I said, "Thank you, mommy!" And Susan smiled. And so did I. And in that smile I was grateful to have a wife willing to tie my shoelaces. And in that moment I was just me. As writer Norman Cousins once observed, "Hearty laughter is a good way to jog indoors without having to go outdoors." During my illness there was no way I could get to the gym, but at times laughter offered a viable emotional alternative -- it may not have burned as many calories as exercise, but it certainly released plenty of endorphins!

YOM KIPPUR 5774

“Lessons Learned from a Summer School of Pain”

Sermon by Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner

The English word *patient* comes from the Latin meaning *bearing pains or trials without complaint*. In the 14th century, the word also came to denote *an individual awaiting or under medical care and treatment*. The association of these definitions may have arisen from the dismal state of medieval medicine when treatments were often as painful as useless. In our day, however, we forget the linkage between the two. Indeed, given the speed with which our technological world moves, today's patient is more impatient than ever for instant convalescence. Obviously it doesn't help that our system of medical care is also burdened by unnecessary layers of bureaucracy; If you've ever had to wait day-after-day for some anonymous functionary to pre-certify your procedure or surgery, while you anxiously sit on the sidelines in pain, you know exactly what I mean. This, too, was part of my summer education.

Yet pain can teach the value of patience. Medicine is a science, but it's also an art. Every person responds differently to treatment. What is successful much of the time might not work in every case; you might just be the exception to the rule. You should feel better in a few days is a prognosis, not a prophecy. And even when it comes to pass, a few days might be two, but it could be three, or even four. Living within your body means accepting its unique quiriness. There is no genie to call from a magic bottle to alleviate one's pain on demand. Of course, there are prescription drugs like Oxycontin, which pretend to be that genie, but their promise of relief can come at a very steep price if we put our faith in them too deeply or for too long.

When we hurt it's remarkable how gladly we'd trade time for relief from severe pain. Who wouldn't hit the fast forward button to the moment of being pain-free . . . even if the price of doing so were to lose some of the life-time that God has granted you? So how much of your life would you be willing to give up to avoid pain -- a week, two weeks, a month, a year? Yet be careful before you agree too quickly. It could well be a Faustian bargain -- time is all we have.

Did you ever consider that the word *happiness* contains within itself all the letters of the word *pain*? There is no meaningful celebration without the experience of pain. That the wonder of childbirth is accompanied by pain is cosmic recognition of this reality. That we shatter a glass at a Jewish wedding is a symbolic reflection of this truth. That we add *Yizkor* on our most joyous holidays echoes this life lesson as well.

Rabbi Yohanan -- whom I mentioned earlier as the sage who could only heal others but not himself -- once asked rhetorically: למה נמשלו ישראל לקצרה? -- Why is Israel compared to an olive? -- לומר לך מה זית אינו מוציא שמנו אלא ע"כ תיתה, אף ישראל אין חוזרין למוטב אלא ע"י יסורין -- To teach that just as an olive produces its best oil when squeezed, so Israel produces its best in times of affliction (Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot* 53b). No, we never seek pain, yet if life is for learning, then pain is on the faculty of life's college. It is simply part of the core curriculum for being human.

Every Shabbat and festival we precede the recitation of *Birkat Hamazon*, the Grace after Meals with *Psalm* 126, which teaches, הַזְרִיעִים בְּדִמְעָה בְּרָנָה יִקְצְרוּ - They who sow in tears, shall reap with songs of joy. Over the years I've watched people sow in tears and reap in joy; often

YOM KIPPUR 5774
“Lessons Learned from a Summer School of Pain”
Sermon by Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner

the nexus of sorrow and celebration is measured in weeks, days, even minutes.

As many of you now know, Esther Ohayon, a beloved member of our pre-school faculty, was killed last night as she crossed San Jose Boulevard. She was walking with her daughter, Orly, to *Kol Nidre* services at Etz Chaim Synagogue. Surely the moment before they began to cross the intersection they had no inkling of what was about to happen . . . Mother and daughter were wonderfully close. They walked to *shul* together, and looked forward to spending the holiest day of the Jewish year with each other. There is no reason to believe they were anything but content as they approached the light at the corner. Yet within the space of a few seconds, Esther was dead and Orly was critically injured. This morning our prayers are with Orly as she faces the daunting challenges, physical and emotional, in the months ahead. Such is the lesson of pain and joy that Yom Kippur teaches by way of liturgy, and life by way of example.

Some years ago I shared with you the memory of officiating at a wedding while concealing from the happy couple the news that my father had died earlier that afternoon. I stood just a few feet away from the blissful bride and groom, who were oblivious to my sorrow . . . and vowed to do everything I could to keep them ignorant of my grief. But life teaches us that happiness and hurt don't simply co-exist in temporal or spatial proximity; in some ways they elicit similar reactions from people.

I've observed countless families want to share their *simhah* with the entire community -- you can almost feel their happiness exploding outwardly, impelling them to give *tzedakah*, to invite the congregation to *kiddush*, to become more solicitous of others *because* they are happy. As Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav once said, "Joy opens the heart as giving itself leads to joy."

But I've also seen people use their happiness to circle the wagons and push others away. It's my day . . . my son's *bar mitzvah*, my daughter's wedding. Why should I pay for a bunch of strangers to eat *kiddush*? Why should I invite other kids from my child's grade if she doesn't like them? To be sure, a *simhah* doesn't have the power to transform a kind person into a selfish one any more than it will turn a self-centered individual into a paragon of generosity. Rather, joy is like a magnifying glass, concentrating the personality of the individual already present.

So, too, with affliction. Pain can topple the walls that separate us from others, or they can fortify them, building them higher, rendering them more impenetrable. When I hurt, I can at that moment define my entire world by my pain. "How can you talk to me about your needs when I'm the one who's in pain?" or "If you knew how terrible I felt, you wouldn't bother me with your petty concerns!"

Still, often enough, it's the exact opposite that happens. The cancer patient finds hope in helping others cope with fear and uncertainty. The recovering addict maintains his own sobriety by sponsoring a person trying to stay clean; the mourner visits someone else's *shiva* and finds comfort in knowing she has consoled another human being. In its wisdom Judaism has always known that pain, like joy, can be a powerful teacher of empathy. The very key to our own healing requires that we find meaning by awareness of others in their hours of pain or moments of joy.

YOM KIPPUR 5774

“Lessons Learned from a Summer School of Pain”

Sermon by Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner

Rabbi Milton Steinberg, an incredibly talented novelist, essayist and pulpit rabbi, whose brilliance is all the more conspicuous given his untimely death at the age of 47, wrote the following words during the long illness which eventually took his life: ׀I wanted to urge myself and all others to hold the world tight -- to embrace life with all our hearts and all our souls and all our might. For [life] is precious, ineffably precious, and we are careless, wantonly careless of it. And yet . . . I knew that [this] was only a half truth. All of life is the more treasurable because a great and Holy Spirit is in it. And yet, it is easier for me to let go. For these things are not and never have been mine. They belong to the Universe and the God who stands behind it. True, I have been privileged to enjoy them for an hour but they were always a loan due to be recalled. And I let go of them the more easily, because I know that as parts of the divine economy they will not be lost.... Life *is* dear, let us then hold it tight while we yet may; but we must hold it loosely also! Only because of God is it possible for us to clasp the world, but with relaxed hands; to embrace it, but with open arms.׀

On Yom Kippur it's customary to wear white because it reminds us of *takhrikin* -- the traditional burial shrouds in which Jews bury their dead. The symbolism here isn't depressing, but simply a matter of accepting the truth. *Kohelet*, the book of *Ecclesiastes* teaches: כִּי מִי־יֵדְעֶנּוּ מִי־יֵדְעֶנּוּ מִה־טֹב לַאֲדָמָה לַחַיִּים מִסֶּפֶר יְמֵי־חַיָּהּ הִבְלוּ וְיַעֲשֶׂם כֶּסֶל -- Who can possibly know what is best for a person to do in life, the few days of one's fleeting life? (*Kohelet* 6:12).

Pain and happiness both underscore that nothing really belongs to us, that all is transient, that everything is precious. We wistfully yearn to preserve the happiness we treasure, but know that the sun will set on even the most perfect of days. In our moment of hurt, we hang on to the faith that the sun will also rise tomorrow, that we can let go of today and hope for relief to come with the dawn. Like the beating of our hearts, we hold on and let go through the rhythmic contraction and release of pain and joy; like our breathing, we exhale remembrance and inhale healing. We are trapeze artists in time, swinging from hurt to happiness, letting go as pain teaches us how to hold on to joy, and holding on to joy as we learn to let go of pain. Perhaps that was the most important lesson I learned this summer -- that nothing is more terrifying, more human, more precious, more painful, more heartbreaking, more joyful, and more necessary than simply this: Hold on . . . and let go. It is just that easy. And oh so very hard.