

Remarks by Guest of Honor Dr. Karin Katz
Sharsheret Benefit Luncheon
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“Illness is the night side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well, and the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.” Susan Sontag

Illness is not only an undesired citizenship. It is an emigration that is not preconceived, premeditated, one for which we are often caught unaware. Jerzi Kozinski in *The Painted Bird*, in the voice of a young boy, writes, “Disease enters a person when he least expects it. It might be sitting behind you in a cart, jump on your shoulders as you bend down to pick berries in the wall or crawl out of the water as you cross the river in a boat. Disease sneaks into the body invisibly, cunningly.”

I propose today to explore two brief Biblical narratives as metaphors for illness and its transformative power. I propose to do so because I believe as Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik expounded in an essay on the Holocaust entitled *Fate and Destiny* that when one is suffering “I ask one simple question: What must the sufferer do so that he (or she) may live through his (or her) suffering?...What obligation does suffering impose?...We ask neither about the cause of suffering nor about its purpose, but, rather, about how it might be mended and elevated.” Rabbi Soloveitchik sites: “Against your will you are born and against your will you die, but you live of you own free will.’ Man is born like an object, dies like an object, but possesses the ability to live like a subject...” How does one mend and elevate suffering according to Rabbi Soloveitchik? Man does this by transforming fate into destiny, elevating himself from object to subject, from thing to person.”

This task, when one is suffering with an illness, of transforming fate into destiny, is a task Sharsheret facilitates by forging its links between women who share “a language of experience”; by establishing educational programs; and by reaching out in a myriad of sensitive, supportive and creative ways to young women with breast cancer with its gift of a custom-made pillow, its Busy Box for children, its Best Face Forward initiative and so much more.

Let me return to the two biblical texts which I feel are metaphors for illness in a set of books replete with so much, and yet that remain otherwise silent on the challenges illness and the healing process present.

In Chapter 32 of Genesis after Jacob leaves the house of Laban with his wives, many offspring and a large entourage, they arrive at the river Yabok. Then we suddenly have the sentence, "And Jacob remained alone." It was night and an unnamed assailant, a man-angel wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw the combat was indecisive, he wrenched Jacob's hip. But Jacob hung onto his adversary, refusing to allow him to depart until he would bless him. Thereupon, the man changed Jacob's name to Israel. As the sun's rays shed their first light, the nameless assailant vanishes. Jacob remains with a limp.

This story, unparalleled in biblical literature, is thoroughly bewildering. As I read through it time and again, it dawned on me, what a powerful metaphor for illness and its potential transformative power. Initially---Jacob is surrounded by his entire entourage---but we find Jacob, when the nameless assailant approaches him, precipitously alone. I propose this unannounced assailant is in many respects a metaphor for an illness newly diagnosed--the man or woman affected feeling profoundly isolated, suddenly alone. Illness, as Susan Sontag wrote, "is the night side of life", and we see the timing of Jacob's encounter with the nameless assailant is nocturnal. The setting is the river Yabok, a swift flowing river unexpectedly treacherous whose name Yabok is the root of the word *vay'abek*---translated "and he wrestled." Jacob wrestled with the man-angel until dawn. So, too, one who is ill often indefatigably wrestles, wrestles with pain, wrestles with fear, wrestles to sustain hope, wrestles with a sense of destiny that is often in flux, and an unknown. The assailant wounds Jacob---and leaves him with a limp that remains with him the rest of his life. Similarly, one who wrestles with an illness and does not succumb is, more often than not, left with scars that never fade away completely. Curiously, Jacob would not let the man go---holding tight to the physicality of the "man" not willfully letting him go until the assailant blesses Jacob. During the course of the night time battle, the human-like contact with this man-angel is passionately desired and embraced. Even after his thigh is injured, Jacob refuses to let go of this critical contact. Similarly, when faced with a potentially terminal illness, the need most of us have for an empathetic embrace, a sharing of "a language of experience," is profound.

Finally, Jacob could not, would not let go of this man-angel until dawn, until he was blessed. The assailant blesses Jacob in the form of a name change. The man-angel changes Jacob's name from Jacob to Israel saying, "You have striven with beings, both divine and human and you have overcome." This name change portends a new destiny, effectuates a decisive break with the past and inaugurates a fresh role, all symbolized here by the substitution of Israel for Jacob. Jacob is indeed transformed by this encounter. First, he comes to know his courage and his vulnerability simultaneously---something, each of us, when confronting a serious illness, are forced to potentially recognize. Second, we

knew Jacob, prior to this encounter, as a somewhat self-seeking individual usurping a blessing from his father, occupied for many years acquiring wages and wives from Laban, and subsequently trying to assuage his brother's anger with abundant gifts. Jacob in this encounter with the assailant becomes Israel.

Israel, someone who not only has wrestled with himself and with his God, as the Hebrew word Yisrael is literally translated, but also Israel—who is now the father of a nation – perhaps more aware of his finitude as an individual, but now communally conscious, aware that he is a part of a larger people, living in a time frame that transcends the present. So too illness, when approached not as fate, but as destiny, has the power to transform, to connect people to one another in a Sharsheret, a chain, that involves a brutally honest and passionate embrace. Illness, when confronted not as fate, but as destiny, has the capacity to transform an individual into someone who feels what Jacob felt—and Helen Keller articulated when she said:

“I thank God for all my handicaps, for through them, I have found myself, my work, my God.”

A second biblical anecdote that serves as a metaphor. It is actually, in fact, a story of an illness. Its healing process is a metaphor for the sacred work performed by Sharsheret. In biblical literature, the paradigm of the prophets is one who stands alone. The one exception to this in the Torah is the triad of Moses, Aaron and Miriam. If you read closely the biblical narrative spinning their tale, you see none of them achieve anything without the help of the other. The most florid example is Moses requesting, requiring Aaron's help in his appeal to Pharaoh. Miriam, from the outset of their tale, is a woman busy forging connections between Pharaoh's daughter and her own mother, connections that will make it possible for Moses to live. The story of these three heroes is replete with so many examples of their being critically linked to one another.

After speaking with Aaron about Moses' wife, Miriam is white, stricken with a disease called Tzara'at, which some construe to be leprosy. She subsequently must remain outside the camp, alone in the wilderness for seven days. Again we witness the onset of illness concurrent with a strong sense of isolation. Seven days of total solitude in the desert. Seven is the number of creation days. Something must have been created in those seven days, but what was it? The text remains silent, leaving Miriam's experience while ill, while confined to solitude in the desert, to our imagination.

According to environmentalist Terry Tempest Williams, “There is a resonance of humility...that is best retrieved in solitude amidst the stillness of days in the desert....It is a landscape that makes you vulnerable and also makes you strong....Days spent in the desert are days soaking up strength...”

Tempest Williams goes on, "It's strange how deserts turn us into believers. I believe in walking in a landscape of mirages, because you learn humility....I believe in living in a land of little water because life is drawn together....Wildness reminds us what it is to be human, what we are connected to rather, than what we are separate from..."

How compatible this poetic prose with the potential transformative power of Miriam's illness.

Critical, however, to Miriam's healing is her strong link with her brothers Moses and Aaron. Aaron pleads on her behalf to Moses acknowledging a wrongdoing. He cries to Moses to save Miriam from this terrible fate. Moses prays: "Heal her now, O God, I pray thee." But, not only do her brothers pray for her, the entire people of Israel adore her. When Miriam is isolated for seven days, the people of Israel do not travel until Miriam rejoins them. The people wait in the enclosure in Chazerot for Miriam to return. While we often hear their complaining and dissatisfaction, now their silence is deafening. Nobody moves. By waiting for her, the people advocate for her, show their love for her. And in fact Miriam is completely healed.

Miriam, who had the foresight to bring bells and tamborines out of Egypt, resumes her capacity to play a tambourine and dance in the wilderness.

We see in this story of Miriam's affliction with leprosy that not only does the enforced isolation of illness have the power to transform, but the critical and caring connections between people have the power to heal. Empathetic connections affect the healing process, and empower the afflicted individual to transform fate into destiny. Therein lies the need Sharsheret fulfills.

According to Spinoza, "Man is a social animal---men can provide for their wants much more easily by mutual help and only by uniting their forces can they escape from the dangers that beset them."

The glue of these precious bonds, the power of the links Sharsheret forges, is the expression of empathy. When a link is forged by Sharsheret, a Chesed is performed. Chesed, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchick defines as "a merging with the other person, an identifying with his pain."

This kind of Chesed quiets fears and empowers an afflicted individual to transform "fate into destiny," to fulfill Jeremiah's prophecy: "It is a time of agony unto Jacob, but out of it he shall be saved." (30:7)

Created in the image of God, we are blessed with the capacity for empathy we see God model in the Tanach. Empathy is a quality we learn from the way in which God encounters and interacts with the people of Israel.

God, in the liturgy, appears to his people as Shechina begaluta: A divine Father who accompanies his children in their exile, comforting and consoling them. One Midrash reads:

The relationship between God and the Jewish people is like the relationship between twins. When the head of one aches, the other feels it, too. Therefore, we see that the Holy One said to Moses, 'I am with him in distress' {Psalms 91:15) and again, 'In all their afflictions, he {God} too was afflicted. (Isaiah 63:9) Are you not aware that I am wracked with pain when Israel is wracked with pain? Take note of place from where I am speaking to you-from the midst of a thorn bush. I am, as it were, a partner in their pain.'

I myself have had breast cancer; have had a surgeon unexpectedly draw with purple ink on my chest; have wondered if I would be fortunate enough to be here to dance at my children's weddings. I currently work in Cornell Women's Health Center-imaging, biopsying and diagnosing breast cancer. If I am blessed to simply let a woman know on her six month or six year anniversary right breast mammogram after a left mastectomy that I see nothing suspicious on her mammogram, I am privileged to witness in her large smile, her sense of vulnerability dissipate for the moment.-----Or if I diagnose a new cancer-and can talk to a patient and tell her, if I deem it appropriate, that I, too, have had breast cancer-I often watch the still, glistening tears in their fear-filled eyes suddenly fall and wash away a fragment of their dread, replacing it with a flame of hope. I hear an expression of disbelief---"You...you have had breast cancer?..." Recognizing that what they are really saying is, "You mean one day I can be well just like you?"

On Yom Kippur I find myself ironically thanking God for my breast cancer. As a direct consequence of the illness and the transformation it catalyzed, my career was refashioned and I feel so blessed with my work. I even thank God for my scars; scars that serve as reminders so that I never forget how critical the women who shared their "language of experience" were when I was sleepless and so afraid. Scars that remind me of George Elliot's sentiment: "What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult for each other."

Which brings me finally to why I accepted this honor. When Rochelle first asked me, I was hesitant and discomforted by the notion of being the honoree, Rochelle, in her brilliant persuasive manner challenged me. She reminded me of how I speak of my own dear mother, as "the communicator par excellence." My mother taught me the art of communicating, and more critically, the art of listening. When she left this world nineteen years ago, I lost the one I trusted most to guide me through challenging times and I lost someone who really knew how to listen. She knew how to forge enduring, precious links instinctively. Both in her living and in her dying, my mother did this better than anyone I have ever

been privileged to encounter. Rochelle asked me to accept this honor in commemoration of my mother's nineteenth Yartzheit to honor her memory. In that context, I could not refuse.

I must addendum, however, the invitation to this Sharsheret brunch which reads, "Honor your mother. Honor your daughter. Honor your sisters." Today I also honor my beloved father and his wife Deborah for their support. And I honor my husband, whose constant reminders when I was ill, that it was not my body, but "our body" enduring the illness and the treatment. His immeasurable empathy empowered me to transform my fate into destiny, a destiny I thank God each day I share with you, Joel, and with Avery, Jason and Elly.

Implicit in the efforts of Audrey Lookstein, Nikki Sausen and all who helped to make this brunch possible, and implicit in the presence of each of you here today is your sensitivity to how precious the chain, the Sharsheret is, how critical each and every link. Your belief that "our desire to share is more potent than our desire to be alone," is almost palpable. I suspect you must each quietly concur with the poet Mark Nepo who wrote:

Still, it is next to impossible
to do this alone.
We need the loving truth of others to be well.
Inevitably when one is thrust into life,
into crisis, into transformation
without notice or instruction
some come with us
and are forever changed
while others watch as we are forced out to sea.
It is the power of love
that enables those who come along
and in truth,
a language of experience is unearthed
that cannot be translated
to those who stay behind.

Thank you again, on behalf of Sharsheret, for caring enough to be here today, for opting to be in the category of those who do not "stay behind."