

Sharsheret Empower Teleconference
The High Holidays and Renewal
September 4, 2007

SHERA DUBITSKY: Good evening everyone, I'm Shera Dubitsky, the Clinical Supervisor for Sharsheret. I'm happy to welcome all participants from all across the country and I anticipate that tonight's program will be meaningful and insightful.

I wanted to briefly thank the Sharsheret staff for putting together such a wonderful program and to offer a special thank you to our summer intern, (Miriam Kahn), for all the time and input that she dedicated to the Empower Program.

Thank you for joining us as part of the Empower teleconference series for single Jewish women touched by breast cancer. Our featured speaker is aware that there are some participants joining us who are not single. We hope that those of you not in the Empower Program will find this evening equally fulfilling.

Tonight is about renewal as we prepare for the High Holidays. Our hope is that you will ride on the momentum of this evening and find the spiritually meaningful space for you to begin this New Year.

We are fortunate to have Rachi Lerner join us in addressing this topic. Rachi presents weekly and monthly Torah classes and records many classes for the OU radio. Additionally, Rachi writes a Psalm thought of the day that reaches over 300 subscribers.

She is a psychotherapist whose approach to bible study, integrates her passion for textual analysis with a psychological mindset. In addition to teaching, she maintains a private psychotherapy practice. But most importantly, I'm grateful to call Rachi a very close friend of mine.

I'd like to briefly share with you an email that I received from a rabbi several weeks ago. "This past Wednesday commenced the last month of the Hebrew calendar known as the month of Elul when we bid farewell to a year gone by and prepare to embrace the new one in its stead beginning on Rosh Hashanah."

"The great sage Rabbi Nason Shapiro writes that the four Hebrew letters of the name Elul, which is spelled *aleph lamed vuv lamed*, is the acronym of the four Hebrew words *aron luchos veshevrei*, which also began with the Hebrew letters *aleph lamed vuv lamed*. These words, a quote from the Talmud, means the ark containing the whole tablets and the broken tablets."

"When we reflect on our past year, many of us suffered difficulties whether it be personal, financial, health issues, etc. These are represented by the broken

tablets. There were also great joys in the past year, moments of inspiration, and times when we've soared spiritually. These moments are the whole tablets."

"Here lies the unique power of this month in the Jewish calendar, the final one of the year, the name of which spells out the word the ark containing the whole tablets and the broken tablets."

"This is the month that allows you to build in your personal life an ark, which will contain not only your second complete tablets but will also embrace the broken pieces of your first tablets. This is the time when you are empowered and can pick up the broken pieces of your life and discover that there is a part of yourself that was never really broken; that every setback, every obstacle, and difficulty enables us to strive higher, reach loftier heights by revealing an inner strength that we never knew we had."

"What is more, during this month you may go back and with tender love lift up every broken piece of your life learning how each of them constitutes another way to enhance spiritual and emotional growth."

With no further remarks from me, I now have the privilege of introducing Rachi Lerner. Rachi will speak for five to ten minutes and then we will open the floor for questions. Rachi?

RACHEL LERNER: Hello everyone. I'm really gratified to come here and speak with you for many reasons not the least of which is that I too am grappling with hope and renewal and with the challenges that are particularly endemic at this time of year.

This is the time of year that to us speaks of change, and growth, and potential, and possibility. And for those of us who are facing an illness such as cancer it's very hard to conceive of hope and possibility sometimes and to understand that at this time of year we are contemplating that there is a judgment that's going to be passed and that judgment will affect the rest of our lives.

I want to share with you that when I say, "We," I am including myself in that grouping because while I am not struggling with breast cancer, I have been battling ovarian cancer for four years and have had two recurrences of the disease.

So I too, at this time of year am also struck with the poignancy, and the potential, and the fear, and the idea of connecting to a God who at this point of my life perhaps has things in store for me that I may not be able to handle.

So how does one connect and how does one address that? How does one find the courage to move forward at this time of year? How does one get renewed?

I love the idea of renewal. I think of it in terms of going to the library and getting your book renewed. It's so simple. You know as long as you get there by the expiration date, you get a renewal so it's simple.

I wish it were that simple for all of us and perhaps there is a lesson to be learned from the library and from the model of a book. We are all books being written and part of what we do is we set ourselves back and we think of ourselves as a book whose text is totally spoken for.

We know that it is very hard for us to fathom that there was a before to the earth's creation. All that we know about earth is what happened after. And part of the reason we can't conceive of an after to the world is because we are bound by the physical limitations of our universe. We don't have any capacity for time travel, we can't reverse time, we can't undo events, and we can't do anything that affects the past.

Even those of us who do psychotherapy are not fool enough to say to somebody, "Come to me and I will erase any trauma you've ever had." If we could do that, we could make a fortune.

So in this physical world that we reside in, we can't reverse time, we can't undo events. All we can do as clinicians for our clients is help them to look at the time that's transpired and see it completely differently; to change their reaction or their interpretation of events.

But in this spiritual world that we also reside in, in the world of the soul that attends to the body, we are capable of turning back time and changing actions after they occur. And what is that thing that allows us to turn back time? That is a concept of teshuva. The word teshuva means repentance.

What we are told in the mishna, the commentary that explains things on the Torah, on the scriptures. We are told that teshuva, the very process of repentance, was created prior to the creation of the world, which is a phenomenal concept.

We know that before God created the universe, he created the things that the universe would need in order to succeed. It's almost as though before God gave us the disease he gave us the cure.

Before the creation of our universe, which would contain individuals who would invariably sin, who would inevitably fail, God gives us a remedy. He gives us teshuva.

That metaphor of repentance, which allows us to have the cure, is perhaps the best metaphor for renewal for us who are struggling with cancer and cancer issues.

We need to be able to see the world as having in it things greater than the sum total of our current situation. That there are things in play that we can do, that we can go back to, that we can come to and understand that will permit to come to a place of greater divine understanding and that is perhaps the most important part of the entire focus.

We need to be able to transcend the moment to be able to reconnect, recreate, and renew by seeing that the world is greater than just the moment we are in currently.

So that is the idea of going back and recreating a universe so that we understand that we are larger than the sum total of our bodies, that our history and our footprint on this earth is about every part of who we are, our mind, our heart, our soul and that connection that we can create.

What I invite you to do with me today is to explore with me all the ramifications of what that might mean. What might it mean to step outside bodies, to see the universe from the perspective of being larger than the sum total of our surgeries and our chemos?

To be able to see the world as a brand new beginning where we can move into new places based on the fact that we've been given this great gift of time travel, of going backwards to find our way forward.

And I look forward very much to hearing your questions and exploring with you together ways to recharge our batteries and ways to reconnect to the very fiber of who we were BC, before our cancers, and where we are AD, after diagnosis. So Shera I ask you to welcome everyone onboard so we can start.

SHERA DUBITSKY: That was very beautiful, thank you. To all the participants, I ask that you keep your questions brief and also broad enough so that all the participants can benefit.

SHERA DUBITSKY: Somebody sent us the following question , "Being a single woman, the High Holidays always seem scary. This year it is much worse since I am going through chemo, a double whammy. What is a good approach to davening, to praying, during this trying situation? How do I get into the spirit of the days without the anger and feelings of rejection that I'm feeling towards my Father in heaven?"

RACHEL LERNER: Well, that's a very important question because I think what most of us are dealing with is anger and that anger surfaces about, "Why me?" and it surfaces when we look at the liturgy that says who shall live and who shall die, and it surfaces when we think about how do we connect to somebody that we are pretty angry with. How do you connect to God?

I think, once again, this requires a little bit of a mind trick. If your relationship with God is on the level of, "You give me what I want God and I'll connect to you," then this is going to be an extremely trying period.

If you assume however that your relationship with God is complex and multi-layered, that your body relationship with God is only one part of the equation, and that you have a head relationship with God, you have a soul relationship with God, you have a connection to a spiritual being in your life that is bigger than your body, then you can slowly but surely get to it.

You can use your chemo as a guide. You can use your emotional experience to say, "Look God, we have the richest possible emotional experience. We have a real marriage and in this marriage, I have good days with you and I have bad days with you. In this marriage, I like you sometimes but I don't like you others, but I'm in it for the long haul and I'm committed."

And therefore in that moment of commitment, you can ignore the pressing insistence of your anger and move into the spirit that says, "Okay, here we are God, let's have a talk. I don't know what you have in store with me, but I'm here, I'm going through it, and I'm hanging in with you. And because I'm hanging in with you and I'm deeply committed to this marriage, I need you to come and meet me half way."

God does not require of us in the sense that we do all the work, that's not a relationship. We are in a relationship with God because God needs us as much as we need him.

And so if we sit there and say, "Okay, I have anger towards you and I accept that anger, I'm not going to fight it, but we have a bigger and broader relationship than just my reach," then slowly but surely we can start going through it.

One of the things that is perhaps paradoxical about all of this is that chemo is a wonderful motivator for prayer. I don't know if all of you feel this way, but I know that when I'm going through chemo and going through recurrence, the intensity of my prayer is much stronger than it is when I'm in a good space. When I'm in trouble, I need God so I use that as a spur to get me to connect to God.

SHERA DUBITSKY: Do you have any specific concrete suggestions when you actually find yourself in the synagogue and may be having a difficult time concentrating and focusing on what you were just addressing?

RACHEL LERNER: Well, the first thing I would do, Shera, is I would not beat myself up. That's number one. If you lose focus -- I think under optimal conditions, under the best relationships with God, we all lose focus.

I don't think anybody can do the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which is a very long day and a very hard day without being distracted. And in those moments when I am distracted, I permit myself those distractions.

I try to focus on the parts of the liturgy that speak to me. I don't feel obligated to connect to every word and every refrain and every communal prayer in the same way. I just don't think so. I don't think it's human to expect that, so I try to engage with those prayers that are tremendously meaningful to me.

The Avinu Malkenu, the prayer, "Our Father, Our King," is extremely meaningful to me because not only are we asking for self, but also we're asking for the needs of a community at large. I try to connect with the parts of prayer where we ask God to join us in our struggle.

I find that the more I think of this as a shared trip, of me and God working this together, the more readily I can address my own issues. When I think of myself as having to do all of the work, then those little messages of resentment come up like, "Why do I have to do everything?"

As a woman no matter what our marital status is, we're always having to do everything so that's a natural resentment. When I think of this as a joint venture, that God wants me to connect to him every bit as much as I want to get there, or maybe more, then I find it easier. And I don't lay unnecessary guilt trips on myself about not being able to be connected 24/7. I just don't think that's realistic.

SHERA DUBITSKY: Is there anybody on the line who has a question to feel free and jump in whether it has to do with the liturgy or maybe even some concrete issues about being back in the community during this time?

CALLER: I have a question. How do people feel when they go to shul and people know the fact that you have cancer and that they shy away from you? I don't know what to expect because this is my first time going to shul knowing that people know that. And I'm just kind of like a little bit nervous like how -- I mean how to respond or like how to -- I don't know.

RACHEL LERNER: That's a very good question. First of all, let me just ask a couple of quick questions for you. How many people really do know?

CALLER: Well, not so many but not so few. I started telling people.

RACHEL LERNER: Okay, there are two ways to handle it. Because of the nature of the day, it's entirely appropriate for you to say, "Not now." It's entirely appropriate for you to take refuge in the day itself and discourage, you know, cavalier or casual conversation. I think that's one strategy if that works for you.

The other strategy that I find for me is the more upfront and matter of fact about the amount of disclosure I choose to allow, is what controlled it for me.

CALLER: Right.

RACHEL LERNER: What will give you the best emotional kind of ease would be that you control the disclosure, you control the reaction, and you can do it a few ways.

So if you don't feel like talking, then by all means don't talk. You can pull the religious card and simply say, "You know, this is not the place or the time," which I think is entirely appropriate.

One of the things my mother used to say to me, which was really brilliant, was she'd say, "Just because someone asks a question doesn't mean they deserve an answer." It was so simple, but it was so brilliant because these people really can ask you anything, have you noticed that?

CALLER: Yeah.

RACHEL LERNER: They don't have the right so you have no guilt about that. You disclose what you feel comfortable and go to shul for what you need from shul and not for what other people are needing from you. That's not your job.

CALLER: Okay.

SHERA DUBITSKY: I would assume that the advice that you just gave the caller would also apply to being in your household, particularly if you are spending time with your family.

RACHEL LERNER: Absolutely. And the most important thing I want to say to you is nobody deserves or needs more to be self-caring during this period of life than you do. And pleasing other people's need to know or need to be intrusive over your need to be protective is foolish.

I say that with absolute love because some people feel such a compelling need to be inside your head and inside your body. And I think it comes from a good place, or at least I hope so, but it's so often experienced by us as intrusive.

Basically, the most important thing that matters to you is to have a healthy dose of enlightened self-interest, to be entirely self-protective, and that by the way is not at odds with anything spiritual.

In fact, ironically the Talmud, which is the book of Jewish law, has a wonderful paragraph in it which says that a person is very close to himself.

And what the Rabbis explain is that a person must, in order to be fully human, have a healthy sense of self-interest, so you have to do whatever works for you within the family structure, within the broader community structure, within the spiritual structure.

But you have to take care of yourself because if in addition to being ill, you're feeling intruded upon, and injured, and emotionally battered, that's not going to aid your recovery at all.

Does that answer it Shera?

SHERA DUBITSKY: Yes, thank you. did you have any follow up on that?

CALLER: No, that was very good, thank you very much.

SHERA DUBITSKY: I'm going to put another question out there that came through to us, Rachi. "Ever since my diagnosis four years ago, I have a very difficult time with the High Holidays. It is especially difficult to listen to the liturgy, "Who shall live and who shall die? Who by fire and who by hunger? Who by thirst and who by cancer?"

"Could you please address this? I know the liturgy is not meant to be literal, but nevertheless the concept of blame, or guilt, or responsibility for your cancer still echoes. The whole concept of being inscribed in the Book of Life when you are confronting death is very hard."

RACHEL LERNER: Okay, that's a very challenging question and it's a multi-layered question.

First and foremost, the idea of cancer as being a punishment for what we do has its argument and is reinforced in the fact that people believe that to some degree, we are in absolute control of our circumstances, and certainly the name of this group, Empower, suggests that there are areas in which we can take our power back.

But the reality of our situation is that none of us really did anything to do this to ourselves and I think none of us would feel comfortable with being blamed for what happened to us.

So the very first thing to do is to understand what I call, "False guilt from real guilt." We all screw up in different ways, we all have made mistakes over a thousand different things that we do in our lives that we regret, but those are not issues where we went ahead and we said, "We're going to do this and we're going to risk cancer."

Taking responsibility for cancer as it being your fault is a residual idea of, "I'm in control of everything." And those of us who are Type A personalities, and I include myself in that one and who are control people, have a hard time believing that we are struck with something that we have absolutely no control over. So that's the first layer.

I imagine that people who have the hardest time with feeling guilty for their cancer are people who engaged in risk-taking behavior, you know who perhaps, smoked like a chimney for, you know, 20 years and then got lung cancer. And maybe they feel the guilt over the fact that they did it to themselves.

But the reality for most of us is that cancer came independent of what we did and that it was a completely arbitrary thing that occurred and that happened within us, so that's the first issue.

Having said that, I'd like to take a look at that idea of what the liturgy said. The idea of Rosh Hashanah, the idea of the liturgy of this day of Yom Kippur, is one about taking ownership for what belongs to you and giving to God what belongs to God, or giving to whatever spiritual being you embrace what belongs to them.

You can only own what's yours. So to sit there and feel like you are having to own the whole idea of your cancer is bigger. Because as one Rabbi once said to me, "What is it that you think you could have done to earn your cancer? Have you mass murdered? Have you raped or pillaged, you know, failed to feed children? What is it that you have done?" The punishment would be so out of proportion to any crime that we would have committed.

That starts dispensing with the idea of blame. So then what do you do with your feelings? What do you do with this whole day, this whole liturgy that says, "Who shall live and who shall die?" That is about the greatness of the day. That is part of a very famous prayer called UnetanaH Tokef, which was composed by this great Rabbi Amnon.

This prayer really talks about the power of the day; that on this day people's lives are written down. And on this day, we are going to write down in the great book who shall live and who shall die.

And yes, it's absolutely terrifying as a person with cancer who confronts immortality on a daily basis to read this part of the liturgy. It's extremely powerful.

But this part of the liturgy was not written for us; this part of the liturgy was written for people who needed an adjunct to help them understand it. We who breathe this, who live this daily, do not need this as a reminder.

So in a sense, from our vantage point, this prayer particularly is over the top. It's overkill because we are dealing with this and we understand it infinitely in our souls.

Again with that being said, if we understand that that's not a tool for us, what can we get out of that prayer? What we can get out of that prayer is what someone once said to a woman with cancer. When people said to her, "Well, how much longer do you have to live," and she said, "We're all busy dying."

I thought that was a very brilliant line because what it says is that all of us, whether we have cancer or we don't have cancer, it's about living day to day and about possibly dying. All that this means is that we are looking at this prayer as a signal to us to look at our life and look at our life differently.

The one thing I see this prayer is telling me is that living for me means living beyond and above my body, that my body doesn't tell my whole story, that I am larger than the sum of my surgeries and my chemos, that I am bigger than my body, that I have a whole life of the mind and a life of the spirit and a life of the soul, and a life of family and community that transcends the physical.

So if I look at this prayer and I say, "Okay, this time of year there is a diagnosis being given to all of the people in the universe, all the Jews in the world, and I am just part of that. And this particular prayer is meant to spur people onto self-reflection, but I already have a leg up on that because I'm already reflecting."

Instead, I see this prayer as saying to me, "Live your life in the fullest possible way. Make the most of what you've been given because you don't need adjuncts, you don't need audiovisual aids to help you understand that life is short and precious."

So that's how I stay connected. Instead of seeing this as a negative I think you need to transform it and say, "What does cancer teach you? Cancer teaches you that you are bigger than your body, that you are larger than your body, that you are more than just a person with a breast issue or a person with an ovarian issue. You are a person who has a soul, and a spirit, and a mind that quests and goes beyond that."

EILLENE LEISTNER: Rachi?

RACHEL LERNER: Yes.

EILLENE LEISTNER: Hi, it's Eillene. May I ask a question also that somebody had mentioned to me?

SHERA DUBITSKY: I'd like to quickly take this opportunity to introduce Eillene. She is our new Executive Director here at Sharsheret. Go ahead Eillene.

EILLENE LEISTNER: Thank you Shera. Thanks, Rachi. What you're saying is so moving and I think so helpful to all of us and to everyone who is going through something as we approach the High Holidays.

And I guess my question has to do with family on the High Holidays because yes, we spend a great deal of time in synagogue and we are focused on prayer. But also, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are also family holidays.

I just wondered if there might be some things you could share with us about preparing to deal with family during this time.

RACHEL LERNER: That's a wonderful question, thanks for asking that.

I was listening to a TV broadcast on Israel. And they were saying on the TV broadcast, which I thought was fascinating, that at this time of year, before Rosh Hashanah and before Passover, they have the highest number of admissions in patients to the psychiatric hospitals in Israel because people are having difficulty dealing with so much family.

So I thought that was great because in the non-Jewish world, the highest rate of admissions takes place right before Christmas and Thanksgiving.

EILLENE LEISTNER: Right.

RACHEL LERNER: Because those are the family-intense holidays. So for Jews of course it's Rosh Hashanah and Passover. Perfect.

When you are a person who is the identified patient, which of course having cancer you cannot help but be an identified patient, then it's 100% worse because people fall over you or they make you crazy. So in addition to the holiday, they have to deal with the relatives.

There are a couple of strategies and I want to say this again because I want to remember Empower, self-empowerment means that you are willing to sacrifice being popular for being healthy. I will say that again. Self-empowerment means that you put yourself first without apology.

Now it's interesting because the messages that you will get from your family is, "Of course you should put yourself first, but first take care of me," And that's the onus that kind of double binds communication that people say, "Please take care of yourself. Please do this and this, but you are to drive me here and there."

The reality is here is a time where you have to put your money where your mouth is. And the number one rule of thumb here is if it doesn't feel like it's helping your

recovery then don't go with it. If it isn't working for you, let it go. Your family is adult enough and hopefully adequately functional that it will be able to process it.

But the number one issue here is self-care. Self-care has to be the absolute number one because that facilitates your recovery and when you recover everyone else around you recovers.

EILLENE LEISTNER: That's easier said than done.

RACHEL LERNER: That's what I was going to say. So let me give you some strategies for that.

One of the things that I encourage my clients to do is to use the "I" voice when you are in a family situation and you are feeling uncomfortable to say, "I need to go lie down. I feel tired."

Because if you say, "I think I'm spending too much time with the family," and you use too many words, you get into the thinking statements, people attack you. They can attack a thought, but a feeling is your own.

So if you need to distance yourself from your family, use your feelings. Say, "I feel tired, and I'm going to lie down." Do an action statement; a feeling followed by an action statement. "I'm going to lie down." Move away from your family.

Also, encourage your family beforehand if you have an opportunity to talk to them to just to say to them, "Look, this is going to be difficult for me and I'm going to need kind of your patience with me because I may need to disconnect." Just sort of lay the groundwork just to distance one's self beforehand.

If that's not possible, if you have the kind of family who is enmeshed or difficult or challenging, then you may need to think about whether or not being with them for the High Holy Days is a good idea in the first instance.

If it can't be avoided, then to have at least one person in the family who is your identified ally who is going to be supportive of you in the family structure so you can say to them, "Look, I need to get out of here for a while. Can you cover for me or can you help me?" There is usually in a family one person who is more rational who you can involve in that self-protective way.

The more preparation you can do for this event, the more you can talk to people ahead of time, the more you can tell people, "Look, I'm going to come to a meal but I'm going to excuse myself right after a meal."

The more you can lay that groundwork for your limited involvement, the better off you will be. It's about being protective and about not being apologetic about being protective.

EILLENE LEISTNER: Great.

RACHEL LERNER: I don't know if that helps, but that's one strategy. In your head if you can be very clear inside your own head that what you are doing is not about hurting them but it's about helping you. But of course, everybody in your family wants you to be helped; they care about you, they love you.

EILLENE LEISTNER: You need to set limits and they will respond.

RACHEL LERNER: I think they will respond to that.

SHERA DUBITSKY: On the heels of that question, I'd like for you to maybe address people who have different theories and different ideas about the onset of cancer, or about treatments of cancer.

People may be interjecting their theories, or their advice, or, you know, their ideas about God or whatever and you may not be on the same page for that.

Can you give some concrete suggestions also in terms of how to address that?

RACHEL LERNER: Okay, that's a loaded question again. There are a couple of things.

When you are a cancer patient, everyone feels this amazing license to come and jump in on your life and interject and give you unsolicited advice. Free advice is worth the price.

The reality is you may not be able to shut them down in terms of what they say, but you can shut yourself off in terms of what you hear. What I mean by that is sometimes you are on the subway and you have those announcements that are inaudible that come on that are loud and annoying, and after awhile you tune them out or the white noise of an air conditioner. You need to develop almost a technique to ignore people's well-intentioned foolish ideas.

This has been my experience and I hope the participants will jump in and tell me if it's the same for them -- that when I try to logically rebut or say, "Well, I've thought about that, I've spoken to my doctor about that, blah, blah, blah," I still get it. In other words, people don't seem to hear me.

So I have evolved a technique for saying, "I hear you. I hear you. I'm listening," and then I go do whatever the heck I want. That's my new strategy and I mean that honestly. People keep talking and I say, "Yes, yes. How interesting," while meanwhile it's not that interesting. "How wonderful. Yes, yes. Yes, yes," and then again I don't let it even touch the surface of my brain. It goes in my ear and it doesn't even go to the cochlea. I block it right at the outer ear.

I just don't let it go any further because I have wasted so much energy in four years trying to persuade people that I know what I'm doing, that I've decided I'd rather be thought as an idiot.

That's just my new motto. It's simpler. It's much less emotional energy on my part. I nod knowingly and I move forward. That can be a very difficult thing to do but it saves so much wear and tear on the brain you have no idea, and on the ears.

Just because you are a cancer patient doesn't mean that you are open season, you know, that everyone can say whatever the heck they want to you.

I think that that is part of what is so striking is that in a way that so much of us feel this need to sort of take care of everybody else while we're going through this process, which is insanity. The reality is people need to be able to take care of us.

They don't know how and so they act in ways that they think are helpful that are not helpful. And rather than fight with them and say, "You don't know what you are doing, you are an idiot," it's easier to simply nod and move forward.

SHERA DUBITSKY: I heard a lot of laughter and I can almost see the shaking of the heads as Rachi was saying that. Does anybody have any thoughts about that that you feel comfortable sharing?

RACHEL LERNER: I would like to know, Shera, if I could ask a question.

SHERA DUBITSKY: Sure.

RACHEL LERNER: In 1990, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and I was single, so I actually can say that I was single and diagnosed with it at the time.

But in reality, I have not had to face particular issues. Are there specific issues that the single women out there would like to ask me about having to navigate both being single and going through this process at the same time? Because I would hate to think that I could put words in your mouths and ask the questions for you.

Does anybody out there have a particular thought that I can address for you that we could shed some light on perhaps?

CALLER: It's tough not to feel angry just because you're alone. I mean you are truly alone. I have no family here and I go to shul. My family is my friends and stuff, but still it's a very alone time for me especially struggling with this.

RACHEL LERNER: I want to share something with you that you're going to think is crazy so can you hear me out for two seconds?

CALLER: Sure.

RACHEL LERNER: Okay, here comes the lunatic thought. We are all alone, only you have the clarity to see it. We are all alone. All of us operate under the delusion that we have other people with us, but at the end of the day and even at the beginning of the day and in the middle of the day, the reality is we are all very alone.

What you have is the clarity of thought to see it and because of that, you have the ability to openly embrace your aloneness and you can see your aloneness, again, not as a detriment but as a reason for you to connect even more powerfully to God.

Because what do we humans do? We fool ourselves. We are so adept at self-delusion. We fool ourselves into thinking, "I don't need God, and I don't need this because I have got my friends and I've got my family," right.

CALLER: Right.

RACHEL LERNER: But the truth is between you and me, only you have it. You know it absolutely for what it is. You know that you have God. And when you are clear on that perspective and you know that you are alone, you have no obstacles to embrace in Him. You are utterly open to Him.

CALLER: That's interesting that you say that because a Rabbi said it to me recently that said, "It wouldn't be any different if you had a partner, just because in the end you are alone anyway. They are not always as supportive as you would think and you're still alone in many cases."

RACHEL LERNER: At the end of the day, most women that I know who are battling any kind of cancer are really worrying while they are battling about how to take care of everybody else's reaction to the process, and I'm sure, even you take care of your friends a little bit during this process.

CALLER: I take care of everybody; my parents and everybody.

RACHEL LERNER: I'm sure you do because that's the nature of who we are. So maybe your awareness of your aloneness is a gift. Maybe it allows you to let go of some of this stuff that we carry that distracts us from the business of healing.

"If I'm alone with this struggle, then I can take all of my energy and heal myself without guilt. All my energy, all my emotional resources, everything I have, all my gifts, I can bring to this process because I alone am fighting it. I and my God together."

CALLER: Interesting.

RACHEL LERNER: So there is no delusion that someone else is going to take it over. You are clear as can be; clear as a bell.

CALLER: Thank you.

RACHEL LERNER: You are welcome and thank you for sharing that with me.

CALLER: Year after year you're reading the same liturgy and you are perhaps asking God for certain things or trying to have renewal spiritually for yourself.

I guess that some of the other women in the Empower Program feel like, "Okay, here we are again," like you know, "I've done that. I've tried to do everything to find this spiritual place. I've asked God and yet I still can't believe that in some ways, I'm not where I thought I would be at this time in my life. And on top of that to also be struggling with the cancer."

RACHEL LERNER: Okay, first of all I don't believe that we are ever in the same place twice. In other words like the Native Americans said, "You don't step into the same river twice."

The truth is you and I day to day we're not the same. I'm not the same woman I was yesterday and I hopefully will be a different one tomorrow. Hopefully thinner; that's my goal.

But the reality is -- the truth of the matter is that each time we embrace that liturgy, that we touch it, that we engage with it, we are not the same person we were the year before.

We have that whole year's experiences, that whole year's positive energy, negative energy, the cancer issue, and all of that has changed us in some way.

I don't think any of the women listening would argue with me if I said that you are not the same women BC, before cancer, as you were AD, after diagnosis, right.

I don't think I'm the same woman at all. I think that this has changed me absolutely and appropriately so. To have gone through this experience and not be altered by it seems ridiculous.

So in essence when we engage with the liturgy this year as opposed to every other year, we are a different person in it and because of our experiences, we can see some parts of it differently than we did before.

I know now that I am much more sensitive to the idea of a community of people because I have been the recipient of a lot of graciousness from the community.

I know that I am much more sensitized to certain words, then when I greet people on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur I will choose my words very carefully when I give words of blessing or I give words of greeting.

So part of what we need to do is we need to not see this "same old, different day", but see the "same new different day" that somehow we are engaging with this liturgy with new eyes.

Because I always feel this from the bottom of my heart that if a cancer has not effected a change in me, of what use was it. That in order for me to go through this experience, to go through cancer, and be positive, I have to believe that it has brought a positive change. Even if it's been a painful, crappy change in some ways, but it's brought a positive change in my life that I see things differently.

One way to engage in the liturgy is to find the part that speaks to you. Again, personalize your relationship with God or personalize your relationship with the liturgy; find those words in it that speak to you, that addresses your concerns and back away from the parts that sound like hell and damnation.

That's where I think we get caught. We say, "My God, I have cancer. I must be the world's worst person." Look outside the window and you will see a lot worse people than you are and recognize that cancer is not about punishment, it's a process you're going through and that you can engage with God beyond the body.

I'm going to say this again. You are more than the sum total of the surgeries and your chemo. You are more than a body; you are a whole spirit that inhabits the body.

You are a soul. You are a mind. You are part of a community, you are part of a family, and you are grander than that. That's one way to get past the sense of, "My gosh, not again. Not again. Not again and again."

If however you can't formally pray -- and a lot of people have said this to me that, "You know I can't formally pray. I'm just too upset," then have a causal conversation with God. God is talking to me; I'm going to have a talk with God. And if you can't talk with God, talk with yourself. Have a talk with self and see what you need to make yourself feel connected.

Honor your process. Empower yourselves by honoring your process. Nobody else can sit there and tell you how to best reach yourself, only you can because you know what you are going through.

SHERA DUBITSKY: I'd like to ask you, Rachi if you have a couple of thoughts to close out the evening with?

RACHEL LERNER: I have a few thoughts that I'd like to share that I think might be helpful specifically for the idea of renewal.

The number one thought that comes to me as I'm listening -- and I want to thank the women who participated because they triggered this thought -- was the idea of how much we worry about what others think and feel about us, how much we worry about our connection to people and taking care of everybody else.

One of the things I want to say about renewals is that renewal requires expenditure of energy. And if you have limited resources, and you are going through chemo, and you are battling cancer, and you have just enough emotional energy for a few things, then part of the trick here is allocation of resources and knowing where to put your resources so that they serve you best. Where is the best place to put resources? In places that allow you to be renewed and recharged.

I would say that at this time of one's life, this is an opportunity to look at oneself and say, "Okay, my body has been attacked. I have all this garbage going on in my body I have no control over. I'm sitting here listening to doctors and everybody else is running my life. But I do have the power to take back and the power that I take back is in the areas of where I choose to put my emotional energy and my spiritual energy." Carve out a place that you want to work on. Find the parts of self that are larger than body, that are different than body.

I almost feel like we spend so much time talking about the mind/body connection, but here we're talking about the soul/body connection that we're bigger than the physical kind of vehicle that transports us around. We are larger than that. We have this great soul and we can choose where to address.

So on Rosh Hashanah, which kind of forces us this time of year to take stock and to think about the future, this is a good time to say, "Which part of myself do I want to polish? Which part of myself do I want to connect to? Which part of my single experience do I want to capitalize on and do I want to celebrate?"

And even if it comes from a depressed place like the sense of aloneness or the sense of isolation or the sense of despair, take that despair and say, "Okay, I'm feeling it. This is what I'm feeling."

It's honest, it's open, and now I need to reach out in my aloneness and my despair and my fear. I need to reach out not to other human beings who are going to try to capture me in a certain way, but I need to reach past them and reach deep into myself and say, "Who am I and what am I and what is it that I want this year," and ask God.

One of the things that we forget is that Rosh Hashanah is not just about judgments, it's about a huge laundry list of requests that we make of God.

This is the time to lay it out for God even in an alone stage to say, "Hello God, I'm here, this is me. This is my soul speaking and this is what I need from you," ask and be open to the possibility of life extending beyond this moment in time.

That's the key to this thing; take care of yourself during this time. Self-caring does not mean that you are not in an appropriate spiritual headset for this holiday, that's a myth. It's not about self-neglect and it's not about self-flagellation. I don't believe in beating one's self up.

It's about connecting and it's about reaching out and celebrating life, and reaching out toward life and saying to God, "I'm scared out of my mind. You know better than anybody that I'm scared in my head. And I need you to listen to me and I need you to address this with me because I only have you." That's the part.

Take care of self and know that that's totally appropriate for this time year. This is a self-reflective healing time for all of us and it's not about punishment, and it's not about hell, and it's not about damnation, it's about connection, renewal, and healing.

SHERA DUBITSKY: That's absolutely beautiful. Rachi, I really want to thank you because for myself I just feel like you reminded me certainly that I have the control and the power to take what is factual in my life that I may not have control over and change it to make it purposeful. I feel like that was a strong message you offered us today.

EILLENE LEISTNER: Rachi, may I just add also my thanks on behalf of all of us at Sharsheret. I think what you've given me and what you've given I hope all the listeners is something solid to go forward with and it's really tremendous. Thank you.

RACHEL LERNER: You are welcome.

SHERA DUBITSKY: Before we close, I want to just remind you that the Empower Program also offers resources and information materials focusing on

issues unique to the single woman. Our first Empower teleconference called, "Dating and Disclosure," is available online at www.sharsheret.org.

I'd also like to remind you to fill out the evaluation forms because your feedback helps us to shape further programs.

We will be presenting a teleconference in November addressing the topic of intimacy and sexuality. You will be receiving an announcement about that soon. We developed that idea for a teleconference actually from the last Empower teleconference that we had and from the feedback that we received.

I would like to just close by taking something from the holiday liturgy, from Y'aleh V'yavo. I wish all of you a year of well-being and grace, kindness and mercy, life and peace.

And on that, I'd like to thank Rachi and all of you for joining us this evening. May we all have a spiritually meaningful and sweet New Year.