

Sunday, October 13, 2013

I cannot ask God to change the course of events which He has chosen to occur in my life. I believe that He presents us with tests for which He has reasons. I would, therefore, hesitate to wish that God had spared my family's hardship and the suffering of my brother Judah during the year he was ill with cancer. I can, however, replay the events which took place when I was in the tenth grade and reflect on mistakes I may have made.

I recall it was the eve of the Jewish holiday of *Sukkot* and my brother was scheduled to have a six hour surgery at Sloan Kettering Hospital to remove a large malignancy. I did not, however, understand the severity of the surgery and thus found myself on 86th Street and Broadway trying on shoes at the Aldo shoe store. In the midst of my shopping spree, my mother called to inform me of the success of the surgery. I quickly said "ok great, one second, Mom" and reached into my purse for my credit card to purchase the black patent leather stilettos. I was in no rush to return to my mother's call. Once my big brown box was handed to me, I resumed the conversation with my mother. I assured her that I would make it to the hospital by sundown, in time for the holiday.

Delighted with my purchase, I walked through the hospital's revolving doors and into the elevator. I pushed the button for "Intensive Care Unit". When I stepped out of the elevator I thought I must be on the wrong floor because it was too quiet. It must be a floor of offices, not of patients and their families. To test my hypothesis, I explained to the young man sitting at the desk that I was told that my parents and/or brother would be on the floor. When I told him my last name he directed me to a closed door down the hallway. It did not feel or look like a hospital, more like an apartment. I knocked lightly

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on the door and my mother opened it. I pranced over to the coffee table eager to show off my new shoes. As I put down the box, I noticed my father sitting on the couch, speaking on the phone with tears in his eyes. I heard him say "please tell everyone [the congregants of my father's synagogue] that now they can have us in mind when they recite the *Hallel*." (Literally meaning, "Praise God", but referring to the six Psalms (113-118), which are said as a unit, on joyous occasion.)

The room which felt like an apartment was the room where doctors tell family members the results of patients' surgeries, whether good or bad. That day we were lucky. Perhaps in the next room someone was less lucky and I sure hope they were not shopping in Aldo that afternoon. Often our focus on materialism and our self-involvement prevents us from paying attention to the truly valuable things in life. In my case, it could have been the difference between seeing my beloved brother one last time or not. Even if the surgery had been less dangerous, I should have been in that room with my parents, as a family. I will never forget the day I forwent my tremendously valued virtue of *Li* and almost lost my sense of loyalty and respect for those most important to me. Immediately after the holiday, I took the cross town bus back to Aldo and returned my meaningless stilettos. I hope it was the *teshuvah*, repentance, for my mistake.

My brother Judah has been in remission for five years. Two years ago, however, we experienced another wakeup call to the fragility of life. I was in Israel, studying religious studies, when I got a call from my brother wanting to be the one to tell me about his recent checkup at the hospital. The doctors found, what they thought to be,

another tumor developing and growing in my brother's abdomen. The final results would not be available for six more weeks.

When I hung up the phone with my brother, I felt as if something had pierced through my chest. I felt dizzy and as if I were hallucinating. "Could the nightmare of our past really be coming back to haunt us?", I thought as I began to keel over and cry. When I was able to calm myself down enough to be able to articulate a sentence I called my mother and lashed out at her for not telling me sooner. As she apologized I told her I was not going to do this again. I boarded the 12 hour flight from Tel Aviv to JFK the next morning for a 24 hour trip New York. With only a backpack carry on, I arrived at home with just enough time to get a full night's sleep and do what I traveled 6,000+ miles to do: Show Judah I was going to be there with him. No more shopping sprees to numb the pain and stay away from his bedside.

Many virtues, contrast to common belief, are more difficult to practice when it comes to those closest to us. Often we feel that they will love us regarding of our callousness or lack of respect and loyalty. The embrace I gave Judah that day was one of the most valuable hugs of my life; firstly, I showed him respect and love that I lacked the first time around, and secondly, proved to myself my ability to always improve on character. I believe God was testing me again during those six weeks of waiting. He tested my ability to step up to the plate in the hardest of times. When I passed that test, my brother was freed. The doctors had made a mistake.