

# A Torah for Cancer

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BY DANA JENNINGS

Torah is as much a part of my treatment for an aggressive form of prostate cancer as are the drugs, the radiation, and the love and support of my family and friends. Along with my current daily dose of radiation, I always take at least a couple stiff shots of Torah, too. Medicine and science alone aren't enough. They don't treat the whole person.

Cancer has forced me, like Abraham in the Book of Genesis, to leave the house of my father, to spurn comfort and security, to journey through an unknown wilderness. But that's okay. To become the man I'm meant to be, I know this dark pilgrimage is necessary.

When facing illness, we Jews often prefer the solace, tears, and wisdom that seep from the Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes. But Genesis, with its births and rebirths, suits me these days. So many of our matriarchs and patriarchs in the book's primal tales, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, are remade in the absolute hope of renewed covenants between themselves and God. And Adonai doesn't change your name—Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel—then just abandon you.

I, too, feel that I am being remade in hope.

Like dreamy Joseph—in the pit, in slavery, in prison—I know that fuller

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"meaning" beckons. I have not been cut open, radiated, and tried physically and spiritually so that I can merely survive.



As Torah constantly reminds us, a human being is so much more than the sigh of the lungs and the thump of the heart.

I am no Pollyanna. Yes, my cancer could kill me, and it is a bleak prism indeed through which to read Torah. But Torah is no prison. Hope and light still simmer for me in its holy words. Since my diagnosis, I keep asking: *What can this cancer teach me?* I have learned that there is Torah. There is cancer. And there is a Torah for cancer.

Here are some of the lessons I have learned so far on this journey.

## SHABBAT CANDLES CAN FLY

One Shabbat in late July—18 days post-op—I shuffled into a deep and inky dusk, my blue bathrobe flapping and snapping in the humid breeze as the crickets and cicadas hymned toward night. Flurries of fireflies sparked and flickered,

and I recited the blessing over those sudden, stunning Shabbat candles in flight: *Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh Ha-olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav vitzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat.* I was grateful to be home, grateful to be walking, grateful to be able to kindle the candle that is my soul.

## SCAR LESSONS

I am rich in scars, each recalling a hard-earned lesson. There are the naive scars of boyhood, marks left behind by knives, acne, fish hooks, and sprinting into a lamppost chin first. My latest scar—a serpent of deep purple running from my navel to my pubic bone—marks the 25 surgical staples that held me together after surgery. More and more, I see it as a kind of *tzitzit*, permanent fringes on the garment of my body (and soul). To paraphrase Numbers 15: They are my fringe, and they *do* remind me to do all God's commandments. I caress that reptilian skin and shake my head in wonder, knowing that despite many obstacles, I have been *delivered* to this day. I am being led out of the Egypt, the *mitzrayim* of my cancer. I belong to God.

## WE ARE ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

"Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test." (Genesis 22:1)

Rereading the spellbinding tale of the binding of Isaac, I've come to realize that anyone who has cancer, anyone who has any serious illness, is at once both Abraham and Isaac.

We are Abraham, ideally, when we