TIME to SING a NEW SONG

Thoughts one year after a breast cancer diagnosis

By Toby Klein Greenwald
When you’ve had cancer, your emotional taste buds change everything. A sunset is more brilliant, smells of flowers are magnified, music touches the heart more. So when my daughter sent me a WhatsApp in December that she was in the delivery room with another one of my daughters in a hospital in the Negev, I burst into tears. We have, bli ayin hara, many grandchildren, and I’ve attended some of those births, but I never cried before upon hearing that I was exhausted, the lead actresses would rehearse in my living room with me reclining on the couch. Once, I fell asleep in the middle of rehearsal and they tiptoed out quietly.

It was important to me to tell the cast and crew about my illness personally. I didn’t want the children in the cast to hear through the grapevine at school. And I wanted them to see me smiling and functioning, even when it became clear that my beret was covering a bald head. They will all have challenges in their lives, I thought, and I want them to see that someone with a difficult challenge can get through it with cheerfulness and faith.

When my hair began to fall out, I asked a friend to photograph me getting my head shaved at the local beauty shop. Then we took selfies, including one with me looking cool in a fedora and sunglasses.

I got a big infusion of faith from one of our choreographers, an Italian dance and theater professional who was studying, along with her Italian artist-performer husband, to convert to Judaism. Her post-conversion name is Emuna Bracha—Faith and Blessing. She would talk to me about God’s goodness and the fact that He always has a plan, which I knew, but it meant so much to me to hear it from her. The day she and her husband completed their conversion and got married l’halachah was a chemo day for me. A cast member drove me to the wedding. I sat on the side, utterly exhausted, but at one point I took two belly-dancing belts, went into the dancing circle, tied one around Emuna Bracha’s hips, the other around mine, and for five minutes I danced with her. It was my badge of courage. I had decided there was no way I was going to miss the opportunity to bring joy to this particular bride. Afterward, I had to sit down and breathe heavily for ten minutes, but it was worth it.

I discovered the sisterhood (and brotherhood) of cancer, and I also began quietly giving support to others—including a woman in our community who had told no one but her immediate family and me about her illness. I discovered scores of people, in hospitals and elsewhere, who are humbly doing chesed for patients, without fanfare. At one point, I had my Na’na Playback Theater (improv) actresses act out some of my harrowing stories for me, to help me heal. I felt all the love and support I had given them through the years come flooding back to me.

There were crises and hardships along the way, beyond the scope of this essay; but no one’s cancer story is simple and every patient could write her own book.

Sometimes I wanted to be alone, in the quiet. But I also discovered the value of bikur cholim (visiting the sick). In these days of social media posts, e-mails and texts—and I truly cherished every one of those comforting messages—it was special when friends paused their busy lives or overcame their discomfort and actually...
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heard my daughter whisper to my son, “It must be the anesthesia.” “It’s not the anesthesia,” I said. “I know I’m repeating myself. But I want to say it again and again.”

During the treatment and operation period, my creativity had become blocked. I only had patience to read mysteries and watch sitcoms, stand-up humor (thank you, Jeanne Robertson) and dramas. (I discovered that it’s not wise to watch medical shows when one has cancer.) The moment the radiation was over, I felt a burst of new creative energy, more ideas for books and theater projects than I could implement in a lifetime. I also discovered a new sense of gratitude. Every night, before I go to sleep, I say out loud, “Thank you Hashem for my husband, my children, my grandchildren, my friends, my health, for the roof over my head, this warm bed, the food I eat, the clothes I wear, for the fact that I have the opportunity to do creative things . . . .”

I had received my diagnosis on November 28, 2016, which corresponded to the twenty-seventh day of Cheshvan. In 2017, it fell on November 16. Thirteen years earlier I had begun, with a friend, Yael Valier, to collect materials about the anusim (conversos) of Spain, with the goal of producing a musical theater project. My new idea was to expand that concept and produce a show about the missing and hidden Jews through the centuries—not just from Spain, but also from the Ten Lost Tribes, like the Bnei Menashe community of India and Jews from Poland, China, Indonesia, Africa and elsewhere who were discovering their faith. On November 16, 2017, one year from the day I was diagnosed, eighty immigrants from the Bnei Menashe community were brought to Israel by the Shavei Israel organization. I knew I wanted to be there.

I drove to the airport and saw them come through the sliding doors—men and women and children, older people in wheelchairs, some who were reuniting with family members after seventeen years. People hugged, sang, danced and cried. I noticed a young woman with a baby girl in a sling. I asked her what the child’s name was. She said, “Chadasha”—“New.” I asked her what her own name was. She said, “Shira”—“Song.” Together, “a new song.”

And I knew then that the name of the show I would write would be A New Song—Melodies and Monologues of the Missing Jews.

And I knew why I had been drawn to this particular event on this particular day.

To remind me that, one year after my diagnosis, I was ready to sing a new song.