

Healing from Trauma, Loss and Illness

We have been through so much for these many months of the pandemic. Some of us have been sick, some have experienced loss and tragically been unable to say goodbye and grieve in ways we need.

Many of us are struggling with the stresses of this time. Mental health professionals have been reporting such an overabundance of demand for their help that they can't fill the need. The Mayo Clinic reports that the uncertainty, altered routines, financial pressures and social isolation have contributed to worry and confusion. For some, these times can make life feel out of control. During Covid, many have come to experience stress, anxiety, fear, sadness and loneliness. Surveys show a major increase in the number of U.S. adults who report symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression during the pandemic.

We are in great need of healing of body and soul, collectively and individually. I have shared that it often feels as though the stress of this pandemic is coursing through in the background of so many conversations, like music constantly playing. It can be very difficult to turn it off.

I would like to share a story that speaks to the power of healing through prayer and sharing. It comes from my dear colleague and wonderfully gifted writer, Rabbi Naomi Levy, in her book, *Einstein and the Rabbi, Searching for the Soul*, (chapter 33):

*“Know Who You Are; Recognizing Your True Divine Power.”*¹

¹ From *Einstein and the Rabbi, Searching for the Soul*, Rabbi Naomi Levy, 2017. Chapter 33, page 223.

In April 2016 I noticed a tiny dot on my nose, a dot as small as a pinprick. It seemed completely insignificant. I ignored it, assumed it would soon disappear, but it just wouldn't go away. On Friday morning...I went to the doctor to have that dot removed. It was supposed to be a totally routine procedure. But it turned out that the tiny spot was actually the tip of an iceberg, and beneath it there was an extensive infiltrative tumor. By the end of that day I was missing a lot of my nose. A lot.

It all happened so quickly. And the cancer wasn't on my arm or my leg: it was bull's-eye smack in the middle of my face. My nose was gone, and I'd need a new one really fast. The surgeon who removed the cancer told me I was going to need a total nasal reconstruction. I didn't understand what that meant or who to go to for help.

The whole thing was so crazy, so unexpected.
...I thought I had a good nose... It fit me. And just like that, poof, it was gone. And I missed it.

It's strange, a piece of my anatomy that I never spent five minutes thinking about and now I was mourning it. Suddenly I realized my nose was a sign of my clan. You're part of that tribe, the Levy nose, it looked like this. You could see the family resemblance. It was the seal of my family imprinted on my face.

In Hebrew the word for face is *panim*. In English, "face" means the surface of things, but in Hebrew *panim* means the interior of things. Your face reveals what's inside you and now my face was disfigured, frightening, a freak show.

I kept contemplating that expression we say without thinking for a minute about its true meaning: “It’s no skin off my nose.”

It means, no big deal. I can handle this. Who cares? *No skin off my nose*. But suddenly I was realizing that having no skin on our nose was actually a really big deal. The situation was not life threatening but it was full of life lessons.

The Jewish mystics have a concept called *Rishima*. It means the imprint a life experience leaves on you. If you endure something and then you just forget about it—if it doesn’t change you in some way, if you don’t learn anything from it—then it’s as if the event never happened, as if our life is vanishing behind you. But if you go through something and it leave its impact on you—if you grow from it, learn from it—then even a challenging time becomes a blessed teacher. Lessons are for sharing. So I’d like to share an important lesson I learned from my journey with skin cancer.

.....On that Sunday night, as I was searching for the right doctor to perform my reconstruction surgery, I just knew Byrdie (her friend who had suffered a series of great tragedies and emerged transformed in soulful ways) could help and tell me what do to. So I reached out to Byrdie and told her what happened to me. In no time at all, Byrdie gave me my answer: “Naomi there’s only one man in this whole city for you and his name is Dr. Azizzadeh.”

Thank God, Dr. Azizzadeh was actually one of the two names already on my list. I already had an appointment with him first thing the next morning.

On Monday morning I was feeling frightened and anxious. {My friend took me to the Dr.’s office.} It was a beautiful office and

everyone there looked beautiful. The receptionist was beautiful, even the patients in the waiting room were beautiful. And there I was, all bandaged up with no nose.

Someone called my name and led me to the examination room. And then Dr. Azizzadeh entered. Right away I could feel his kindness.

He began peeling off my bandages to examine my missing nose. I started feeling sick. I told him, "I think I'm going to faint." He went and got me a little juice box, the kind I used to give my kids, with the straw attached.

I sipped and told him, "Listen, I have to tell you I'm totally freaked out. And also I want to make sure I never see what my nose looks like right now. Please don't show me." He promised.

I could just sense his compassion. And then he explained **my** situation to me. I was bracing myself for what he was about to say. There was still a part of me hoping that he'd say my nose could simply heal up on its own with time.

Dr. Azizzadeh sat in front of my and said, "Listen, your skin cancer was very extensive, and you're going to need to have three separate surgeries over the next six weeks." My heart was racing. What? He told me about my tissue loss. He was gently trying to tell me there was very little there.

And then he explained what my first reconstructive surgery was going to entail. How he was going to have to take a chunk of my scalp and my forehead and he was going to be flipping it all over and stitching all that to my nose. And he'd also be taking cartilage from my ears to rebuild my nose.

He said, the first surgery where the cancer was removed was already behind me, and now I just had to gear up for three more to go.

My eyes were tearing up. Basically, for the next six weeks there would be an elephant trunk going from my forehead to my nose. It would be a horrifying sight.

But Dr. Azizzadeh promised me that in the end, in seven weeks, I would have a nose. That's nothing to sneeze at when you're sitting there with no nose.

When Rabbi Levy went to get a second opinion, the second doctor told her, "I want you to go to Dr. Azizzadeh. He's better than me." This doctor called her later that evening and told her he just wanted her to have the best outcome. And then he said, "Rabbi Levy, in your words you told me you were freaked out, but that's not the person I saw. I just want you to know that."

I was so moved. I said, "I can't thank you enough for your care and for your humility."

He was quiet for a minute and then he said, "***Does Dr. Azizzadeh know who you are?***"

I didn't understand what he meant, and he said it again: "You need to make sure. He needs to know who you are."

"Okay, I promise," I said. But when I hung up I asked myself: *Who am I?*

Soon an answer to that question would come to me.

On the day before the surgery Dr. Azizzadeh called Rabbi Levy to discuss the procedure. She asked if he could give her back her old nose. He replied,

“No I can’t give you back what God gave you, but I promise I will give you the best nose I can give you.”

Rabbi Levy writes, “I couldn’t sleep Tuesday night. I was terrified and my surgery wasn’t until 5:00 pm Wednesday. No food or drink all day long. It was like a dress rehearsal for Yom Kippur.

Wednesday morning I was a bundle of nerves and tears, and the fear seemed to get worse with every passing hour. My mind was going to dark places. The shock of losing my nose had lifted and been replaced by a recognition of what I was about to undergo.

I was pacing back and forth trying to pass the time. I was spinning out.

At last it was time to head off to surgery. I grabbed my prayer book and a copy of a book of prayers I wrote in 2001 called *Talking to God*, and Rob and I drove off.

I was starting to feel like an imposter. Like one of those commercials I grew up watching on TV when I was a kid. An actor would come on and say, “I’m not a doctor but I play one on TV.”

When the chips were down, I was worthless to help myself. I was a frightened child, helpless, tearful. I was failing myself. I felt like I didn’t have the resources, I worried I might not have the resources.

I’m not a rabbi, I thought, I just play one.

Rabbi Levy recounted how she went through the pre-op prep and she was trying to make time and space for prayer. She pulled out her book, *Talking to God*, and thought, “The person who wrote those words didn’t imagine praying them.” But still,

...Right there in the pre-op room, I opened the book and started to pray....As I prayed I didn't recognize my own hand in those prayers. It was as if the me from the past had somehow channeled the exact words I needed to hear right now. It was me talking to me. I just took the prayers in like somebody had given me a gift.

I cried. Things started shifting, the air in the room even. And then I said to {my husband and my two friends with me}, "Now I'd like you all to put your hands on my head and say this blessing over me." I closed my eyes and I could feel their hands on me as they recited the blessing from my book.

Then I said, "Please don't take your hands away. I need to meditate now." ... you could hear a pin drop inside our tiny room. They all stood over me, surrounding me, perfectly still, with their hands on me, and I began to meditate.

There was a sort of an electric feeling among us, the vibration of it, an energy was circulating around and around. All of us were fused as a single prayer, tight, intimate, so powerful. Nobody broke that intense energy of prayer. No one moved.

Soon we weren't even in that room anymore. No more sounds coming from anywhere. The whole room just levitated. We were flying to a higher place, it was beautiful and bright. Floating, rising. I had no idea of time, time just melted.

Right then a nurse opened the door and she said, "Whoa!" She could immediately feel what we were feeling. She said, "Something really powerful is happening here," and she backed away and closed the door behind her.

My heart was still beating hard in my chest. With my eyes closed I repeated in my mind over and over again the Hebrew verse that is my mantra:

I called to God from my narrowness, and God answered me with a vast expanse.

I called to God from my constriction, and God answered me with wide-open spaces.

I called to God in my need, and God answered me with grace.

I kept repeating this verse over and over and over again in my mind. And all of a sudden I crossed a river. From drowning in waves that were engulfing me to the purest, stillest water I have ever seen. It wasn't something I did, it just happened. Grace.

All that turbulence was gone, and all I felt was absolute stillness. The stillness was so real, so palpable, so pure, so crystal clear. *You lead me beside still waters. You restore my soul.*

And then Rabbi Levy heard a voice that said, "***Know who you are.***" She realized she was not a frightened child, but a child of God. She felt "Whole and sustained and loved and strong, and with resources I didn't even know I had."

She had moved beyond fear. But more than that, she reflected, "I now saw from my place of stillness that I not only had the power to bless myself, I understood that I had the power and a sudden desire to bless others at that very moment."

From that moment on, she gave her blessing to the nurse, then the anesthesiologist, then the surgeon, as they arrived one by one in her room.

The doctor said, “Rabbi, it’s my honor to be able to do this for you.”

Right then I could feel it in the very depths of me “I’m ready now.”

I was in the place of still water. Calm, trust, faith, beauty, God, connected to my soul, blessed.

When she awoke after surgery, she felt gratitude and euphoria. She said to the Dr: “Thank you. God bless you.”

Know who you are, I whispered to myself, still in a haze.

I crossed a river that night, and the strange thing is, I’ve never gone back. It’s a place I don’t ever want to leave. A knowing I was given. Like an inheritance....

And at this moment all I want to do is to share the inheritance I received with you, to bestow it upon you.

Are you ready to receive it? **Here it is:**

Know who you are!

It’s imprinted on your soul with vision, clarity, expansiveness. Your soul’s voice is a God’s call to you. Daily. God is saying about you... “Look at the gifts I’ve given you. When are you going to use them for the purpose I planted them inside of you?”

Know who you are. Let these four words become your mantra. Don’t set your sights too low. Understand what you’re capable of. You are a child of God. You are strong, you are loved, you are not alone.

Your soul’s voice is God’s call to you. God is saying... “Look at the gifts I’ve given you. When are you going to use them for the purpose I planted them inside of you?”

[There is a] designer label on you right now...It's written across your forehead and across your heart in big capital letters: GOD.

The Creator's seal is on you. Let it inform your actions, your thoughts. God's seal is on you, in your essence.

You are unique, one of a kind, there has never been anyone like you.

Know who you are.

Indeed, I know that Rabbi Levy's great spiritual gifts are as central to this story as the lessons she is sharing. Still, the example she sets offers us a signpost to the path forward. During this challenging and difficult time, with our lives upended, transformed and stressed by illness and fear, stress and isolation, it can be difficult to find our way to healing from this most difficult time. Rabbi Levy shows us a way with faith, friendship, meditation, prayer, and love. We have it within and between us, to hold each other and find the healing path at this time of new beginnings.

It is time to dive into the healing waters, a virtual mikveh of renewal. Each of us, and all of us together, can reclaim the person we are meant to be.

Know who you are. Emerging from these virtual waters of renewal into the quiet space of God's presence, may we find healing, wholeness, and peace.

Leshanah Tovah.