

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



Man plans, and God laughs.
—Old Yiddish saying

A rabbi and a Baptist minister walk into my clinic, both to be treated for diffuse large B-cell lymphoma. They are consecutively put in examination room 312. While waiting to be seen, the minister is solemnly reading the New Testament. When I go in to see the rabbi, he is telling jokes.

The previous sentence is not a punch line but describes exactly what happened a few weeks ago. The rabbi, rumor has it, had at one time been a stand-up comic (good that he didn't completely give up his day job). He is the sort of person I wish I had come to know in another venue, but that wasn't a choice permitted to either of us. I spent a long time with this 57-year-old man and his wife and was quite taken by them. Needless to say, I was curious as to how someone of such faith would deal with this rattling experience. The rabbi said he hoped to at least get one decent sermon out of it. And he did. He recently sent me the sermon he delivered to his congregation on Rosh Hashanah—the Jewish New Year. It is a day when we are supposed to start life anew, and here he is worrying that his life is coming to a close. He started out the sermon with a few jokes, first quoting the Rodney Dangerfield line about why he didn't want to get a second opinion, because of the risk of hearing “You want a second opinion? You're ugly, too!” He then recalled that when he had learned that the prognosis was more favorable for Hodgkin lymphoma than for non-Hodgkin lymphoma, he asked if he could switch. But the serious parts of the sermon are worth summarizing. Because they are Talmudic, there is not enough space here for the morals wrapped up in the tales. But, I found it of interest to get the perspective of someone with a load of faith who has been blindsided by the vicissitudes of life, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

Since a rabbi is a teacher, he divided his sermon into lessons: the basic one was that we never know when life will throw us a curve. Thus, we should live our lives, not wasting time allowing things to pass us by, but rather acting on our dreams. But, on the other hand,

we should not just live for the moment. He distinguished between events that are out of our control (such as getting lymphoma) and must be dealt with from events that we can control, which we can take advantage of to lead a more meaningful existence.

He did not feel anger towards God, no “Why me?” but he took his illness as an opportunity to develop a deeper closeness to those around him. He realized that he would emerge from this part of his life a better person and—as a friend of his put it—also as a better rabbi. He cited an anonymous poem:

Cancer Is So Limited
It cannot cripple love.
It cannot shatter hope.
It cannot corrode faith.
It cannot eat away peace.
It cannot destroy confidence.
It cannot kill friendship.
It cannot shut out memories.
It cannot silence courage.
It cannot reduce eternal life.
It cannot quench the Spirit.

I would like to thank him for his permission to steal bits from his sermon, for being the kind of person and patient he is, and for being very supportive of the Lymphoma Research Ride, which took place on October 3.

As a summary of his beliefs—which should be ours as well—he provided a musical reference that sort of says it all. I would have thought he might have chosen something more solemn, but as I have come to know him, the Beatles did seem quite appropriate: “And, in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.”

Until next month . . .

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bruce D. Cheson".

Bruce D. Cheson, MD