

The Spirituality of Healing

by Alanna Berman | [April 2011](#), [Popular Stories from SDJJ](#) | [Post your comment »](#)



By the time Eva Grayzel was diagnosed with oral cancer, she had just a 15 percent chance of survival. A young mother of two at the height of her career as a performance artist and motivational speaker, she wondered how her family's life would look without her in it — and then she didn't.

“I decided to fight,” Grayzel says, “and I had radical surgery, cutting out all of the cancer.”

Grayzel had a third of her tongue and all the muscles and lymph nodes in her neck removed, as well as the maximum dose of radiation to ensure the cancer did not return. Fairly healthy before the diagnosis, she hadn't smoked and hardly ever drank, which could be why she was classically undiagnosed.

“I have learned that dentists in our country are not required to have any education in early-detection of oral cancer,” she says.

It was this realization that prompted her to write the six-step oral cancer-screening postcard, which is distributed to dental offices and schools worldwide. Besides the postcard, Grayzel has begun a book series, “Talk for Hope,” for families affected by cancer. She now spends her time touring the country for speaking engagements to make sure others do not go undiagnosed as long as she had.

“The fact that I am articulate [post cancer] is extraordinary and miraculous,” she says.

During treatment, Grayzel and her family had some ups and downs, and her outlook was not always so bright.

“With oral cancer, you can't really hide behind [clothing]; it's very public,” she recalls. “You can't eat, you can't swallow your own saliva, and it's an awfully devastating experience [that greatly affects social interactions]. My children were afraid of losing me, and rightfully so.”

Grayzel recalls that she planned her own funeral at one point during the treatment because she was sure she wasn't going to survive. Her children felt her fear, and in turn, she says, pulled away from their mother.

“I think they didn’t want to commit to another day of loving me,” she says.

When she went almost two years without a kiss from her daughter, something finally changed, and she turned to Judaism and her training in the arts for answers.

“When I was on that tightrope between life and death, I had regrets about how I had raised my own children. They were 5 and 7, and I was a perfect mom on the outside — [I took them to] soccer and ballet and piano, but I hadn’t raised them with the Jewish values I really wanted more than anything for them to [have] going forward.”

Grayzel says she made small changes, like celebrating Shabbat in a different way with her children and really paying attention during services at her local synagogue so that she could engage her children in their own religious practice while simultaneously bolstering her own.

“Before [the cancer], Friday nights weren’t meaningful or memorable. We lit the candles, said the blessings and ate! There was nothing memorable or meaningful about it, because I had no connection with it being meaningful...for me, growing up, being Jewish was a bunch of things that we were supposed to do, but I had no idea why.”

Now, she says, it’s the ritual of Shabbat that’s beautiful.

“It’s a way to communicate with your children and your family not only about the things that they do each day, but creating memories that last. I do a whole thing with the lighting of the candles and [bring it back to] how you can bring light into your life.”

Shabbat wasn’t the only thing that changed. Every night, Grayzel recited the Sh’ma and blessed her children, a ritual usually reserved for Friday nights.

Rabbi Mike Shrager at B’nai Abraham in Easton, Penn., says Grayzel was always an attentive congregant, but during her ordeal, she seemed to turn to Judaism and him, in particular, for answers.

“I spend a lot of time with congregants in the hospital, but I believe people have to come to [spirituality] in their own way. In Eva’s case, she was really searching for and open to spiritual guidance,” Rabbi Shrager says.

Rabbi Shrager, who says he feels hospital visits are an essential part of his responsibilities, are different than most might think.

“People just want kindness and love when they are in the hospital, and [congregants and I] really don’t have any major spiritual discussions,” he says. “If the person wants to pray we will, but people don’t want a large theological discussion.”

Rabbi Shrager says the “randomness” of illness is something he would often speak about with Grayzel.

“When people know you are interested in them, you care about them and you don’t feel their illness is standing in the way of their humanity, then they really appreciate it,” he says. “It helps them a lot.”

Rabbi Shrager credits the teachings of Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” with his own approach to illness, citing the renowned rabbi and author’s own struggles with “God’s plan” in his dealings with congregants who have experienced disease and even death.

But for Rabbi Shrager, the question is not “Why did this horrible thing happen to me,” but “What can I do about it now that it has happened.” The answer, of course, is often rooted in Judaism.

“Religious tradition is full of kindness and compassion, and it is uplifting and invigorating and vitalizing,” he says, adding that he wasn’t surprised that, like many others, Grayzel turned to religious teachings in her time of need. “Judaism certainly helps us through that in a big way, and she was the recipient of a number of people who really did care.”

Adds Grayzel, her local Jewish community really supported her, offering rides for the children to and from school and activities, bringing food to her house and anything else they could to help.

“We are trying to forge communities and forge togetherness when we get together,” Rabbi Shrager says. “It’s what it really is all about when push comes to shove.”

Eventually, Grayzel’s daughter was able to kiss her again through a game she developed, called “the smallest kiss in the world,” turning affection into a competition between her young children.

“That really put [my family] on the road to recovery,” she says.

Today, 13 years cancer-free, Grayzel credits her Jewish community for the outpouring of love and support they offered during this tough time. Her books speak to children affected by cancer, because she concentrated so much on her own children during her illness and treatment.

“Everyone is so focused on the cancer survivor, and people don’t focus on the children, so that’s who [the book] is for,” she says.

The book features children worldwide who have a family member with cancer. It shares ways to deal with sadness, tension and fear, and eventually find strength.

Though Grayzel’s illness has left her with a lifetime of repercussions, including loss of sensation on the left side of her tongue, ringing in her ears and sensitivity to light, she continues to share her experience and talent as a storyteller in hopes of helping others find ways of coping and gaining strength under unlikely circumstances.

She says one of the greatest things family members can do is to create meaningful experiences out of the everyday things they do, and set up ritual ways to share these experiences with one another.

“Even if you have two bagels in your freezer, start celebrating Shabbat,” she says.

Touring the country for speaking engagements at dental schools, corporations and synagogues, Grayzel has seen the benefits of a close-knit community. Above all, her advice for those who may be questioning God’s plan is this: Pray, but not to get better.

“Your prayers have to be prayers of thanks,” she says. “You have to constantly recognize your gifts and your blessings, and if you pray to get better, that isn’t going to work. Prayer is not about asking for things; prayer is about recognizing your gifts and being grateful for all that you do have, not what you want.”

Amen.

For information on Eva Grayzel’s upcoming speaking engagements or books, visit www.evagrayzel.com.

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