Coping with the Illness of a Child

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This is the text of a talk given by Mitch Morrison on October 11, 2015, at the Interfaith Prayer Breakfast of the National Association of Convenience Stores, held at the Las Vegas Convention Center. Mitch Morrison, a member of our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, is vice president and group editor at Winsight Media, directing both the magazine and digital media for executives in the convenience-store industry. He and his wife, Leslie are blessed with two children, Ari, 16, and Daniel, 12. Ari is a junior at Frisch High School, Daniel is a 7th grader at Yeshivat Noam.

Good morning. I would like to thank Tom Severson, Michael Davis, David Nelson for inviting me to speak to you this morning and the many of you for allowing me to talk with you today.

"It's 2:00 in the morning. We are at Hackensack University Medical Center in Northern Jersey and are grieving beyond tears and words. Our younger son, Daniel, hasn't been feeling well for a couple of days, complaining of back pain and shortness of breath.

“Two hours ago, what we thought was perhaps a virus or something tied to the heat and humidity was something much worse. Our little boy has cancer.

“Just two days ago, Daniel had scored two goals in a street hockey game at camp, a performance more impressive when realizing he was playing with a collapsed left lung.

“For whatever reason, we have been hit with a challenge we never sought. But with God's help and the strength of friends and family and a terrific medical team, we fully expect Daniel to celebrate his Bar-Mitzvah in three years and hopefully to marry and raise a family.”

I wrote this for CSP Daily News on July 5, 2013 – 9 days after Daniel fell ill -- as I prepared to take a short leave of absence.

Today, nearly 2 ½ years later, I am speaking publicly for the first time about the trials, challenges and the profound appreciation of a faith that had to transcend its routine.

For much of my life I have prayed every day. I grew up in Boston – and as many of you know I'm a devout Red Sox fans. I was raised with an Orthodox Jewish upbringing, one imbued with a sincere pride in our religious faith, coupled with a deep love of people of all backgrounds.

More recently, I have come to appreciate a certain insight. It is one thing to go to Church or Temple or a Mosque and recite the daily or weekly prayers when there is little at stake. Oftentimes, in this scenario, it is we who define God – what He means to us, the role He plays in our daily lives.

It is another thing to cry in our prayers, to wonder if God is truly listening and whether we will receive the favorable answer that we seek. In this relationship it is God defining who we are, who I am and the relationship that God and I share.

This has been my life over the past two years. I pray three times a day, every day. Prayer has always served as my spiritual food much as breakfast, lunch and dinner provide the nutritional source to empower us through our day and evening.

With Daniel's cancer, prayer took on an additional role – that of medicine, my cure, my hope.

There is a beautiful and yet complex story in the Bible. It occurs in Chapter 20 of Genesis. We have just completed the story of Lot and his two daughters and how after the destruction of Sodom and Gemorra. Thinking that the world had been destroyed, Lot's two daughters intoxicate their father and have relations with him in order to bring new life. That's the last we read about Lot and his life.

The story now moves to Abraham and Sarah. He is 99 and she is 89. For decades they try to have a child but without success. Time is certainly NOT on their side. Living in the Near East, they travel South to the city of Gerar and as they do, Abraham notices that Sarah is still attractive. He suddenly fears that the people of this community may kill him if he is truthful about his marriage. So he tells Sarah to "lie," to reply that she is his sister if asked about their relationship.

And indeed, such happens. The King – known as Abimelekh – literally “takes” Sarah. But before any hanky panky can happen, God appears to Abimelekh in a dream and says Sarah is married and that her husband Abraham is a Prophet.

God then punishes not only Abimelekh but his entire palace by blocking their orifices. After Abimelekh apologizes to Abraham and returns Sarah to him, Abraham prays for the King and his Court to be healed. God answers and Abimelekh and his crew are able to conceive and bear children.

It is this prayer of Abraham – of praying for others for the very thing that he and Sarah lacked – a child – that prompts God in the following chapter to reveal that he has remembered Sarah and that he’ll restore her youthfulness – V’HaShem Pakad et Sarah.
Interestingly, the Hebrew root PKD means more than just “remember,” it suggests that God took an accounting of the lives of Abraham and Sarah and affirmed their worthiness to be blessed with a child. Only then does Sarah bear her first and only child -- Isaac.

[Parenthetically, it is striking that the 3 vignettes of Lot, Abimelekh and Abraham/Sarah all deal with fertility and perpetuating or obstructing life.]
In the stories of Abimelekh and then Abraham/Sarah, there are inspiring lessons. The first is the power of prayer, of Abraham’s ability to intercede on behalf of Abimelekh and his Palace. The second is the altruism to place someone’s needs ahead of your own even when you share that very need. [Rashi]

This is where you come in. In the days after our discovery, you extended yourself and embraced me and my family. In less than one week after we learned of Daniel’s cancer, I received more than 150 emails from you – the leaders who make up our convenience-store industry.

Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Jews, as well as many who do not associate with a particular denomination, prayed for my son. And some of you – nearly 2 ½ years later – continue to pray for Daniel. How amazing. In the depths of my greatest pain you have been a source of salvation.

I’m happy to share that the daily medications of Mercaptuperine, the scheduled intake of Prednisone, Pentamadine, Methotrexate and countless other multi-syllabic, tongue-twisting drugs ? are nearly over. By next month, Daniel’s regular treatment ends.
We then embark on what is basically a six-month wait with intermittent treatment. If he is cancer-free, that portends well for his future. If cancer is

found…

The shift from daily doses of medications to a certain hiatus is personally very frightening. The idea of meticulously preparing his medication has given us a sense of empowerment, a partnership between medicine and prayer; Man and God.

In just weeks, our partnership will change. In lieu of pills, prayer will be our sole representative, faith our lone agent. Truly the next six months will rest in the Hands of God.

One stage is nearly done, another soon to follow. What I know is what we all know –
Life truly is a Gift from God and it’s our mission to appreciate it each and every day.
When I wake up in the morning I recite a little prayer as soon as I open my eyes. It is called the Modeh Ani. It is a prayer of gratitude to God for restoring our soul – for giving us a new day. It is up to us to make each and every day a worthy gift from God.

Thank you so much and Bless you.