

LIKE A LIGHTNING BOLT IN A CLEAR BLUE SKY, IT STRIKES WITH MERCILESS SUDDENNESS. A NORMAL PERSON, LEADING A NORMAL LIFE, SUDDENLY FINDS HIMSELF FACING A MONSTROUS, DREADED DISEASE. HOW DOES HE COPE? WHO CAN HELP? ONLY SOMEONE WHO'S BEEN THERE, WHO HAS FACED THAT VERY MONSTER HIMSELF, CAN TRULY EMPATHIZE. THAT'S WHY SUPPORT GROUPS SHOW SUCH POSITIVE RESULTS.

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BY T. S. DELLER

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The ship bobs along in the calm, shimmering waters. Suddenly, without warning, the pleasant breeze turns into a gale; the furious thrashing waves toss the ship violently. The ship hits a sharp boulder, and water gushes in through the nasty gash. The sailors man the lifeboats.

And so the exhausted, hungry, and terrified survivors find themselves on a remote desert island. They have nothing in common but the shared fate that has brought them there: a successful teacher, a young boy who wanted to explore the world, an elderly grandmother who ran a linen store for the past forty years, a young cashier from the local supermarket, a sought-after marriage counselor, a celebrated singer who has just released a hit album, and whoever else your imagination might add to this indiscriminate list.

As they explore the island, they discover wild shrubbery, a flowing stream, coconut palms, and exotic birds. But most of all, they discover two factors that will dictate their every step from now on: The first is that the island is a complex maze of tangled paths, and the second is the big sign with its message in bold letters:

"You are now on the Island of The Dreaded Disease. Some of the paths lead to the other side of the island, where ships occasionally pass that could take you back to the Land of Life. Throughout the island, you will find guides whom you will identify by the empathetic look in their eyes. They'll be glad to guide you along the twisted paths of the island and help you get safely to other side. Do not hesitate to make use of their services."

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# ALONE on Illness Island

SUPPORT GROUPS BREAK DOWN BARRIERS FOR THE SERIOUSLY ILL





Mrs. Chaya Heller, founder and director of Beit Natan Women's Health Center, describes the traumatic transition from being an ordinary, normal person to being a seriously ill patient: "The stops that preceded the patients' unexpected arrival on the dreaded Island of Illness were familiar and expected landmarks along the journey of life: graduations, marriage, parenthood. Most people pass these milestones, and there's always someone from whom to learn how to adjust to the changes: a mother, sister, friend, or neighbor who volunteers her advice and experience to smooth the way and help adjustments. But when there's an unexpected detour to the Island of Illness, a person is totally unprepared to deal with the grim diagnosis he's been given. It's a harsh shock. Totally bewildered, people find themselves in unknown territory; they are complete strangers to the rules and possibilities. They don't know what their choices are or how to explore them. They have no basic information as a starting point. They can't see an inch ahead. They feel different, isolated, alone.

"Besides being bombarded by a confusion of doctors and medical jargon and facing the thorny paths of devastating side effects wrought by various treatments, cancer patients also suffer from shattered self-images and strained interpersonal relationships.

"It's not only cancer patients who find themselves on isolated territory. The same isolation may also be the lot of those suffering from diabetes, multiple sclerosis, or other chronic diseases."

"If you want an example of someone whose life was full of changes and adjustments, I'm the perfect example," says Jenny Yaffa-Edri, with a smile. She is a psychologist and psychotherapist who leads a support group for women with cancer. "I always saw myself as a flexible person, someone who's open to changes.

"I was born in Brazil. I was a rebellious teenager and traveled around the world by myself. When I came to Israel, I worked as a psychologist and mentor. I got married, divorced, went back to Brazil and, about thirteen years ago, I returned to Israel. I became a *baalas teshuvah*, remarried, moved to many different places ... but none of these changes prepared me for the biggest change, that was hurled at me when I was diagnosed with cancer nearly two years ago.

"We all crave stability; we want a steady, well-paying job, a stable marriage, and all other qualities that will ensure that our road in life is smooth, with no

bumps. But, in the real world, bumps do appear. Sometimes those obstacles are as towering and daunting as Mount Everest. Nothing could have properly prepared me for the sudden and traumatic shock that completely changed my outlook on life."

Jenny tells of the initial shock, confusion, and fear, of the days and nights fraught with pain, helplessness, anxiety, fatigue, and weakness. "What I remember of the two weeks between my diagnosis and subsequent surgery is just a long chain of tearful days and sleepless nights.

"In an effort to try to relax, I would go swimming. I remember how a sudden thought occurred to me while I was coasting through the water in rhythmic strokes. I realized that the cancerous 'growth' in my body could actually be a springboard for spiritual and emotional 'growth.' It was a peculiar thought, but to me, it was as if a light had been switched on in my mind. I could use my *nisayon* as fuel to ignite spiritual facets within me that until then had lain dormant. I remembered the dictum, 'No bad

comes from Above,' and I resolved that this would hold special significance for me.

"I realized that the dividing line between health and illness is so very fine and fragile. That true health also includes spiritual and emotional health. As a matter of fact, I thought, could you say about every person who does not have cancer that he's healthy?"

Positive attitude notwithstanding, being on an isolated island still makes one feel ... well, isolated! If one were to paint the feelings in the heart of one who's seriously ill, the colors would no doubt be only shades of drab gray. "The loneliness is deep and searing. A cancer patient feels as if he's in a bubble, cut off from the rest of society, who doesn't begin to understand what he's going through." Jenny tries to put the feelings into words.

Sarit Almaliach, a social worker and psycho-oncologist who helps direct the group, explains the rationale behind Jenny's support group: "A person who becomes ill feels as if he's the only one who's been stricken with the illness," says Sarit. "This sentiment, that no one understands what he's going through, is not all that exaggerated. Because someone who hasn't experienced the *nisayon* of the dreaded illness, indeed cannot grasp the depth and magnitude of the patient's emotions and tribulations. The only ones who can commiserate and empathize with him are others in his position; this exceptional loneliness is

a common feeling among all cancer patients. The patients' ability to understand each other, the common language between all the group members infinitely enhances their emotional energy. Furthermore, research has proven that patients who participated in support groups enjoyed quicker and more effective recoveries.

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"A few years ago, I led a group of about ten women. At one of the meetings, I noticed that one of the women was absent. She didn't show up at the following session either. After missing four meetings, she suddenly showed

up again. She told me that she'd read an article about cancer patients whose physical symptoms and responses to treatments improved dramatically as a result of taking part in a support group. That article, she said, was what caused her to return to the group ... "

Cancer is so severe an illness, its treatments so wrenching, that no patient should be left alone to deal with his or her overwhelming *nisayon*, in isolation. A support group also fulfills the social needs of the patient, which have changed dramatically with the onset of illness. The fact that a patient finds herself with people like her, inhabitants of the same "island," creates a whole new social realm, a camaraderie that gives her the strength, resilience, and support that she so badly needs.

Suddenly, at a group meeting, the patient is transported from a hopeless state of "No one understands me" to a shared situation in which a common fate creates a connection of understanding among them. The deep fear and isolation that they bring to the first meeting quickly gives way to hope and encouragement, thanks to the power of mutuality.

"When I tell the members, at the end of the twelfth session, that we're about to part, they're simply not prepared to face it," Sarit asserts.

The support group goes beyond addressing emotional needs. Meetings become forums for intimate discussions about the technical aspects of the illness, how to deal with its physical





ramifications. "Even though it's possible today to live with cancer for many years, it still remains a formidable and threatening illness. Patients come to the meetings armed with myriad ideas and advice that they've collected over the course of their illness. They share tips on how to soothe symptoms or treatment side effects, through ointments, herbal remedies, or massages. This exchange of helpful information further enhances the feeling of kinship among the members.

"Patients share various relaxation techniques such as breathing techniques and muscle relaxation, guided imagery, and affirmations. Many patients hear others around them say, 'Think good and you'll see that everything becomes good and you'll feel better!' Easier said than done. Practically speaking, how does one really do that?

"As a group mentor, I provide the participants with effective tools for positive thinking. Every member in the group has her own unique way of dealing with chal-

lenges. I identify, along with them, each of their special strengths; everyone has something unique to contribute from her own trove of qualities. Everyone is helped by everyone."

Sarit relates the story of "The Fence, the Sheep, and the Man with the Problem," by Yael Biran, a tale that has helped her in her work at the support group.

"It's a story about a man who had difficulty falling asleep at night and tried the age-old method of counting sheep to help him drift off. To add some 'color' to this image, he mentally

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placed a fence in front of the sheep and watched how sheep number one jumped over, followed by number two. The third sheep had his wool shorn and then, being considerably smaller than the rest of them, was able to sneak under the gate. One daring sheep wrote a sign declaring: 'We protest! Remove the fence!' A more refined sheep branded herself with a symbol of aristocracy which caused the fence to bend for her. A group of sheep helped each other climb over the tall fence. Conversely, another sheep roughly stepped on top of her peers in order to reach the top of the fence. Then there was one with small black-rimmed glasses who claimed: 'There is no such problem called a fence ...'" Sarit chuckles. "I talk about the sheep. Meanwhile, I can see the women drawing parallels in their minds. It's amazing how each of them finds a sheep with which she can identify ..."

The support group atmosphere of empathy also allows the members to touch on deeply sensitive issues inherent in the illness, things they would never discuss outside of this framework. "The illness and its various treatment courses have a devastating effect on a woman's image: the dreadful weakness, the hair loss, surgeries (which sometimes involves amputation), the inability to bear more children. All these factors cause the patient to view herself with different eyes. I distribute cards with depictions, and ask the patients to choose the card that portrays how their spouse views them today, as a sick person. Then, together, we explore ways to restore their former image."

Then there's the topic most of us avoid dis-

cussing at all costs: death. "Not all patients who will reach the other side of the island, will merit getting onto the ship that heads back to the Land of Life," Chaya Heller again refers to the parable of the desert island. Some of them will sail on, to the place that is unknown to us mortals — the Eternal World of Truth. And this awareness plays a significant role in the struggle with the *nisayon*."

"Most people go about their daily lives without thinking about their mortality," says Jenny Yaffa-Edri. "We're busy with our day-to-day duties: household, family, work, children, cooking, preparing for Yamim Tovim ... We wake up each day to another day of life. Death casts its forbidding shadow only in roundabout ways; it is spurred only through anxiety, nightmares, depression ... Cancer harshly forces the patient to face the menacing threat of death, head-on.

"But facing the possibility of death is, paradoxically, also a blessing. It puts us at a completely different vantage point. Death is sort of like a mirror, through which we reflect upon our lives. Who are we? This introspection enables us to effect real inner changes, find new meaning, reach into reservoirs of strength, and reveal precious potential within us."

"The terror of death will come to us in any case, in our nightmares," says Chagit, a cancer patient. "You can't run away from it. So if we face the fear head-on and deal with it in the open, we could gain a certain measure of control over it. The atmosphere in the group, contrary to what outsiders think, is not at all morbid. The incredible supportive powers generated override all fears, stigmas, and woes. It starts with a change in the way we think, and it goes on to encompass a whole new emotional

outlook. It's like finding new paths in spirituality.

"What makes our group so unique," says Sarit Almaliach, "is the fact that we work a lot on strengthening our faith in Hashem through strengthening ourselves. Not to dwell on the negative, but to channel everything into positive energy, to keep looking forward. And if you fall, to get up. Instead of falling into the rut of self-reproach, which often occurs in cases of severe illness, instead of asking, 'Why did this happen to me?' we ask, 'For

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**— Chagit, cancer patient**

what purpose did this happen to me?' — a question that nurtures growth and progress. The feeling of togetherness does a lot of good in these areas."

Chagit's assertions are awe-inspiring. "The dreaded illness makes us face a moment of truth. For years, I have lived with the mistaken idea that I need to better the world around me. Now I've been given an opportunity to truly improve ... myself. Today, two years after I've been diagnosed and operated on, I can say wholeheartedly that my illness has been my spiritual window of opportunity. I remember how on the way to those first fateful blood tests, I was licking a popsicle, like a little girl, not dreaming that I was about to cross a giant threshold

into a completely different reality. Today, when I enjoy a rare and close relationship with the One Above, because of my illness, I can only ask Him to open my eyes and continue showing me ways to improve, to keep infusing me with new meaning.

"Recently I was gripped by a sudden attack of excruciating pain. Of course, the perpetual fear of the disease spreading to other parts of my body sprang foremost into my mind. I was hospitalized for a long time. After many tests, it became clear that the pain was in no way related to my illness. I felt that I had received a real gift, not only the relief of knowing that the problem was unrelated to the disease, but also the closeness to Hashem that I had fostered during this hospitalization.

"Don't think of me as such a *tzaddeikes*," Chagit tells her friends. "'*Tashev enosh ad dakah, vatomer shuvu bnei adam* — You turn a person until he is crushed, and then You say, 'Repent, people!' ' In the first part of the verse, *enosh* is singular: one person mired in afflictions. But one person's sufferings inspire awakening in all his surroundings; all his acquaintances are uplifted. Many people — *bnei adam*, in plural — repent. Take something small from here: a special undertaking in a *middah*, a stringency in halachah, a stronger relationship with Hashem. Let my illness uplift you," Chagit wraps up her stirring words.

"When we focus on *emunah*, love, and hope," concludes Jenny Yaffa-Edri, "when we overcome the despair that crops up along the way, when we arm ourselves with courage and continue on, then Divine Providence is revealed to us in stunning clarity, and the path to our coveted goal is shortened by way of a pure miracle." ■

