

## BEFORE AND AFTER THE CORONARY

by Harold M. Schulweis

Samuel Johnson was right. "There is nothing that concentrates the mind of a man more than the prospect of being hanged." And there is nothing that fixes the mind of a human more than an event that threatens his health and life. If you are lucky enough to survive the first assault upon a vital organ, it is interesting to see how playful you become and what surgery of humor wells up in your entire being.

President Reagan's flashes of humor after being shot manifested not only grace under pressure, but the joyous relief at being alive. Humor is a form of prayer, a way of declaring, "Thank God that I'm alive." With all of its grimness, there is healthy humor even in sickness, in the theater of doctors, nurses, attendants and hospitals.

Doctors sought to help me understand what it was that I sustained. They speak in a language peppered with such terms as "occlusion," "necrosis," "myocardial infarction," "interventricular septal lesion," "thallium test treadmill," "pericarditis," "auricular fibrillation." (Please note: these are some of the very doctors who complain that my sermons use too specialized a vocabulary.)

Doctors must all believe in the wisdom of *tsarot rabot chatzi nechama*—much anguish is half consolation. To buoy up my spirits they inform me that one out of every five males in America suffers a coronary before the age of 60.

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Somehow I am not even quasi-soleed. With frightened patients doctors are prone to adopt a bedside manner borrowed from Jimmy the Greek. When I confess to my fears of intrusive modes of diagnostic procedure, or of the prospects of surgery, they invariably retort, "Look, Rabbi, it is far more dangerous to drive a car or to cross Ventura Boulevard than it is to undergo these procedures." They thereby succeed in giving me two phobias I have never had before. Now I am absolutely petrified at the prospect of entering a car, and I am also scared to death to cross the street on Ventura Boulevard.

Nurses are properly known as angels of mercy. Mine is an exception: a vampire in white, a sleepwalker with long needles, eager to tap my veins—especially at the stroke of midnight. Every other day my "angel" finds delight in spreading some thick gelatinous material over my legs and chest area, and in placing there circular discs attached to electrodes. It reminds me of *shtellen bankus*. In the midst of all my misery I hear my *bobbe's* voice: *Es vet helfen vi a toiten bankus.* (That is, it will help as much as cupping would help a corpse.)

I brood in my hospital bed, wallow in self-pity; my nurse offers sage counsel. "You've got a television set. Don't read books. Get your mind off your problems and put on the television set." I discover that there are limited channels on hospital TV sets: the sets have most likely been purchased from bankrupt motels. I discover that linguistics is important to get the most out of TV. I wish I had studied Spanish and Japanese. It also helps to be a devout fundamentalist. Two out of three pushes on the remote control bring to view an excitable evangelist. Still, as I watch during the early hours, transfixed at the ordeals of "Ryan's Hope," "All My Children," "As the World Turns," "General Hospital," "The Edge of Night," and "The Days of Our Lives," and see the tormented, twisted creatures truly suffering from rapes and

murders, amnesia and suicide, sadism and infidelity, I chastise myself. "By what right do I complain about a minor myocardial infarction compared to their anguish?" Thank you, Nurse.

While at the hospital and later recuperating at home, I receive wondrous counsel from my rabbinic colleagues and congregational friends, the old and the young. From a pre-adolescent constituent: "You are lucky to be a rabbi because you can pray." And on the back of this envelope the child added, "P.S. I didn't write this on Shabbes." And another: "Dear Rabbi, I hope you feel better in a few minutes, or maybe a little longer." The contamination of innocence via the reality principle.

Rabbinic colleagues, as befits their station, do not send plants, flowers or candies. They send books, usually paperbacks. A friend from New York sends me his copy of *A Coronary Event*, authored by Dr. Michael Halberstam and his cardiac patient Stephen Lesher. In his note my friend urges me, "You've got to read this. It's you." I quickly take the creased copy into my hand, glance at the blurb on the jacket where it describes Stephen Lesher, the patient . . . "Ambitious, hard-working, proud of his athletic ability and sexual prowess, and in the process of getting a divorce." That's me?

Another colleague sends his copy of *Type A Behavior*, by Drs. Friedman and Rosenman. Again a moment of self-revelation. "Type A" is characterized by "excessive competitive drive, free floating hostility, aggressively involved in a chronic incessant struggle to achieve more and more in less and less time." Instant analysis.

*Similia similibus curabantur*—like cures like. Three out of five letters come from people who have sustained some "involvement" with the heart. From them I am instructed that all roads lead to heart attacks: anger, excitement, hard work, obesity, ambition, success and failure. But also that there are sure-fire ways to avoid their recurrence.

Some are obsessed with "glatt" dietary matters. A friend of mine from the Bronx reminds me that the word "infarction" as in "myocardial infarction" is a Latin term that etymologically means "stuffed." He proceeds to recall the various infarcted derma that we consumed during our carefree youth, and warns me to avoid hors d'oeuvres. I receive countless pamphlets from coronary societies cautioning me to be wary of saturated fats, egg yolks, organ meats, monosodium glutamate. I am to watch out for salt, sugar, caffeine and triglycerides in my blood stream. I take the vow to live by cabbage heads, celery stalks, fish and skinless chicken.

In all this, there is a proven Jewish advantage, a dietary compensation: In every coronary menu there appears an asterisk cautioning you to avoid consumption of bacon, shrimp, clams, oysters and crab. And that, in short, means that treif kills and kosher cures. (See Leviticus, chapter I I.)

Yet another group of counsellors emerge from the "juggernauts." These are the hyperkinetics who are opposed to the sedentary life, who walk, run, skip and trot. Invariably they tell me of the 89-year-old who is on the tennis court every single day and who plays two sets straight. How many of those sets he wins they never tell me. They make me feel guilty of all stationary postures. I come to believe that I have no right to be sedentary, no right to sit down and read a book or eat a meal. What meal of cabbage heads warrants such leisure anyhow? Consequently I manage to master an unusual skill. I develop the capacity to read and turn pages while walking very briskly and simultaneously chewing sugarless gum. In this small way I alleviate some of my anxiety.

The most sustained advice I receive comes from those urging me to avoid all kinds of stress, anxiety, anger, frustration and hard work. What strains my credulity is that this counsel is offered by members of the Board of Directors of the synagogue. Yet I am back at work now, eager to enter the fray of communal life, because of an unsolicited call from the president of my synagogue. He called upon me, leaving with these assuring words: "Rabbi, whatever you do, don't rush to come back. Your associate, Rabbi Margulies, is doing a wonderful job." Needless to say, nothing could more quickly or surely have gotten me off my back. A dose of insecurity is a spectacular energizer.

I would not have you believe from these light-hearted remarks that I responded to the trauma of my ailment with stoic impassibility. I went through the stages of confusion, denial, anger, despair and dark fear. The heart carries with it a mythology all of its own. Suddenly, within moments, I experienced a kind of holy cessation, a holy culmination. "Shaddai," say the Rabbis, is the name of God who says "Dai"—enough! Almost at once your whole sense of time comes to a grinding halt. The little book that is always with me, filled with appointments and schedules, deadlines and meetings—all peremptorily dismissed. Even language loses its conviction, replaced by tentativeness and qualification. "Maybe I can make it. If I can make it . . . I hope I can be there . . . perhaps."

When you lie on the hospital gurney and look up at nurses, attendants and doctors you are quickly transformed. The world looks different on your back. You experience unsuspected needs of dependency. All your possessions amount to pajamas, slippers and a robe. You are a fragile human being.

In my parents' home, as a child, I never remember anyone speaking about sickness. No one in the family spoke about another's sickness—or, for that matter, health. If someone spoke about how healthy a person looked, it would with the speed of a sneeze be counteracted by *kaynain-hora*. Sickness was either trivialized—"It's only a cold"—or repressed. No one revealed his illness. And I believe the silence derived not from modesty or a desire for privacy, but out of a primitive view that sickness somehow is related to punishment. Sickness is perceived as a consequence of something that was done wrong. The perception creeps into the very vocabulary that we use. We say, "He was stricken by illness" or "struck down by illness" or that "He fell sick," or "was afflicted by a disease," suggesting that there is a striker, a feller, an afflicter—in short, a punisher. I suspect that's why being ill became a sign of shame, of guilt and therefore of silence.

Even as a child I rejected this primitive notion that placed God in the role of villain. Certainly the God that I prayed to, the God of my ancestors, was somech noflim, the God who upholds those who are fallen, who cures those who are ill and who loosens the fetters of those who are bound. I never believed that the longevity of some Nazi official was a sign that he was favored by God or that the short life of a child stricken by leukemia was an omen of wickedness. But theology aside, that self-imposed silence of the sick that still prevails robs the sick of that which they so desperately need. Sick people are scared to death. Sick people are scared not only of death but of incapacitation. They are afraid that their energy has been drained out of them, that the promises they made to themselves and to others have been dashed, that somehow or other this illness marks the end, the curtailment of passion and

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song and easy laughter. They fear that all the fantasy of yesterday and all the hopes of tomorrow have now to be fabricated into a premature nostalgia.

The sick person wants, above all else, the presence of others so that he can work out the inner trembling of his heart, the dark brooding of his soul. When I was sick I did not want wisdom or advice or explanation. All I wanted was a presence and a loving ear. That is why I think sick people repeat over and over again the same story of their malady, the very same episodes of how they got sick—not for the sake of giving others information but in order to reassure themselves. They retell in order to rehearse and review and relive the shock so they can get used to the new fate.

So the friend who comes to see the sick person need not be armed with great wisdom. It is gratuitous for him to say, "Do not worry," or, with all the best of intentions, "Relax and take it easy." That is precisely what the sick person is afraid of. He is afraid that he will be bound to a life of relaxation, that he will become a miser with his vitality, hoarding every ounce of energy, that he will live henceforth with timidity, forever clutching his hand to his chest. To live with the single mandate that you "should take care of yourself" is no life.

In time, the patient will learn not to be driven by omnivorous conceits or wild discontents. He will learn this of himself; no one else will teach him to learn to live with a proportionate ambition. But his danger lies in invalidating life by acting the invalid. He must not "play possum," pretend not to be alive in order to gain immortality. Life must be lived with passion, b'chol l'ovocha, u'vchol nafshecha, u'vchol m'odecha, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Otherwise existence is at best a quantitative prolongation. For the sick, the first real sign of recovery is the craving for stress and for struggle and for conflict; they are coterminous with life. A stressless life is a lifeless existence. You don't die from debate or deep feeling or struggling for a cause.

Some say that there are no atheists in intensive care units and none in the waiting rooms of hospitals. I don't believe that. To be scared into faith is to inherit a sick faith. The fear will not last, nor will the faith. But faith may come out of a crisis because it bends the tin of your iron will. When the debris and the clutter of the armored self clear away you may begin your rediscovery. Old-new questions reappear. What and who and when is most important in your life? These questions call for self-revelation and for confession. This moment, this hour, this day is most important. Do you know whether you will have another like this one? Do not neglect the present tense. And this one sitting beside your bed. Will there be another like this one? No book held in my hand but this human hand held in mine makes me strong, helps me struggle against submission.

In the hospital, I remembered what my mother told me when she was in the hospital. Always she spoke to me in English, except this time. In Yiddish she whispered, "You know, if I get well I promise you I will know how to live better." I don't know precisely what she had in mind, but she never had the chance because for her the rediscovery came too late. We need not wait for a calamitous event to open our eyes to this hour and to those who are about us. Recovery is a return. Go home to your families and love them. Go home to your houses with your Sabbath lights and wine and white challah and make peace. Go home to your families and bind the injured relations. Cast aside invective and sharpness of tongue and irony and sarcasm and judgment and blame. Go home to your family and learn to listen and enjoy and share legend and story and laugh together, sing together and study together and come to shul together. And go home to your friends. Do not let small things, jealousies, demeaning envies destroy the health in your life.

"Blessed art Thou who fashions persons in wisdom and endowest them with health."