

*New Stories Vayeira 5777*

**God, Stay Where I Can See You**

**Shattered and made whole. Learning to trust God with everything.**

**by Lori Samlin Miller**

A decade ago, I began a journey toward Jewish observance together with my husband. I embraced performing mitzvahs and keeping Shabbat. I loved the holidays, and began to see through what I previously thought were random events, God's loving hand in my life.

But all that changed when my husband became ill. Suddenly, God's management skills came into question. How could this random, awful thing happen to my husband? I much preferred the God I had come to feel was directing my life and orchestrating events that made sense and showed us His love for us. How could I feel God's kindness now?

My mind split into two screens. Showing in Theater One: Numbness. I was overwhelmed, paralyzed with disbelief, unable to process, accept or absorb the severity of this new reality, let alone confront the necessary steps we had to undergo to determine the choices we now faced. How could my husband – a kind, caring, selfless physician and surgeon who'd devoted his life to caring for his patients – be so sick himself?

Playing on Screen Two: Business. Putting my emotions aside, there were practical decisions to be made – lining up appointments, selecting doctors, comforting our loved ones while reassigning his patients to other doctors and grappling with the insurance company's endless red tape.

Over the next few days, we gathered blessings from rabbis and opinions from specialists. Our journey through a maze of challenges, confusion, and fear was just beginning.

I did a lot of praying, choking back tears most times, gushing at others, finding myself frequently at God's doorstep to petition for His mercy and healing because I didn't know where else to turn. I felt such despair. God really cares about us, I told myself repeatedly, as I threw myself harder into my prayers. I quietly gave God my whole package.

Amongst my many fears and the confusion I expressed only to God was the puzzling fact that my husband was young and strong. He'd never smoked or drank. How could this diagnosis of throat cancer be true?

Not only did the illness seem terrifying, the recommended surgery to affect the best prognosis, a total laryngectomy (the removal of the larynx and breathing is done through an opening in the neck) is so radical and extreme. How would we learn to accept and

adjust to what this new reality would bring? It wasn't fair and I at times I felt a distance between God and me.

The next few days were a blur as we chose surgeon, hospital, and course of treatment. My battle with the insurance company began to heat up. I stopped often to pray that God would be with us every step of this journey. I experienced panic and terror when I lapsed into thinking I had to make everything work out, forgetting that God was in charge and onboard to orchestrate the best doctors, hospitals, outcomes, healing and recovery possible. I doubt I could have survived without believing that, no matter how muddled my thinking and my emotions often were.

What a journey. After each surgery, I was euphoric, full of gratitude, awed by my husband's courage and determination. I felt God's mercy and appreciated the skillful medical specialists He worked through. God really loves us, He really cares about us, I thought repeatedly. When the euphoria wore off, we were left to confront so many difficult adjustments in the aftermath of disease and surgical devastation. I wondered, do I really trust God? If so, why did the intense emotional pain and confusion sporadically reappear? Why did my emotions torque from one end of the spectrum to another like a kite on a windy day?

I prayed incessantly as I made my case for mercy and healing, wondering if I was being heard, yet painfully aware I had no place else to go. I've always been squeamish, with a deeply rooted fear and discomfort in hospitals and medical settings, yet I remained firmly planted by my husband's side. Slowly, the shock of what happened was replaced by greater awareness of God's presence all around us in the form of kind nurses who exhibited great compassion and care; in volunteers who bought me books and tea; and especially in my husband's humble acceptance and appreciation of everything being done to help him. I tried to string together the minutes that were devoid of worry or fear.

What does it really mean to be a practicing, believing Jew? Would I succeed in forging a relationship with Him? Until we went through this life changing experience, I never understood how important and necessary it was for me to be able to spill out the entire contents of my mind and heart and give all my anger, disappointment, unhappiness, worry and fear to God. I held nothing back. Allowing myself to be totally vulnerable and real with God saved me exploding in rage and turning away completely and losing my faith.

Though I kept stumbling and hitting my reset button, I was trusting Him to take care of us even when we didn't like

what He was dishing, when we thought it was unfair, horrible, uncomfortable and incomprehensible. It was all true, but I came to understand that nothing I felt or expressed pushed God further away; paradoxically it only bought us closer. My honest expressions made my faith in Him stronger as I learned there was nothing I could ever say or do that would sever our relationship as long as I kept Him close and trusted in Him.

My husband's encouraging prognosis and slow progress became palpable, exciting. Fear, worry, and doubt no longer eclipsed my gratitude and recognition of God's hand working to heal my husband, keep our family afloat, and fuel the hospital's competent and caring staff as we eased into our next steps. No longer was I questioning why God would allow such an evil thing to occur, but was instead clinging to Him for help to guide and direct us. I realized it had been vital for me to question God and express my anger and outrage to Him because it meant I no longer felt resentful about the challenges and pain our family endured. That was the process through which my anger, resentment and disappointment were removed, leaving a stronger relationship in their place, based on my ability to be honest with God about how I felt, and what I needed from Him.

We entered the next phase of our journey – looking forward to our new

life and the next set of challenges, and the skills to grow and maximize the opportunities that God was now showing us.

I'm a Special Education teacher, a detail my husband credited God with having inserted into the equation to encourage our resilience to accept our new reality and recognize our potential. By learning to accept what we perceived as different, we slowly learned to show ourselves love, tolerance, and acceptance that emulate the way God loves us.

Not being able to speak is a challenging disability. We were told that after his throat healed, my husband could opt to learn a new way to speak, but before his discharge from the hospital, he received a mechanical device called an electrolarynx. Eager to talk rather than write, the speech pathologist asked what he wanted to say to me. I stood by his side, breathless and excited.

Fascinated, I watched him study the apparatus, place it against his throat and turn to face me. With a twinkle in his eye he didn't hesitate to say exactly what was on his mind. "The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain."

That was it. I laughed so hard until the tears splashed over my eyelids and down my cheeks. I laughed so much it hurt to keep laughing, but felt too good to stop. I thought I'd forgotten how to laugh and it made me feel so alive.

We were encouraged by other people we connected with online who'd had the same surgery. After our radiation treatments were complete, a wonderful speech therapist taught us esophageal speech. As a result of my husband's incredible determination, it is somewhat mind boggling that he learned an entirely new and different way to speak and is well understood.

Forced to retire as one of our region's most beloved surgeons, he devotes himself to learning Torah. I am grateful for my husband's kind demeanor and humility. Despite having gone through so much, he recognizes God as having orchestrated things perfectly. His simple faith is both stunning and inspiring.

I started volunteering at an inner-city hospital, deriving such joy at distracting and momentarily cheering up patients stuck there. While visiting as many patients as possible each week, in my efforts to give others what we most needed when we were in their place, I feel I am acknowledging and attempting to repay my debt of gratitude at the miraculous care my husband received and the healing God granted him.

It's not that I like being back in the hospital every week; actually, I despise it. But then how else could I be there to offer others what we needed most: distraction and a moment of lightness and joy at a time when it may be the

last thing you'd expect, but possibly the thing you need most. With a small flower glued to my nose, I step far outside of my comfort zone each week along with my fellow hospital clowns, performing red foam nose transplants; making children smile, encouraging anxious family and friends in the waiting rooms, distracting terrified babies with bubbles and our special light-up thumbs.

I can't believe I get to do this work. It keeps me focused not on how low and lonely a person can be when things seem dark and stormy, but how high you can soar if you let God lift you up. I have no shame that I doubted God's plan, and I no longer wonder if feeling angry and questioning God meant I didn't really trust Him. I know now that in reality, my personal dialogue with God removed the distance and the interruptions I experienced in our relationship. Dislodging those thoughts brought me closer to Him. ([www.aish.com](http://www.aish.com))