

Two weeks ago, I met the self-proclaimed “most Jewish man I would ever meet in my entire life.” He told me about his Jewish family, his Jewish wife, his Jewish foods, his Jewish nose, his Jewish name, etc., etc. and then, he paused, looking uncertain, and asked “can I still be Jewish if I don’t believe in God?” I assured him that his doubt about God was perhaps the most Jewish thing about him and we proceeded to have a deep discussion about the existence of God and God’s presence in our daily lives for the next hour and a half, right there, in his hospital room in the neuro-rehab ward, as he sat in his motorized wheel chair, paralyzed from the waist down. I don’t know Jack’s entire story, but I do know that there are only two ways to land yourself in Neuro-rehab: brain surgery or traumatic brain injury...neither are good.

Jack is in rough shape. He is relatively young, probably mid forties, but he has lost his physical independence. There is a heavy metal neck brace attached to his chair, to hold him upright. The only thing that Jack can move is his hands. He has had a caretaker for a number of years, a devout Christian woman who says that she prays for him in church every Sunday. She attends bible study, does volunteer work for the church and has a close knit community of people that she cares for and who care for her. Jack, although committed to being Jewish, told me of his jealousy and longing to have something like that in his life that could sustain him in his extreme hour of need...and that’s when he requested a rabbi and they sent me.

Rather than immediately jumping on him to join a shul and donate tzedakkah to the Federation, we took a tiny, baby step forward. It was late afternoon on Friday and the sun was beginning to set. I had a left-over Shabbat box from my rounds visiting patients that morning and I asked him if he would like to celebrate Shabbat with me. He gave it a few seconds of heavy consideration and then said, “yeah, I think I would like that.” I gave him the sheet with the explanations and blessings and he seemed suddenly unsure. “I had a bar Mitzvah,” he said, “but I’m not sure that I remember these.” “Not to worry,” I assured him, “I will lead and you can join in if anything jogs your memory.” I lit the candles, closed my eyes, and sung the blessing softly so that I wouldn’t disturb the other patients. When I opened my eyes, I could tell that something profound had just happened. Like flipping a switch, the simple candle blessing and its melody had triggered something in Jack that had been dormant for many years. He said, “I remember these, “I used to do these brachos with my parents.” And instantly, he was transported back, to a place where he was surrounded by loved ones, healthy and youthful, a child sharing in the

wonder of our sacred traditions. After the motzi, he chewed his challah thoughtfully and said, “I can’t wait to call my mother and tell her what I just did here in my hospital room.”

For me, as a hospital chaplain, this would typically be the end of the story, but, as I was to discover on my next rotation two weeks later, this was the beginning of something truly incredible. I was away for the following Shabbat because of Thanksgiving, but when I returned to the hospital two weeks later, Jack was still in Neuro Rehab and my supervisor said “you have to go see this patient again!” Do you know that last week he gathered all the Jewish patients in the Neuro rehab ward, along with a few doctors to celebrate Shabbat? He had his wife bring a challah, the first she had ever baked in her life, and they all did the brachot together...and then, they spent an hour discussing their own thoughts on God and the afterlife.

Wow, this...I had to see!

When I went back to see Jack, he greeted me warmly and said “I didn’t know if you would be able to make it by to see me today, so I’ve already started on the blessings, but would you like to do the motzi with me?” He led us together in the bracha and his voice was strong and confident. When we were done, I asked him about his week and he regaled me with the story of his Shabbat community organizing project the previous Friday.

He said to me “Sydney, I will probably never see you again, but I want you to know that you have started something. I don’t know where it will lead, but I am ready for the journey. Maybe I am here in this hospital for a reason.”

Pretty profound for someone who just two weeks ago told me that the most Jewish thing about him was his love of kugel. He went from doubt in the existence of God to belief in a divine plan. My colleagues were convinced that next week he will be asking for an application to rabbinical school.

Of course, this all made me feel incredibly warm and fuzzy. There’s a reason why people love doing this kind of work. But I had to admit that it really had little to do with me. I didn’t invent Shabbat, I didn’t pen the brachas...I didn’t even bake the challah. The tradition spoke for itself. It gave Jack something that he desperately needed: a sense of comfort, a reminder of family, and a sense of order and meaning in his chaotic universe.

Looking back, I realize that as much as Jack thinks I did for him, he did so much more for me. For those of us who observe Shabbat regularly, like almost everyone in this room, the blessings and rituals are familiar and comforting, but, at least in my case, I have taken them for granted.

Jack helped me to see Shabbat with new eyes. This Shabbat, Jack is a reminder to me, perhaps a reminder to us all, to zachor v'shamor, to remember and keep Shabbat. Jack's parents did something simple and yet so profound. They gave him a gift of comfort and hope that he could turn to in his darkest hour. This Shabbat, may we all be blessed with that same kind of wonder and appreciation for our traditions, preserving them for our own children and grandchildren, and just as importantly, for ourselves.

Shabbat shalom!