

“How to Treat the Sick”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Now that I am halfway through five months of chemotherapy for lymphoma, a few words of advice:

1. Do not greet one who is sick morosely. If he is feeling well, he must now accommodate your level of sadness. The sick person does not spend all day thinking, “I am sick.” He may be thinking about lunch. Greet normally, and allow the one who is ill to guide the emotional tone.
2. Losing hair is visible and dramatic, but not catastrophic. After all, Rabbi Akiba was bald.
3. Offers to help should be specific. “Let me know if there is anything I can do,” though well meant, places the burden on the sick person. “Can I bring you dinner tomorrow night?” is far better.
4. If help is refused, or offers and well wishes are met with silence, do not be hurt. Sometimes coordinating help, checking on it, thanking, is more trouble and fatigue-inducing than refusal. Responding to even the most gracious message requires energy the person may need elsewhere.
5. The Jewish tradition esteems the art of medicine. Anyone tended to by good doctors and nurses understands why.
6. Strength and weakness both are good, and each has its place.
7. In every sickness one can find mission and meaning. That does not make the sickness welcome, but it can give it a new and powerful dimension.
8. No matter what your theology, there is great power, comfort and beauty in prayer.

“We thank you God, for the miracles which are daily with us.”