

## Lorrie Klemons - Sept. 2, 2023

March 18, 2016 was the worst day of my husband's and my life. In the wee hours of the morning, I had to call 911 to rush my son to the ER. He had been suffering with persistent, debilitating headaches that had gotten progressively worse over a 6 week period. He told me that it felt like his brain was swelling. I asked the paramedics to take us to the best Neuro center in NYC. Through what I believe to be G-d's divine intervention, they transported us to Lenox Hill Hospital, a small hospital in the Northwell health system on the upper East side of NYC.

Also through G-d's divine intervention, we were immediately embraced by an unbelievable medical team that included a Syrian neurologist, a Jewish neurosurgeon and an Israeli oncologist.

I had flown up to NYC from our home in Charlotte, NC the day before the 911 call for "just a few days" to see what was going on with these headaches that Jordan was having. I had no idea how very sick he was. My best nursing and mothering instincts could not have prepared me for what lie ahead. Those "few days" turned into a 9 month odyssey to save my son's life. During that entire time, I never left his side. My husband, Barry, commuted back and forth from Charlotte to NYC on a regular basis. There was excruciating darkness during those months which included 47 days of hospitalization, mostly in the ICU, double doses of chemotherapy, radiation therapy, a seizure, 7 surgeries, two of them being neurosurgeries, 4 kidney stones with stent insertions, and CT Scans & MRI's too numerous to count. Yet despite the darkness, there was so much light. And as a family, we grabbed onto that light with all of our might. It's what gave us hope. It's what gave us gratitude. It's what gave us connection. It's what gave us strength. It's what gave us love.

Why do I share this dark chapter of my family life with you as we read today's parsha, Ki Tavo?

The parsha begins with ... *"For I command you this day, to love your God, to walk in God's ways..."*

What does it mean to walk in G-d's ways? According to Maimonides, when the Torah obligates us to "walk in His ways" it means that our intention when being kind and compassionate must be specifically to emulate G-d's ways. "Just as G-d is called merciful, so too, you must be merciful. Just as G-d is called kind, so too, you must be

kind..." The idea is not just to be merciful and kind, but to do so in order to emulate our Creator. To do so with the right motivation of behaving ethically so to model one's own conduct after the highest virtues of The Almighty. To be holy like G-d. To bring holiness to this chaotic, scary, unholy, imperfect and sometimes, lonely world. To be a light amidst the darkness. During Rabbi Betsy's sermon on the Shabbat morning of her son and his kallah's uff ruff this past June, she challenged us to take this one step further... to make sure we walk in Gd's way with intentional love in our hearts. I believe that so many of the Rabbi's words from the bima over the past few months have brought our Kahal to this very moment of divine light.

When Jordan was so sick, we were enveloped by that divine light. That light which came from others who truly walked in G-d's ways. That light came from the interpersonal relationships we developed with the myriad of doctors and nurses and other related staff, who either labored relentlessly to save my son's life or who contributed to a positive outcome with a mere smile, hug, or kind word. That Light from patient transporters who smiled their huge smiles and sang to my son as they whisked him from one hospital location to another.

That Light from Father Jude, the Catholic priest, who never missed a day of prayer with my son. "Father, we're not of your faith, but my son can use all the Barucha's he can get."

That Light from the Jewish chaplain, Rabbi Silverman, whose first name is Simcha - such an appropriate name for one who filled us with such joy. Who filled us with G-d. Rabbi Simcha guided us to the free kosher pantry tucked away on the 4th floor of the hospital that was available to patients, family and staff 24/7 as a mission of the Cholel org of NYC which nourished our bellies and our souls. He got me a key to a nearby apartment where I could nurture my body with shower and sleep as the need arose, donated by a generous Jewish philanthropist.

That Light from Carlos, the massage therapist, who massaged away Jordan's pain and stress with his magical hands.

That Light from Shelley and her pet therapy teacup puppies whose licks brought Jordan such joy... lasting long after the visit was over.

That Light from Tom, the music therapist, who strummed and drummed away Jordan's fears and anxieties during the most trying of times.

That light from Israeli oncologist, Dr Ronan Harel, who sang Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah in Hebrew to Jordan accompanied by Tim at the moment of greatest pain during a bedside medical procedure.

That Light from the cheerful hospital volunteers with their noisy rolling carts who visited at just the right moment, delivering much needed diversion, pleasantries and snacks.

That Light from Neurologist, Dr. Souhel Najjar, of Netflix *Brain On Fire* fame, who told Jordan *I LOVE YOU LIKE A SON* every time he visited. I told my son that we couldn't be sure if we were going to have a good outcome, but when your doctor tells you he loves you like a son, medicine just doesn't get any better.

That Light from Neurosurgeon, Dr John Boockvar also of *LHH Netflix* fame, who would stop by every night on his way out of the hospital... and on weekends... just to see how Jordan was doing.

That Light from the nurses who never gave up on Jordan. Caring for him, caring about him, advocating for him, embracing him, loving him... and me.

And that precious, precious light from our collective families and friends and even strangers who called, visited, sent notes, helped move Jordan from one apt to another, cooked, cleaned, donated to fundraising activities and provided us with the love, support, caring, kindness... and hundreds of peanut butter chocolate cookies and bagels with cream cheese... that got us through our hungriest and darkest hours.

I don't believe that G-d made my son sick. I don't believe that G-d causes accidents, natural disasters or war. I never asked G-d WHY he made my son sick. Instead, I begged Him to save his life. And as any mother would, I begged Him to take me instead of my son. I asked others to pray for my son. And with all the light... with all the divine intervention...my son is very much alive and well today, more than 7 years after the darkness.

And yes, I still believe in G-d's mercy. In His holiness. I recognize that G-d created an imperfect world. He relied on us to make it holy. To do his work. To bring His light. I believe that the goodness of others can help bring that light. Our current societal imperfections and chaos demands it... depends on it. We need that light now more than ever.

As a member of the BIC kahal, there are opportunities to walk in G-d's holy ways and bring light into the world... or into the life of just one individual or family.

About a year before the pandemic shut everything down, a group of BIC members had begun making home visits and occasional hospital visits, to our members. It was a small, active and dedicated group called the Chesed Team. We're in the process of reviving that group. Besides visiting or phoning fellow congregants who are home bound, ailing, or otherwise in need, this group will also be available to help those who are coordinating Shiva for a friend or relative. As you may recall, our kahal now strives to provide for grieving families according to their needs, including bringing meals that they can eat quietly without being put under communal pressure to host those who come to comfort them. We know that this is an area of Chesed that we are still growing into as a kahal, and our goal is to help ensure a smooth process when needed.

When our first grandson was born here in 2018, Barry and I bounced back and forth between charlotte, NC and Madison. We attended services at BIC on a regular basis until COVID hit. We moved here full-time in March, 2022. When Rabbi Betsy invited me to help revive the Chesed Team so that we could resume its critical role in allowing our kahal to walk in Gd's ways, I readily accepted. After all, How could I turn down that invitation when Chesed means kindness or love between people? MLK Jr is quoted as saying that Life's most persistent and important question is... what are you doing for others?

Along with Rabbi Betsy, I am coordinating recruitment of new members and will chair and train the revived team along with the Rabbi.

Many of you don't know me. I'm a nurse, an educator, a public speaker, an author, a patient-senior-caregiver advocate, a certified dementia practitioner and an End of Life-Doula. After Jordan got sick, I added Warrior Mom to my resume. I've enjoyed a 51 year career... thus far! I've still got lots to do!

I invite you to join along with me, the Rabbi, and other members of our kahal to emulate G-d's kindness and love right here within our own BIC community. I invite you to bring your own personal light and love to our kahal as part of the revived Chesed Team.

You'll never know the huge impact that your simplest act of kindness or generosity of heart can have on another person. A visit, phone call, text, card, meal, kind word, smile, touch or hug can change another person's life... and perhaps, your own. Your kindness can transform someone's dark moment with a blaze of light. Be that light! The purpose of life is not to be happy...it is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well. Barry and I know first hand, how very divine that light can be. Community is a word that means come unite. The rabbi and I would love to hear from you after Shabbat if you would like to know how you might get involved in our Chesed Team community. "SHABBAT SHALOM". And although it's a bit early, Barry and I wish you all shanah Tovah u'metuka.