

Sacred Wisdom

By Allison Gilbert, LMFT

Diagnosed – 9 days

I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2008 between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – the holiest days in the Jewish calendar. The diagnosis brought with it the threat of death because I had been in denial for so long that the cancer was at a late stage. The timing of this event was one of the hardest parts of hearing this news: the diagnosis came within the 9 days when G-d decides whether you will be written in the Book of Life for the coming year – or not.

Background

I've always been a bit superstitious. I dabbled in Astrology, wrote my master's thesis on using the Tarot as a self-help tool, and explored many different religions trying to find out how deal with life's worst-case scenarios. My favorite undergrad class was in Tibetan Buddhism taught by visiting monks. The Jewish calendar never really meant that much to me. I was raised Jewish but like most American Jews, didn't think Judaism had what I was searching for.

Hasidic family

It was around 15 years ago when we moved back to S Cruz that a Hasidic family moved here too. Their kids were my kids' ages and so we hung out together while the children played. I learned that there were times of the year that I couldn't call my friend because it was a holiday or the Sabbath and according to Jewish tradition and law, she couldn't answer the phone. My friends followed the Hebrew calendar and even celebrated birthdays accordingly, instead of the Gregorian calendar which made it seem to me like they were in this world but not of this world. This started me thinking more about the differences between the two calendars.

About the Calendar

What I'd like to show here is how the ancient Hebrew calendar is like a spiritual calendar that starts at the beginning of the creation of the world and so keeps track of dates through a broad expanse of history. The Gregorian calendar starts only 2000 years ago and wasn't really fully adopted until the 1600s. The ancient calendar is based on the moon – each month starts with the new moon and the year follows the sun and the beginning of the year starts in Airies, the first sign of the zodiac. In fact every month begins or ends in each of the zodiac signs, as contrasted to the modern calendar that follows only the sun and is divided up into 12 months simply to fit into that solar year. So I think of the Hebrew calendar as a calendar that connects us to the Universe and universal bodies as well as a woman's bodily cycles with the moon.

Inform & Transform

Lastly, I want to show how following the ancient calendar can inform our lives. It can show us what we need to look at and focus on within our own minds and hearts. It follows the natural, spiritual energies available to us on a daily, seasonally and yearly basis. The year on this calendar is a cycle that repeats itself generation after generation. Simon Jacobson writes in his book "60 Days",

“As we travel through each year, we revisit the energy of ancient days – energy of freedom, of destruction, of mourning, of forgiveness, of empowerment, of joy. We use that energy to uplift events from our lives that inevitably parallel the lives of those that came before us.”

Parallels our Story

The cycle of the year parallels the story of our own lives, giving us a chance to revisit our personal challenges so we can find deeper and deeper resolution. I will show how this works through telling you about my own story. My desire is to enable you to use the spiritual energies available throughout the year. The energies are there despite your knowledge of them. Once you are aware of these energies, you will be able to apply them consciously and more constructively.

Image of Calendar

I used an image of the calendar (end of paper) that shows the ancient calendar in the form of a circle of months and added in little white squares the events I will talk about today. You can look over this as I tell my own tale so you will know which months I’m referring to.

21 yrs ago

I’ll start with 21 years ago when I had my first experience with the healing that comes from knowing what to do during specific times of the year. The experience occurred about 6 months after my first child was born. If you look on the calendar, you’ll see he was born in the month of Nissan on the 27th day of the month, during the holiday of Passover – which is also a day commemorating the passing of Joshua in 1245 BCE, who is buried in Mt. Ephraim, Israel. In addition, this day is the 11th day of Counting the Omer, Netzach of Gevurah which means it is the day of working on the Endurance of our Discipline (I will explain later the Counting of the Omer).

Reflux Baby

Jason was my reflux baby. 3 weeks into his life, he started screaming and there was no way to console him. The energy that was available on the day he was born, was what I needed in order to mother this baby and was where I had to stretch myself. Endurance in Discipline. This baby needed my attention 24/7 so that I could catch him 20 minutes before every feeding, give him the medicine and then hold him off for 20 minutes before feeding him. One of his medications needed to be refrigerated, so even though I was breast feeding and not bottle feeding, I had to carry around an ice pack wherever I went. Plus, I believed that no one but me could care for him due to all my worries about this timing factor. Unfortunately, I had not fully separated from my mom and so was working on a common theme between daughters their own mothers, namely, working out who is the parent of this baby? My own zealous protection of my little one didn’t give my mother a chance to have the grand parenting that I think she was looking forward to. This created a lot of tension between us and standing up to my mother and not giving her the time she wanted, alone with my baby was again for me an endurance in discipline.

6 month later

6 months after he was born, you will see that the month of the calendar is Tishrei. During this month we have all of our High Holy Days. (This is also the month when I was diagnosed.) We are told that we have 9 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to make amends in our relationships. At that time

in 1994, I took a class through Chabad to learn more about these 9 days. The rabbi was telling us that we need to apologize to others for what we have done the previous year. My friend asked him, “even if we don’t believe we’ve done anything wrong?” He said, “yes”.

Using the energy of the time

So I decided to use this time to write an apology card to my mom. I didn’t think there was anything to apologize for so I wrote: “I apologize for anything that I did this year that made you feel bad.” It was a clean apology where I didn’t admit to doing anything wrong. It was an apology for doing anything to cause her to feel badly. And that card changed the tense dynamic that had been created since my baby was born. I had used the energy that was available during the 9 days to rectify my relationships.

2 New Years

Both holidays, 6 months apart, Passover and Rosh Hashanah, are considered the start of a new year. Just like a business may count one new year and then also have a different fiscal new year, the ancient Hebrew calendar has 2 new years. The month of Nissan, in Airies, when we celebrate Passover, is one of the beginnings of the year. While 6 months later the other new beginning is in the month of Tishrei, in Libra. Rosh Hashanah is the first day of Libra where we celebrate the New Year & have an entire month of holy days, starting with the first 10 days, called the days of Repentance.

First New Year

The first new year in the spring, is the time of new beginnings where we are letting go of the places where we are stuck and imprisoned by our faulty assumptions and destructive behavior. This includes being fixated on the easy way out, the superficial & material life, and addictions. It’s the leaving of Egypt every year that takes us away from areas in our psyche where we are enslaved to things that aren’t important in order to bring us again to our true purpose.

Second New Year

The second new year is in the fall. It’s called, Rosh Hashanah or “head of the year” and it is the anniversary of the creation of mankind. At this time the energy is one of renewing our commitment to the mission of our lives.

3 Weeks

But I always start to feel the preparation for this time 3 months earlier in the month of Tammuz. There is a fast day on the 17th of Tammuz (this year, Saturday, July 4th) commemorating the start of 3 weeks of the year when many different tragedies happened in the spiritual history of the world.

The following is a partial list of the tragedies (from Chabad.org, edited) that befell the Jewish people during the 3 weeks between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av.

1313 BCE– 1. Israelites build the golden calf a mere 40 days after the revelation on Mt. Sinai and so Moses breaks the first set of the 10 Commandments tablets. 2. Israelites are doomed to wander the desert for 40 years due to 10 spies who were sent to scout out the land of Israel and came back with a report that it was too dangerous to conquer.

422 BCE – The walls of Jerusalem are breached by Babylonians who destroyed the First Temple.

70 CE – Jerusalem was conquered by Rome and the 2nd Temple was destroyed. 2.5 million Jews are killed and 1 million are exiled. – Today we are still in the Roman exile.

(Both the first and second Temples were destroyed on the same day – the 9th of Av – the saddest day on the Jewish calendar.)

133 CE – The defeat of Bar Kochba in the revolt against the Romans.

1096 – The Crusades began which led to the murder of ½ the Jews of Europe and all of the Jews in Jerusalem.

1290 – The Jews were expelled from England.

1492 – The Jews were expelled from Spain or they had to convert or die.

1648 – The Chmielnicki Massacre where the Cossacks, led by Bohdan Chmielicki, began a series of campaigns against the Jews. The death toll reached approximately 100,000, and nearly 300 Jewish communities were destroyed.

1914 – World War I starts which brings to earth the beginning of mass murder through poison gas and the first genocide of a people (the Armenians) in 1915. Jay Winter, a Yale historian says,

“...was Hitler or the Nazi regime thinkable, or possible without the First World War? My view is, not. The first war opened the door. The first genocide of the 20th century was the Armenians. Hitler saw it and he did it again.”

1942 – Deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto to the death camp, Treblinka.

A Mourning Period

The 3 Weeks start this year at nightfall on Friday night, 7/4 and continue through the 9th of Av, 7/25, in the signs of Cancer & Leo. These days are treated like a mourning period – we are mourning that the world is not where it needs to be – that we are not where we need to be. There are no weddings, music is not listened to, new clothes are not bought and hair isn't cut. The mourning intensifies during the first 9 days of the month of Av, starting 7/17. There is a tradition of being on guard in the summertime during the entire 3 weeks but especially during the first 9 days of Av. One rabbi told me that during summer camp, they never allow children to go swimming within these 9 days.

My 9 Days story

Some years after I heard that story, it was a morning during the 9 days that I was driving my 2 year old daughter to her preschool summer program and my 6 year old son to his summer camp. On the way, I picked up some coffee because I had a migraine. We came to a stop light where there was a long line of around 10 cars in front of me. I wanted to turn right and could see that there was a passing lane on the right side of the long line of cars so I decided to take it. As I slowly went through the right hand lane, passing car after car, my kids began fighting over a pillow in the back seat, distracting me. When I came to the beginning of the line of cars and started my right-hand turn, I didn't notice that the first car in line at the stoplight was a big truck. It was the kind that took wide right hand turns. As luck would have it, the truck turned right just when I was also turning the corner and my car was totaled and my coffee spilled all over me. Thank G-d, my kids were fine.

From then on I try to remember to never take any risks during the first 9 days of Av. I also plan our summer trips so that we are never traveling during this time.

Fear...

At this point I was to show you a quote from Rebbe Nachman of Breslov who started the Breslover Hasidim. He lived from 1772-1810. He said, “the essence of descent is ascent” (יְרִידָה תְּכִלִּית עֲלִיָּה), which means the descent is not a descent at all, it's a part of going up. Whenever a person rises from one level

to the next, it necessitates that he first has a descent before the ascent. Because the purpose of any descent is always in order to ascend. He also wrote the famous song:

- כל העולם כולו גשר צר מאוד, והעיקר - לא לפחד כלל.
 - *Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od, v'ha'ikar lo lefahed klal.*
 - **All the world is a very narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to fear at all.**

Our Descent to Earth

This is a basic tenet of Kabbalah – that we on this earth to create a dwelling place for G-d. It is our job to descend into this lowest of all worlds to create an ascension that bridges heaven and earth. It's a nasty business we are in where many tragedies happen and many mistakes and falls but that is the plan. And it's always important to look at the dark days as just that – a way to ascend to a higher level. My car was totaled but my husband bought me a new one that was stronger than the old one.

Elul

The next month on the calendar is Elul, in Virgo, which is the month of consolation. The first day of the month was when Moses went back up the mountain to pray for forgiveness for the folly of the golden calf. The month of Elul is a time of taking stock and preparing ourselves for the coming New Year. The energy of this month gives us the ability to do some soul searching. How am I doing? What have I accomplished? What do I still need to work on? Am I repeating old patterns that need to be changed?

Visiting my parents

It was Elul 7 years ago that I went to visit my parents to take care of them while they convalesced – one from knee surgery and one from back surgery. While I was there I came to the realization that this trip was not about helping out my parents – they were doing fine. Instead it was about me getting some time away from my life, relaxing and being able to focus just on myself. While in the shower one day, I felt my left breast and told myself, “you are doing that same old pattern of helping others instead of focusing on yourself. You need to go get that mammogram you’ve been putting off for so long.”

Tishrei & Holy Days

Once I got the mammogram, I was told I needed a biopsy. Later I wrote about my incredible denial and caretaking of everyone but myself on my carepages. I wrote,

“The morning before going in for the biopsy, I met with friends for tea and reassured them that I just had benign fibrocystic lumps. I told the doctor and the nurse the same thing while I was lying on the table having my breast punctured 5 times. I could sense the darkness & fear in the room and knew that they were incredibly concerned that this woman, I, was in danger. I wished I’d brought Geoff with me to hold my hand...”

I got the biopsy a few days after Rosh Hashanah and the results a day before Yom Kippur. I wrote,

“The first few days after diagnosis, I cried pretty non-stop. Not for myself and the horror of the treatment and the possibility of death. Instead, I cried out of guilt, shame, embarrassment, and the sheer responsibility I took on for not getting this taken care of

sooner because had I not waited, my children and my husband, and parents and siblings would not have to go through all this pain over me.

When I went to shul on Yom Kippur, the rabbis asked for my Hebrew name for the mishaberach. (the prayer said for the sick) Being a few days after diagnosis, I was still in such denial that I thought, “am I really sick enough for people saying the mishaberach for me?” Then I started to wonder what the significance was of having a mishaberach on the holiest day of the year.”

Lucky?

Maybe I was lucky to have had this diagnosis at that time. Yom Kippur is the very day when Moses finally got G-d’s forgiveness for the people after the debacle of the golden calf. Elul brought me the spirit of changing my ways – the spirit of tshuvah. Then by the time Yom Kippur came, it was the beginning of my learning to forgive myself for past mistakes. The guilt was tremendous but the healing from that year touched me on a psychological level and would do away with guilt and shame so that I could begin to love and care for myself again.

Sukkot, Libra, Simchas Torah

Just as the rest of the holidays in Tishrei have the energy of taking what you’ve learned on Yom Kippur and bringing it out into the world, my days were consumed with making decisions about my treatment. It wasn’t until after the holidays that I finally got my first round of chemo. Then, it was a week into the trauma of that when I landed in the hospital and stayed there for a week in a stupor of pain meds, unable to talk to anyone, including my kids, wondering if I was going to die.

Cheshvan, Scorpio - Hospital

That year, the month of Cheshvan was extremely challenging for me. This is one of the only months of the year where there are no holidays except for my rebbetzin’s birthday and she came to the hospital at just the right time to pray over my body writhing in pain. Right after she did, my doctor finally came and got me on the right pain meds after 12 hours of agony. This month of Scorpio brought me to my knees. There could be no more denial - I was fighting for my life. It sobered me up real quick and I ended up firing my oncologist for insensitivity and finding another one who would listen to my needs.

Kislev - Mumbai

Immediately after I got out of the hospital, the tragedy of Mumbai hit me hard. The threat of death seemed to surround me and made me even more grateful to Chabad for giving me a way to hang on to life through my spiritual journey. In the darkest days of Kislev when Chanukah shines through in Sagittarius, there is a day called the Rosh Hashanah of Chassidus. It commemorates a day that the founder of Chabad, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), was miraculously freed from imprisonment in czarist Russia in 1798. His release was seen to be a new era in the revelation of the “inner soul” of Torah. Kislev for me that treatment year was full of developing courage to face chemo again and then coming through triumphant with a new oncologist and an entirely new experience with chemo. It was a miracle in a month containing the energy of miracles.

BTW, did you know that Chanukah falls on the 25th of Kislev? Hmmm....makes you wonder where they got the idea to make the 25th of December a holiday....

Shevat, Aquarius, Tu B-Shvat - Shame & self-blame

It was in Shevat, that I began to really face my shame and self-blame. Was I being punished by getting cancer? Did I create this, like the New Age philosophy seems to say. Was it my diet? My anger? So along with the first buds and leaves beginning to show on the trees on Tu B'Shevat, the holiday marking the New Year for the Trees, I was beginning to uncover some love and acceptance of myself. It was in this month of Aquarius that I began to see myself from a brand new perspective and knew that this was the real work I needed to do in order to heal from the inside.

Challenging G-d

I began to focus on what I haven't done yet in this world that I still want to do. My daughter's Bat Mitzvah was coming up and I also looked forward to my practice building. I was in a transition of letting go of the tired, stay-at-home mom. My kids were growing up and I was now working outside of the home. In my mind, I told G-d why I shouldn't die right now and what I can do in the future if I was given more life to live. I made a commitment to make the rest of my life worthy of being saved. I began seeing all of the natural talents I had that made me who I am and solidified in my mind that I should live so that I could contribute to this world and make it a better place.

Adar, Pisces, Purim - Blondie

In the month of Adar, I turned a corner and was starting to come to the end of my chemo. Adar is a month like Kislev in that it has a holiday that celebrates a miracle. It's a happy month where spring is right around the corner. I got free massages, went to a free make-up class, and wore a blond wig – all from the different cancer programs around town! This Pisces month commemorates a time when the world went topsy-turvy and the boundaries blurred. On the 15th, on the full moon of Adar, the very gallows meant for our hero was instead used on our enemy. We're told to get so drunk on the holiday of Purim that we can't see the difference between our hero and our enemy. Children dress up and there's a carnival-like atmosphere during the celebrations. I hear that Purim in Israel is a lot like Halloween here but instead of children getting candy, we give each other gifts of food baskets.

Nissan, Aries, Passover – Slavery to Appearance

Finally the year of my chemo treatment comes to an end in the month of Nissan and Passover. This time remember, is the month that gives us the energy to help us let go of what's keeping us stuck. We leave our self-imposed prisons each year and my prison surrounded my body and appearance. I had to ask myself, who am I, if I couldn't count on my body to define me. The surgery was coming and I had to say goodbye to my breasts and all they meant to me. I wrote goodbye letters, created collages and wrote poems in order to let go of ways of thinking about myself so I could begin a new life at the beginning of a new year in the month of Aries.

Iyar, Taurus, Counting of Omer - Surgery

My surgery was during the counting of the Omer on the 21st day, during the month of Iyar that always falls in Taurus. From Passover to the next holiday of Shavuot we have a 49 day time period where we are searching our souls – each day gives the opportunity to work with the energy of 49 different qualities within our souls. I started this paper with my son's birth during this time of year and the soul cleansing it brought me in my relationship with my mother 6 months later. Now, 15 years later it felt like the part of my body that held my compassion was being completely exposed. My compassion was

being brought up for transformation. I needed my compassion to turn inward now on the very day in the counting of the Omer when the energy is there to help us rectify the part of souls that contains the dignity within our compassion. Plus, the Hebrew name for the month of Iyar, stands for "Ani Hashem Rofecha" – "I am God, your Healer." And lo and behold, my Jewish birthdate is in this month!

Shavuous, Sivan, Gemini – completion

By the holiday of Shavuous, I had come full circle and I would reach another Tammuz where I would be under the fire of radiation. My body forever changed as I would begin the cycle all over again but this time on a deeper level. It has been 7 years since diagnosis this coming Tishrei and I am no longer the same person that I was in 2008. I now valued myself like never before, I knew that I was meant to be alive and to contribute my gifts and talents to this world and to rectify my shortcomings. All that I went through healed not only my body but my entire psyche. In the end I was changed by the circumstances of the tragedy that befell me but came out of it a better person.

I'll end with this quote from the book, 60 days, by Rabbi Jacobson. It represents my own journey and I believe the journey of all of us as we go through the Hebrew calendar, year after year.

"Yes, there is hope. Yes, we can rebuild. Indeed, we can find an even greater love than the original one. Yes, we can marry heaven and earth. And yes, our entire world can unite in one magnificent symphony, each of us contributing our particular melody."

A Hebrew calendar that lets you know what occurred in Jewish history on each day:

<http://www.chabadbythesea.com/calendar/view/month.htm>

To find out which day on the ancient calendar corresponds with a day on the modern calendar, go to

http://www.chabadbythesea.com/calendar/1000year_cdo/aid/6225/jewish/Jewish-Civil-Date-Converter.htm

Calculate which day is your birthday on the ancient calendar:

http://www.chabadbythesea.com/calendar/birthday_cdo/aid/6228/jewish/Jewish-Birthday-Calculator.htm

Audio on 17th of Tammuz:

http://www.chabadbythesea.com/multimedia/media_cdo/aid/297004/jewish/The-17th-of-Tammuz.htm

Good article on 120 Days between 17 of Tammuz and High Holidays

http://www.chabadbythesea.com/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2508/jewish/The-120-Day-Version.htm

Another article on 17th of Tammuz:

http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/703099/jewish/TammuzTime-for-Transformation.htm

Kabbalistic Astrology: <http://livingwisdom.kabbalah.com/astrology>

<http://livingwisdom.kabbalah.com/blogs/karen/category/Astrology>

Secrets of the Stars Revealed – Audio Class: http://www.torahcafe.com/rabbi-ari-sollish/secrets-of-the-stars-revealed-video_e9138f894.html

Passover Audio Classes: "Going Out of Egypt Daily" by Moshe New - it's only a couple of minutes long:

http://www.chabadbythesea.com/multimedia/media_cdo/aid/368439/jewish/Leaving-Egypt-Daily.htm

And if you want a longer one, "Passover Night and Kabbalah" by Shlomo Yaffe - this was so excellent!!!

http://www.chabadbythesea.com/multimedia/media_cdo/aid/486417/jewish/Passover-Night-and-Kabbalah.htm

Prayer for healing: http://www.chabadbythesea.com/library/article_cdo/aid/6419/jewish/Chapter-119.htm

The blog I wrote for 2 years during my treatment and for a year afterward was posted under a pseudonym. You can read it here: <http://birdsstillsing.blogspot.com>

About the Jewish Calendar: <http://www.jewfaq.org/calendar.htm>

Sefer Yetzira on Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/Sefer-Yetzirah-Creation-Aryeh-Kaplan/dp/0877288550/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1405128593&sr=1-1&keywords=sefer+yetzirah

Online Jewish Calendar: <http://www.jewfaq.org/current.shtml>

