

Shalom Ackshav

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23 March 1994, Revised 9 December 2018

Shalom had cancer. What made Shalom unique was the lack of rancor he felt toward his cancer. Cheerfully he would tell us how his body was getting along with his cancer. He patiently and repeatedly explained to us that we evolve only through mutation, and what is cancer but a mutation? He became very excited when he conjectured what this new lump in his abdomen could develop into. Perhaps previous organs had evolved this way. What wonders could be expected? Perhaps a new sensory organ, or some type of yet unknown organ that would make him stronger than he ever was before. As fearsome an enemy as cancer has been, it could be an even greater friend given time.

As a child, Shalom had been forced to witness the losing and painful battle both his grandfather and later his uncle fought with cancer. His grandfather was living with them at the time and his uncle was only a few blocks away. While the family was in turmoil, Shalom had exhibited a calm and distance that was totally unexpected. Even though nowadays Shalom describes his grandfather as having been controlling and manipulative, I remember how seemingly close he had been to the old man before he was diagnosed with cancer.

I, and many of Shalom's friends, never agreed with Shalom when he became such a proponent of his cancer, yet we saw no harm in it. In fact, Shalom was much more fun to go to dinner with than other cancer patients, who in their dull ways were emotionally focused on their battles against their cancers. Despite the fact that they did not have an unseemly lump protruding from their abdomen like Shalom did, they seemed much more battle worn and tired than Shalom. For you see, Shalom had forsaken medical treatment.

When the doctors had first recommended radiation and chemotherapy, Shalom (like most patients) had drawn back in fear. However, Shalom was somewhat unique in his fears. His cancer at that time was comparatively small and localized. Shalom was afraid that the treatment would destroy the cancer completely, thus robbing his body of the chance to coexist and even prosper from this new mutation. Though the doctors often tried to convince him otherwise, he stood firm. Others, he explained, were so filled with hatred for their cancer that coexistence was impossible, but he was a man who chose coexistence (or even, G-d willing, symbiosis) over hatred.

Later, Shalom, in an incident he avoided describing, was expelled from the hospital for spitting at patients who had opted for treatment.

Ironically, without regular medical treatment Shalom's body sided with the doctors. It started generating its own antibodies and poisons to deal with the cancer, and Shalom's cancer was actually in remission for a little while. In marked contrast to Shalom's friendly yet principled disagreement with his doctors, he condemned his own body in the strongest language, and in public too. He felt responsible for his own body and felt that it was killing off the cancer early, long before it was possible to determine if the cancer could be lived with. You see, Shalom had developed an affection for his cancerous protrusion, much as you or I have an affection for our own organs (say our heart or sexual organs). Indeed in listening to Shalom, one learned that he judged most of his organs by how well he thought they would coexist with his cancer.

Shalom stopped eating fiber and started consuming fats. He even started smoking more. He attended conferences on cancer and took notes. No one could accuse Shalom of harboring ill will toward his cancer, yet it was Shalom's greatest fear that the cancer itself would not realize its true friend in the person of Shalom.

Despite Shalom's worries about his cancer, the cancer had indeed started a comeback. Shalom kept it under a heating pad when he slept at night and he fed it a steady diet of hostess cupcakes, dingdongs and cigarette smoke. Despite all the loving care Shalom showered on his cancer, the cancer never seemed to show any appreciation toward Shalom. It caused him great chronic pain, so much so that now it was sometimes difficult to be with Shalom. The cancer had grown so big that it now blocked his colon and he was forced to wear a colostomy bag.

Yet Shalom never blamed the cancer for any of his misery. However, he was very bitter toward his own immune system. It was a source of pride to Shalom that he held his body to higher standards than the cancer. He felt that his immune system had picked a fight with the cancer and had alienated the cancer from any possibility of coexistence with his body. Deep inside Shalom realized that the cancer was acting somewhat unreasonable too, since coexistence was also in the cancer's best interest. If Shalom's immune system died, so would Shalom and the cancer. It was only a matter of getting the cancer to understand where its own self-interest lie. Yet cancers are a proud lot and Shalom's immune system had committed an offense that Shalom seemed unable to undo.

For this Shalom could never forgive his immune system. In fact, this loving man would have spent all his bitterness and anger on his immune system until his death (of cancer) if not for a strange and ugly incident. You see, one of his doctors suggested that Shalom might be a self-hater. With his face red with blood and with spittle forming around his mouth, Shalom tried to explain matters to the doctor, in quite a raised voice. Couldn't even a butcher (that is how Shalom referred to this doctor) see he was a man of love, not hatred? Was not his cancer human too?

Curiously, for the last few torturous weeks of Shalom's life, Shalom seemed to have forgotten about his friend, his cancer. He now seemed resigned to the deadly damage the cancer was working. After all, it had been his immune system and the medical system that had let them (he and his cancer) down. Most of the energy he had left those last few weeks went into publicly condemning the butcher at the medical center who had called him a self-hater. He considered it not only an untruth (would a self-hater mind being called a self-hater?) but an insult to his humanity. He was willing to die for his convictions and he took umbrage at the butcher and the butcher's patients who would live on past his death.

I will always remember Shalom, as a man of intelligence who always savored being more moral than others, whatever the cost.