

My Recovery, with Help from the TBI Community

This American Jewish Life

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By Karen Hansen

This is a tribute to all of you at TBI who have helped in my healing.

I stand here before you, blessed to be here. As you may know, I leave early each Friday night because I get tired early, so this is late for me. But, in reality, we are all blessed to be here as thinking, feeling, and physically functioning human beings. And a very special day, too. Eleven, eleven, eleven. As many of you know I was hit by an SUV while riding my bicycle and it was exactly three years and three days ago, on November 8th. Apparently, I was taken to RiverBend Hospital by an ambulance and didn't see my house or my dog again for six weeks. I say apparently because I don't remember the next three weeks of my life, mostly due to a concussion but also due to a drug they gave me so my brain could slowly heal.

Vic and I were fortunate in the fact that we had just retired after each of us had been teachers for 30 years. Vic tells me that every day at the hospital I would ask him, "Don't I have to write sub plans?" and he would have to answer that question and many other questions day after day because I had lost my short term memory. I even told him daily I wanted to go home since I had enough of the hotel we were staying in. I was lucky because he could spend each day with me, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. I was also lucky because I know now that I would have wanted to go back to work as soon as possible, which would have affected my healing in a negative way. It has taken a long time, but less than three years is a small investment in getting one's health and wellbeing back.

There were many TBI members who came to my and my families' aid. This is truly a supportive and amazing community. We all know that intellectually, but I felt it constantly. I still am in awe of the people who ask me how I am feeling and are genuinely interested in me. People who I hardly knew before and people I have known well for a long time. Everyone continually gives me very warm and wonderful feelings.

Amy Steckel, Monica Ozwoeld, and JoAnn Hoffman set up a system where people could bring dinners to my house for my family while I was in the hospital. Vic had our kids fly home from college for an extra week before Thanksgiving time and they too, benefited from the meals. Rabbi Yitz and Shonna were a tremendous help in getting Vic's bearings back. They are the ones that convinced him to have our kids come home from college early and even had Vic spend the night at their house before our kids arrived because he needed the support. They also visited me many times, although I don't remember any of that. Shonna also helped Vic set up the blog he used to let people know how I was healing on a regular basis.

As an aside I kid my kids in how they got a lot of mileage from my accident. Rachel wrote a play from her experiences when she came home called "Mommy!" It was actually put on at Yale. Seth wrote a poem about when he first heard the news from Vic on the phone and won \$50 when he read it at a poetry slam.

I felt like my recovery was slow, but because I am a runner, doctors told Vic that they were amazed at how fast I was healing. I broke 5 bones, my femur near my hip being the most problematic because it prevented me from walking. My lung collapsed twice because my broken ribs punctured them and I needed a feeding tube for the first two weeks. After three weeks at River Bend I went to an inpatient wing at the old Sacred Heart hospital and had three different kinds of therapy each day. This was great for me, and I enjoyed the

stimulation. Looking back, I know that it took me over a year to totally recover from my concussion. I still had vertigo and was seeing blurry out of my left eye. TBI member Ophthalmologist Rich Hoffman did so much to help me improve my eyesight. I also couldn't remember at times what I wanted when I would walk into a room and people's names, but Vic tells me this is normal for many people without a concussion but it was truly disconcerting to me. My leg bothered me for a very long time and I still get tired and am ready to go to sleep early, because my brain is still working hard to heal. When my speech starts slurring, which hopefully isn't happening right now, or I'm weaving instead of walking it's a sure sign that my brain is pooped and now wants to rest.

There are some TBI members who work at River Bend Hospital. When Vic was there from 8 to 8 every day Temple members Matt Shapiro and Leo Cytrynbaum would visit him when they could and also took Vic out for breakfast or lunch when possible. Saul Wold and David Helfand went on walks with Vic on the paths behind the hospital, and they each helped him get through the initial shock in many ways. Vic called Saul's wife, Sue, at 2:00 in the morning one time because she is a nurse and the hospital had just called him to tell him that my lung had collapsed - again. Sue reassured Vic that he needn't go stumbling into RiverBend then and this could wait until the morning.

I am touched by our synagogue's members' attention to detail. Deborah Kelly visited me as part of Bikur Cholim and Kelly Terwilliger and her son, Eli, made sure our bird feeders continued to have food throughout those weeks. JoAnn Hoffman was the contact person to report back to the school Vic and I retired from, Eastside, to keep them updated on my recovery. Another member came over to mow our lawn and tend to our yard. Alison Erde supplied dinners with many courses, even including the wine. Many snacks and goodies were brought over to our house once I was home. Joanie Siegel brought Sweet Life Brownies and Abby Gershenzon and her daughter, Jesse, brought homemade cookies. And coming back to services here has been such a blessing. I have been embraced by everyone and feel that this is my home away from home. You are truly generous people and open your hearts in time of need for many.

Why am I still here in the physical world? I've asked myself that question many a time. If I had been wiped out and literally off our good earth, I wouldn't even have realized it. A main reason I'm still here, I believe, is that I have had and will keep having some amazing family *simchas*: Rachel graduated from college just six months after my accident and we all went to New Haven for that wonderful experience. Seth also graduated from college, just last May, and that was such a joy. Rachel married Reed September 4th – just two months ago – in a beautiful wedding in D.C. by a rabbi that our Rabbi Yitz recommended. Vic will be part of a B'nai Mitzvah next September. And Vic reminds me that I am here for him and my entire family, who have given me much pleasure and pride in all they do and who they are.

When the opportunity arose to go to Israel with TBI members and Yitz and Shonna in March, I just felt that life is too short to pass up such a life altering experience. I had a wonderful visit to our holy land. The group of 35 from TBI were terrific and we learned from each other as well as from our tour guide, Gila. The history and many layers of civilization in Israel is a wonder to behold and we saw so much of it all. Our days were packed from early morning to evening and wonderful connections were made. It was a truly amazing voyage.

I also learned that every day is a precious gift. Watching the children that I know here grow each day is heart warming, including attending many B'nai Mitzvah like Josh's tomorrow. Seeing groups who don't have much in common coming together for important causes has been motivating. I don't take for granted the ability to be a part of so many of these activities.

The future promises to be full of joy and pleasure as my past and present have been. The small happinesses are just as important as the big. I remind all of you that this is our life and the emotions and deeds we put into

it will reap its rewards. As our very wise Rabbi Yitz has written in a beautiful song, "Teach us to treasure each day."

Let's sing that together now. Please turn to page 175 in your prayer books to sing along.