

“I am not a tragic person but a lucky one”

Adv. Edan Kleiman has spent the better part of his adult life in a wheelchair. Three months ago he found out that the greatest battle of his life lays ahead: Kleiman was told he has one of the most violent types of cancer – now, of all times, when the COVID19 pandemic is making cancer patients more vulnerable than ever before. Despite all of this, he doesn't lose his optimism or his sense of humor for one moment. “A friend asked me: ‘Tell me, what is it that God wants from you?’”

By: Eti Abramov

It was supposed to have been another simple, small analysis, the kind that discovers a UTI (Urinary Tract Infection) or some negligible neurological disorder. At least, that's what Adv. Edan Kleiman thought. After all, what's a little fever that doesn't come down for a person who for the past 27 years has been grappling with a critical injury, which left him paralyzed from the chest down, including two resuscitations, an open-heart massage and four and a half months of rehab?

The work load as Chairman of the Zahal Disabled Veterans Organization, a position Kleiman (46 yrs.) took over a mere six months earlier, didn't leave much time for such negligible things as medical examinations. But reality kept intervening. “I'd end every day's work with a fever and at the end of the week I'd collapse, couldn't function as a Dad”, he recounts. “At some point, my wife Shiri said that I have to get a blood analysis. I didn't take it seriously, and said: I'll hang in there, there are important matters at work, and sometimes one needs to put one's needs on a slow burner. Until finally Shiri said: ‘If you don't take care of yourself, you will make me a widow’.

“On Thursday, at the beginning of January I took the blood tests, and on Friday morning the family doctor phoned very distraught: ‘You have to check yourself into the emergency ward, you have no white corpuscles, and your immune system is very damaged’. We drove to Ichilov Hospital and from that moment a series of tests began which ended on Monday with a bone marrow test. I had already driven home to Hod Hasharon, when half way there I got a phone call to return immediately to Ichilov. I sat at the rehab department when a doctor and an intern entered. They were not connected to Neurology nor to rehabilitation of disabled veterans. The doctor, Dr. Yakir Moshe, says to me: ‘We've done a bone marrow test and there's no need for a second diagnosis. You have very severe Leukemia in your blood, AML and you have to be hospitalized at once’.

Kleiman listened and replied the only way he knows. “I said: ‘It doesn't work that way. I have an organization to run, filled with Zahal Disabled Veterans who need my help with open cases, two fund raising events in Australia, where over a thousand people are waiting for me’. And he



looked at me, smiling, totally cool, and says to me: ‘That's very impressive that I'm telling you that you were diagnosed this morning with having one of the most violent types of cancer in the world, and you're telling me about the troubles and problems of others. So, let me make myself a little clearer – you have a few days or at most, a few weeks to live, if you do not begin chemo therapy now’.

“I looked at him and said” ‘Alright, if you put it that way, I'll clear my schedule’. Later, I thought a lot about this situation, and from conversations with other patients in my condition I understood that we all perceived the situation in the same way, it felt like being kidnapped in broad daylight.

You receive the diagnosis and that's that. You don't leave the hospital, don't go to your car. You are put into isolation and within a few hours you already have a bag of chemo in your hand. There's no saying goodbye to the kids, no clearing your desk at work”.

Not Your Ordinary Patient

Cancer is not the first difficult battle life dealt him. In November 1991, Kleiman went into the IDF serving in the Givati Brigade. His grandfather had been killed during the War of Independence and his father was critically wounded in the Yom Kippur War. Exactly one year later, on one of the mornings of November 92', he received the happy notice that he would be going to Officer's Course. That evening his squad, eight guys in two jeeps, went out on a mission in Khan Yunis.

"We were ambushed by three terrorists", he describes, "And just as I was getting out of the jeep a bullet hit me and threw me back onto the medic who asked me if I was wounded. I replied that I can't breathe nor move my legs. I woke up at Soroka Hospital. I was 19 and two months. Since then I've remained wheelchair bound, paralyzed from the chest down.

"It was here, at the Hematology Department of Ichilov Hospital, that I discovered I wasn't your typical patient. I don't have tantrums which I let out on the staff. When a nurse asked me about my optimism, I replied that almost all of the patients here got slapped across the face for the first time in their lives. However, I at 19 and two months, was told that this condition is for life, compared to what I was told here: 'You have a four-month struggle, if you're successful, you'll get back to what you were'. So, I'm keeping things in perspective. At home we have a lot of humor and *joie de vivre*. I am going through a year which has certain tragic elements to it, but I am not a tragic person, I am a lucky one".

For Kleiman, who has known many hospitalizations and rehabilitations, it is important to thank the staff at the Hematological Department of Ichilov Hospital, who have stood by his side ever since he got word of his condition. Amongst them, aside from Dr. Moshe, who Kleiman jokingly calls, "Rock Star", is Prof. Irit Avivi, the Director of the Department and the Head Nurse Bruria Yachini. They are the ones who are supporting Kleiman during the hours when his wife Shiri, the only one who is currently allowed to see him, is not there. When he and Shiri met two decades ago, she was a teacher by profession, married to someone else and pregnant with Uri, 20 years old today. They met through her husband at the time. Then they lost contact. About ten years ago Kleiman came across her name on Facebook. It was there that he noticed she had changed her status and he contacted her. Nine months later they were married and Daniela was born, 6.5 years old today.

Kleiman recalls his conversation with Daniela as one of the most difficult ones connected with his illness. "We consulted with a social worker who said we have to tell her directly and not beat around the bush. When Shiri told her, she began to cry and asked if Daddy is going to die. It was a sensitive issue for her because my mother had passed away a few months earlier from cancer of the uterus, and we knew that she would make the connection between such terms as cancer and chemo, with death. Shiri said that unlike Grandma, Daddy is young and strong and the doctors say they can cure him, so she connected us on a video call. I saw how this little one, at six, is holding back her tears as soon as she sees me, takes a deep breath and speaks in a very mature way".



I Sleep Intermittently

Since then, while he's at hospital, he and his little daughter carry on conversations electronically, and when he's home, they take precautionary measures, like the ones everyone is taking nowadays throughout the country. Despite that, Kleiman insists that the situation of the people in Israel is more difficult than his own. "On the one hand", he explains, "My condition is more difficult than anyone else's in the country. Because I am isolated in one room, not at home with a garden, hooked up to chemo with a nonexistent immune system, and Corona virus raging outside. My doctor is in panic. He says to me: 'What timing you chose!'

"As it is, it's difficult to attend to hematological patients. They are worse off than people with risk factors and ever since the Corona epidemic, there are no more visitors, and everyone is with masks, robes and gloves, and contact is more efficient because nurses are exceptionally cautious. Your daily schedule is dictated by the types of treatments you are undergoing. At the moment I am in the middle of my second of three series of treatments. In the middle there's chemo and then two weeks of isolation followed by ten days at home. You sleep intermittently, nurses keep coming and going. At night I'm awake at different hours. There are many things I'm not allowed to eat, I'm not allowed to receive anything from the outside, I have infections and side effects from the treatments, but I keep reminding myself that I am in isolation for the purpose of getting well, and can work on the computer. Isolation is much more difficult for the people of Israel because of the economic situation, destruction of businesses, factories and families".

This out of the ordinary, national and personal situation, brings out in Kleiman, a very optimistic person, as well as those around him, a lot of humor. "People laugh now because when I entered into isolation I said: 'If I'm in isolation then the entire country is in isolation'. When they heard I was ill", he gets serious, "people were surprised, and then expressed disappointment and anger. A good friend, a professor, asked: 'Tell me, what is it that God wants from you?' I replied that I don't know but when I get up there, we'll have a serious talk about it", he laughs again, "There's a lot of poking fun about my baldness. People call me 'Kojak', or say I should 'keep the look', or 'don't keep the look'. Personally, it doesn't disturb me. So, I had great hair, which may or may not return. But to watch Daniela grow up and Uri get married, and live alongside my wife for many more years, that's a little more important".

After the initial shock, Kleiman got a very clear directive from them: "You just get well, and we'll get things moving". Accordingly, he has, of course, a funny story. "Every person hospitalized in the Hematology Dept. has to give a list of at least 25 names of potential blood platelet donors, in order to maintain the reserves. So, the head nurse Bruria, asked if I thought I could find some donors. After a few days, Bruria came into the room and asked for the phone calls to please stop coming in, because they had already exceeded 200. When I phoned my assistant, he was almost offended: 'What?! I still have at least 100 on the waiting list....' And that's just by word of mouth. The funny thing is that friends sent me WhatsApp photos of themselves hooked up to the IV, smiling, saying: 'Bro, I'm just down the corridor across from you".

If two months ago his problem was who will take my place traveling to Australia, today the problems are less glamorous and more severe. "Many thousands of people have experienced the unprecedented and historical shutting down of the Beit Halochem centers. A situation which has never occurred since their establishment in 1974. Beit Halochem, the rehabilitation, sports and recreation centers of the highest quality, are not a country club. I get many messages from members who miss not being able to go there. Gladly, once we realized the scope of the pandemic, we contacted NATAL and created a special phone line intended solely for Zahal Disabled Veterans. Many calls are received daily, especially from people suffering from the strains of isolation. It aggravates the condition of those suffering from shell shock. To this end, the ZDVO District Offices, the psychiatrists and social workers are all available on the phone on a daily basis".

