



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

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WELCOME

Daniel Pawlus: Welcome to *30 Good Minutes!* We're glad you've joined us for this half-hour reflection on faith. I'm Daniel Pawlus.

Lydia Talbot: And I'm Lydia Talbot. Our guest today is Paul Cohen, senior rabbi of Temple Jeremiah in Northfield, Illinois. Rabbi Cohen will be talking to us about how to make it through times of deep darkness, when the world seems at an end and we find ourselves feeling all alone.

Daniel Pawlus: We also welcome back Grace Imathiu, with a reflection about things that endure.

Lydia Talbot: And we begin with the story of a woman whose faith has helped her endure the challenges of serious illness and for whom life is a precious gift to be lived to the fullest. This is Martha Foster's spiritual journey.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Martha Foster: I've seen many, many people who have a life threatening illness and then their life becomes about that illness. I'm not willing to do that. I had started teaching at Columbia. The week that I was supposed to start classes I ended up in the hospital with brain surgery for a benign tumor. A couple years later I ended up back in the hospital with a second brain surgery. The most challenging part was that the right side of my face was paralyzed. That was a very important turning point in terms of my faith journey because I started going back to church. I needed help. I needed support. I needed a community.

About a year and a half after the second brain surgery, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I heard that as a death sentence. I received the diagnosis a few days before Christmas when we had the car packed to go visit my family in Champaign and I sort of kept a stiff upper lip for a few days. And then the day after Christmas I just couldn't get out of bed. I was so terrified. And my sister came and sat with me and at that moment I just decided that I would do anything and everything that I could to stay alive. I wanted to see my daughter grow up. So I decided that I would do everything that I possible could and if I lived, that would be wonderful. And if I didn't, well, I would have no regrets. So it was really a life-changing moment for me.

Looking back, I know that Spirit has been present in my life all along. I use the "spirit" because

I'm baffled by God. I've heard the saying that if you're not feeling close to God, it's not God who moved. I had drifted quite a distance from any conscious connection with my religious heritage or with Spirit for many, many years. And I believe that through these illnesses that I experienced, that really woke me up to the need for a relationship with Spirit. I'm grateful every day that I'm alive! And I'm going to do something with what I've got left.

INTRODUCTION

Daniel Pawlus: Martha Foster is founder and Executive Director of Living Earth Television, where her mission is to promote peace and understanding between cultures. For more information, you can visit our web site at 30goodminutes.org. Now, let me tell you about today's speaker.

Paul Cohen is Senior Rabbi of Temple Jeremiah in Northfield, Illinois. Originally from Chicago, he has served synagogues in Arkansas, Ohio, Virginia and Maine. He's had a long interest in interfaith relations and received a Doctor of Ministry degree from the Bangor Theological Seminary, which is associated with the United Church of Christ. We're very happy to welcome Rabbi Paul Cohen to 30 Good Minutes. Welcome, Paul.

MESSAGE

Paul Cohen: Thank you, Daniel. It's a pleasure to be here with you.

How is that we find the strength to endure time of deep darkness? How is that we are able to move forward with our lives when we feel completely lost and alone, when we are devoid of courage, when we feel all hope is lost? Judaism doesn't necessarily provide us with answers to these questions, but more appropriately responses to these questions. For each of us, the response may be different. And so I'd like to begin first with a story that maybe familiar. I think it's told in many different religious contexts, also in secular contexts.

The story is of a man. Let's call him Jacob. Jacob is living in a town where there has been a very heavy rainfall and the rain is continuing to come down at a very rapid rate. The creek that flows through the center of the town has begun to fill and it is threatening to flood the entire town. People are calling to one another to evacuate their homes, to leave their residences, to flee to safety. Jacob has always prided himself on being a very pious individual, one with a complete and perfect faith in God. And so as his friends are gathering around and trying to convince him to leave his home, he says to them, "No, no, no. I'm going to stay right where I am. I am secure in my faith. I know that God will protect me." Well, his friends continue to argue with him and they try to get him to change his mind but he remains unmoved, relying on God and his faith in God to protect him from any danger that might come through these floodwaters.

The waters continue to rise as the rain continues to fall. And soon the water has covered the street and is coming up the steps to his porch. People continue to evacuate the town, although this time they're not walking on foot, they are in boats. And again, a friend comes by in a boat, in a rowboat, and says to Jacob, "Jacob, come, flee with me to safety. This is becoming much too dangerous. You have to come with us. You must protect yourself." Again, Jacob says, "I have perfect faith in God. I know that God is with me, that God will protect me from these floodwaters. I don't need the help of the rowboat. Thank you very much, I don't need your help

either. God is enough for me. I will rely and place my trust and my faith in God.” Well, the friend in the rowboat continues on and helps other people in need and more accepting of his help.

The floodwaters by now are continuing to rise into the first floor. The first floor of Jacob’s house is now filled with water. He has to flee up the steps to the second floor of his house. The water continues to rise. This time the police come by in a motorboat and they plead with Jacob to leave his home. Jacob says, “My faith is in God. Thank you very much for your offer, but God will protect me. I feel safe in the knowledge that God is always a presence in my life. God would not let any harm come to me. I’m a man of complete faith.” The police continue on their way rescuing others who are accepting of their help.

Finally, the water has completely covered the second floor. Jacob is now on the rooftop of his house. A helicopter comes by and calls out to Jacob, “Jacob, the waters are completely covering your house. You’re on the roof. Come to safety. Flee with us to safety. Accept our help and come into the helicopter.” They lower a rope ladder to him. And Jacob at this point still refuses. He says, “I am a man of complete faith. I trust in God. God will help me through this time of danger, through this time of trial. God is with me as a presence in my life. I know that God will not let any harm come to me.”

Well, the waters completely cover Jacob’s house and Jacob is swept away by the waters. Jacob winds up in heaven and he is a little bit upset and confused, and even a little bit angry that his faith in God has not served him, that he did not survive the flood, that his life is now over. He demands to speak with God. And God accepts this request, accepts this demand. Jacob is standing before the throne of glory demanding to know what happened. Why had God abandoned Jacob in his time of need? After all, Jacob had been a very pious, pious person, had lived a life of complete and perfect faith and lived a good life. Why was it that he was abandoned by God? And God said to Jacob, “I was present with at every step along the way. First, I sent your friends. Then I sent the rowboat. Then I sent the motorboat. And finally I sent the helicopter. Jacob, you refused to accept any of this help that was offered to you.” The message of this story is that sometimes in our time of crisis, when we are looking to God for our faith that we must instead look to other people. It’s very clear to Jacob in the end that having faith in God is so important but having faith in human beings and your community and your friends is also very, very important.

This is the lesson that another Jacob learned, this time in chapter 28 of the book of Genesis. Read the story of Jacob and his brother, Esau. Jacob’s life is a struggle from its very inception. He and his brother Esau are engaged in combat. So much so that it caused Rebecca, their mother, tremendous pain and she seeks to understand what is happening to her. And God tells her that there are two nations within her womb and that they will be in struggle with one another. Jacob is born and the family situation does not improve. His mother loves him more than Esau. His father loves Esau more than him, setting up an intense conflict from which he will struggle to recover. He steals his brother’s birthright and then later steals the blessing of the firstborn. By the stealing of firstborn blessing, he is counseled by his mother to flee his home because surely Esau will kill him. So he must abandon his home, abandon his family, abandon all that is familiar and to continue to cope with the guilt that he must feel at having caused so much

devastation within his home, within his own life. He comes to a place that is so completely desolate, so completely devoid of life that he has to use a rock as a pillow.

It is there that he has a dream, a dream in which he sees a ladder going up to heaven and the angels are going up and down the ladder. At the top of the ladder he sees the very face of God. He wakes up from this dream and he understands that God remains present with him, even in such a desolate place. He utters a sentence of complete surprise, “How awesome is this place. Surely God is here and I did not know it.” It’s a transforming experience in a time of a feeling of complete abandonment, of feeling a loss and no hope, completely cut off from his family of origin. It is there when he opens himself up in that desert, in that place of desolation that he able to not only feel the presence of God in his life but also to have this dream that tells him that the angels which are coming from the Earth and going up to heaven, that these angels are sages of blessed memory to council us, are not divine being but are human beings. There are the people that he will encounter in the coming days and weeks that will help him to not only survive and to come through this crisis, but to thrive and to continue to grow. So Jacob in recognition of what has happened to him, he says that he will dedicate one tenth of everything that he acquires, that he will dedicate that to God. And this is really the first mention in the Bible of giving back, of sharing, what in Hebrew is called *tzedakah*, an act of not only charity but an act of righteousness. And so that it’s not just through other people that Jacob will be able to overcome this time of deep darkness, but it is through serving other people, through providing of his own wealth, of his own material goods that he will be able to grow and to return to a sense of wholeness and to return to his home, as well.

Just a few weeks ago I had the opportunity to talk with a family in preparation for a funeral. One of the things they shared with me about this gentleman who has just passed was that he had lived more than fifty years with intense chronic pain. And they couldn’t understand how he was able to endure this pain, how he was able to get up in the morning to go through the day, to continue to live his life with a pain that was so great at times it brought tears to his eyes. And as I listened to them talk about this man and what he meant to them, it became very clear to me how it was that he was able to survive, how he was able to endure. It was through the love of his family. The recognizing that those relationships were so important and that caring for his family, not only just receiving their care but being able to provide for them through his work, being able to love them, being present for them was the best relief for the pain that he continued to endure through his life. At one point, one of his sons asked him how he was able to bear the pain, how it was he was able to keep on with each day. And he said to his son, in referring the son’s mother, his wife, “I’m hanging in because of her.” He was able to endure this tremendous pain in his life because of the love that he felt for not only his wife, not only for his children, but for his grandchildren as well. This was the secret to how he was able to endure.

These are just a few of the responses that come to us through Jewish tradition. We are able to endure times of crisis when we are able to not only look towards God but to look towards God’s creation, to look to our fellow human beings. Sometimes the endurance, the strength that we need to survive a time of deep darkness comes when we are able to look outside of ourselves and to turn to the needs of others. And sometimes it is the love of our family that helps us to endure the chronic pain that is a part of life.

I would like to share with you words that were written by Naomi Levy, words of a prayer that I find to be of tremendous comfort in times of personal crisis. She writes:

Teach me always to believe in my power to return to life, to hope, and to you, my God. No matter what pains I have endured, no matter how far I have strayed from you, give me the strength to resurrect my weary spirit. Revive me, God, and I will embrace life once more in joy, in passion, and in peace. Amen.

CONVERSATION

Lydia Talbot: If you'd like a free printed or audio copy of the message you just heard from Rabbi Paul Cohen, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or download the text anytime. Now let's talk to Rabbi Cohen. What an inspiring message on endurance, Paul! Thank you for that. You are a marathon runner. I know you've done the Chicago Marathon in the past so you know in terms of athletics and sports what endurance is as a test of strength. But I've got to ask you personally, as you think back over your life, what's the most dramatic personal experience that you've had with endurance as a test of your own faith?

Paul Cohen: I think the time I would like to share is the time when my third child was born, my daughter, Anna. It was a very difficult delivery and it was a time of incredible darkness. And I thought that I was going to lose Cathy. Hours and hours in the hospital wondering what was going to happen next and whether I would lose my life partner, whether she would be able to recover or not. I already had tried to play out how would I be able to move on assuming the worst, what would I be able to. In those moments I felt that God was sending me, just like for Jacob, God was sending me little angels, messengers: doctors, nurses, members of my congregation, friends who would come by and not that they gave magic words that helped me to feel better but it was through their presence, through a simple touch on the arm, an embrace, simply sitting with me, gave me the strength to endure that time which was for me a tremendous darkness.

Daniel Pawlus: Paul, you've touched on this idea of endurance through community which I think is a wonderful thing.

Paul Cohen: Yes.

Daniel Pawlus: Often times we think we have to grin and bear it ourselves as individuals. The Jewish people and the Jewish faith are certainly full of endurance. How do you address that on a regular basis with the temple and your faith community up there?

Paul Cohen: Well, I think that a part of the answer is in the question itself, that is when the Jewish community, when a particular community is feeling threatened or in crisis, being able to turn to one another is the way that we are able to derive strength. Knowing that we're not in this alone, that we can turn to one another even as we turn to God. There is a story that I share that is actually at the end, oddly enough, of the wedding ceremony when we break the glass at the end of the ceremony and we're able to talk about the significance of this event. I always connect it back to the breaking of the first set of tablets at Mount Sinai when Moses has been away for

forty days and forty nights and the people feel completely abandoned and alone. They don't feel that Moses is ever going to return. They feel completely abandoned by God. And instead of turning to one another, they turn to the calf of gold. Moses comes down the mountains, sees them dancing and singing around this calf of gold and out of frustration and anger, takes the tablets and throws them to the ground. They shatter into thousands of pieces. And the way I relate this to the wedding is talk about how the breaking of the glass is an echo of that moment because the Israelites from that moment forward understood that they had to dedicate their lives to strengthening the bonds of friendship and love between themselves in order to not only survive crisis but also to enhance moments of joy. And I think that's been the message that we have carried forward through the generations that when we are together, when are united we can survive most anything. We turn to each other and together we turn to God.

Lydia Talbot: I love your emphasis—the reoccurring emphasis through your message and what you've shared now—about the presence of God in the midst of our pain and suffering. Your stories about the two Jacobs remind us that God is not a magician. God cannot prevent disasters or tragedies or death or loss, but God is not absent from them. So when you're talking about illness and in the earlier video that we saw of Martha Foster and struggling with breast cancer and brain cancer and all the rest, what are the words that you tell your flock at Temple Jeremiah when they are facing serious illness?

Paul Cohen: The responses are different base on how people are coming to me, what are the questions that are being asked. Sometimes people ask: "Why is God doing this to me? Why am I suffering? I've been a good person, why do I have cancer now? Why I can't I have a child now? Why is God doing this to me?" I try to help them reframe the question. I don't think that's a helpful question to ask because it pushes God away or it puts blame where blame shouldn't be placed. It blocks the movement forward. And so what I gently try and guide them towards is it's not why is God doing this to you, it's what meaning can I find in what's happening to me. Not "Why is this happening?" but "What am I able to learn? How can I move forward with this?" Sometimes people dedicate their lives after they've survived an illness to helping others. Sometimes it gives them a new strength to face other challenges in their lives. But what I try to do is help them find the right question and also to be pair them up with people who have had a similar experience. Again it's that sense of community: You're not the only person who has struggled in this way or asked these questions. Let me connect you with somebody else and they can help.

Lydia Talbot: So life is gift in every breath we take.

Paul Cohen: Yes.

Daniel Pawlus: We've enjoyed so much spending time with you , Paul. Thank you for being here today.

Paul Cohen: Thank you for having me.

INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

Daniel Pawlus: And now our good friend, Grace Imathiu, pastor of Brown Deer United

Methodist Church in Brown Deer, Wisconsin, has this “final thought” on endurance.

REFLECTION

Grace Imathiu: When I hear the word endurance, I immediately remember my hand-me-down first grade shoes. They were made of tough leather, and depending on the shoe polish available could be either black or brown or a difficult-to-define-color. They were passed on in the family from one generation of first graders to the next and they refused to wear out. Rumor had it; the prophet Moses had worn them as a first grader! These days, we would be hard pressed to find shoes like those. Our consumer lifestyle encourages us to buy what wears out quickly. Be it new shoes, new experiences, new relationships. Could be at the end of the day, the only thing we own that has endured is the faith that has been passed on to us: a faith that Jesus himself, wore as he walked his human journey.

CLOSING REMARKS

Lydia Talbot: Thank you, Grace. And our thanks again to Rabbi Paul Cohen, Martha Foster, and you for joining us today on *30 Good Minutes*. I'm Lydia Talbot.

Daniel Pawlus: And I'm Daniel Pawlus. Before we go, I encourage you again to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today's program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at *30 Good Minutes*, may your faith be strong in the week ahead and may your heart be open to God.