

Keeping to the Path

From a speech at Chabad of Moorpark, CA's, annual "Spa for the Soul," a day of relaxation and inspiration for Jewish women, March 2, 2014



My name is Avery Sax and I just turned thirteen. And believe it or not, I have a large inoperable mass in my brain with over 100 active aneurysms. The doctors told me three years ago that I had a 50% chance of making it past the first year, and *no* chance of making it to the three-year point where I am today. But I don't think you came here to hear me talk about dying, so I'm not going to stand here today and talk about my illness, or the irreversible damage it has done to my family, our finances* and our lifestyle. I just want to talk. I love to talk! And *you* actually volunteered to listen!

Surviving Radiation

When people feel sorry for me or wonder how I can still feel happy and positive, I'm sure people confuse my faith with being a little girl with rose-colored glasses, as if I don't fully understand the reality of my situation. Well, there are no rose-colored glasses when you're fitted with a skin-tight mask and left alone in a room for 30 minutes with your head locked down in place with screws and drills for a series of 10 rounds of brain radiation.

But my roots are strong, and that's what gives me the ability to smile and give my mom a thumbs up. I didn't think twice about holding up the radiation department's tight schedule so that I could say the Shema before they started each session. And you know what? The radiation tech said I was the first person he ever saw praying. I wouldn't be surprised if I was the first person who smiled and hugged the doctors and radiation staff every day of treatment, too!

It feels good to feel good. And it feels good to believe. I even held my book of "Letters of the Rebbe" on my chest every time I was wheeled into the operating room. Yes, there was fear, but always a lot of laughter too.

The best part about my treatment was that I doubled it every day so that I could not only start school on time, the first day of the year, but I could also be finished and come home in time for Shabbat. After the last round of radiation, five days in a row, I came home to close friends and family, Shabbat flowers, fresh challah and lighting the candles (yes, Devorah Leah, I did light on time).

And, even as my hair started falling out that night, I had that warm feeling inside... a reminder of my roots, that place that glows inside and makes it possible for me to be who I am: A Jewish girl, here today, defying the odds.



The Well-Worn Path

As time has passed and I've grown (a lot), no matter how much better I understand my condition – it changes nothing. Many people tell me that I'm inspiring or that this happened to me so that I can share my faith. I don't really think about it. I don't know what my intended path is, but I do my best not to get in the way.

All day long people post all these inspiring quotes and sayings, or tell you to read a bunch of self-development books. I admit that I like a lot of quotations and share some of them too. And I've read some of those books.

But almost always, the most popular saying is something about paving your own way, or taking the path less traveled, or growing alone in the woods... *why*? The well-worn path is worn for a reason. It gets you there!

So I am sticking to this path.

And when I wander, or want to go with the flow with my friends, or do something more fun, or just step away from this path, just because I'm a normal teenager and rebelling and saying "no," or rolling my eyes just to argue with my mom (yes, I'm 13), it just takes Shabbat or a holiday or a call from Devorah Leah about the candle lighting times or an event like today's to keep me on the path.

I want to thank you all for being here with me today, especially Devorah Leah Heidingsfeld and Chabad of Moorpark. This is why I am the way I am. This is what keeps me on the well-worn path. We all have good and bad days. But I don't have to question "why?" My life is simple. I just have to believe, and I just have to do.

It's kind of like a diet. We have to stick with it and sometimes need support groups. Sometimes we even need help with our meals (especially Devorah Leah's cooking)... But really, that is why we are here... to share, to listen, to be with and help each other. We are on the same path.

I may be 13 and terminally ill, my mom has had cancer and had open heart surgery last year and we even moved away from Moorpark, the community I love, and I'm still happy. I have faith that this is my intended path. I don't know where the next step goes, but there is a reason that we are guided to stay on this path. And as I get older, I will continue to take on more and more mitzvos as I'm ready, because it's not a challenge or a burden. It's a gift. And it's not only about the courage to smile during radiation, it's about keeping my roots strong and believing in the value of my faith.

The Magic of Music

How many of you have heard about Alice Herz-Sommer? She died a week ago at the age of 110 – the oldest known Holocaust survivor. When she was 16 years old, she enrolled in the German Music Academy and quickly became one of the city's most famous students. She eventually got married and had a son. But in 1942, the Germans arrested her sick mother and murdered her.

Alice later shared that at that moment, an inner voice told her, "From now on, only you can help yourself." That sparked something inside. Something moved her to learn to play Chopin's 24 etudes – one of the greatest challenges for a pianist. Despite her loneliness, her fear, and her heartbreak, she practiced for hours every day until the Nazis came for her.

So why is Alice important to me? I watched a documentary about her and the story is that music saved her life. In her interviews, she talked about having to play for the Red Cross, when the Nazis would stage shows to demonstrate how "humane" the concentration camps were. Her music helped her stay alive, and



the others lived for her music, too; it was like food to them.

That inner voice that Alice heard when her mother died connected her to the well-worn path, and while she didn't have Shabbos candles or shul or a Spa for the Soul, she had her devotion to music. Her body was weak, but the music sustained her. She said she looked only for the good things and always looked at the world as a place filled with miracles... Her music kept her believing, just like my faith does for me. When Alice was asked if she was afraid of dying, she replied "Not at all." And *neither am I.*

Talking to you today is my beautiful music and my fresh bouquet of long-stemmed roses. I am responsible for my attitude and what I choose to see, and whether I stay on the intended path or get in my own way.

I know that we are all different women... but, like I said before, the path is well-worn for a reason. So walk, run, jump, roll, rest, explore, question, crawl, carry baggage, stop sometimes... but stay on the path!

Staying connected is what keeps me going. My life is faith in action. And no matter what, please remember: Hear O Israel, the L-rd our G-d, the L-rd is One.

One path, One history, One people.

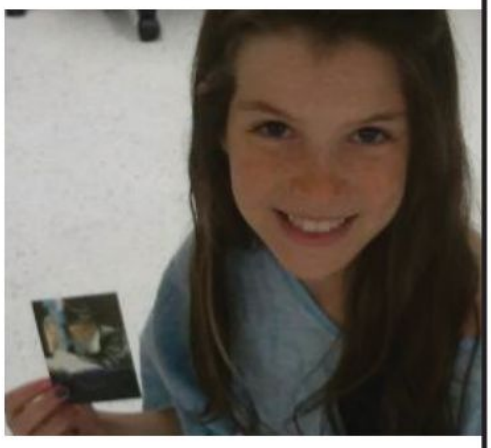
You are one woman. I am one girl, with one brain, with one life, and I have faith in One G-d.

ONE is wonderful.

Thank you.■

**Editor's note: Avery's illness has left the Sax family financially devastated. Her mother, Kimber, has not been able to work consistently for the past three years, and is also struggling with health challenges of her own. They are now living with Avery's uncle in San Diego and need help to cover basic expenses, insurance and transportation. Avery's dream is to move back "home" to Chabad of Moorpark. Chabad is Avery's family. We ask you, the worldwide Chabad community, to please contribute to "The brAvery Fund" via the website, www.JewishMoorpark.com/donate. Please specify "Avery" in the details box. To read more about Avery, visit www.BrAveryNow.Org.*





Opposite: The power of prayer!
Top: Avery Sax speaks at Chabad of Moorpark's "Spa for the Soul" event.
Middle: Mrs. Devorah Leah Heidingsfeld visits Avery.
Bottom: Avery holds a picture of the Rebbe before going for treatment.

L to R: Avery Sax, Mrs. Devorah Leah Heidingsfeld, Avery's mother, Kimber Sax



Their Very Own Shabbos Table

By Devorah Leah Heidingsfeld

During our Spa for the Soul event, we held a mitzvah raffle. Women were asked to take on a mitzvah and submit their names for a raffle for various prizes. Andi and her daughter McKenzie (age 13) were at the event and were thinking about which mitzvah to take on. They considered Shabbos candles, but realized that their Friday schedule was completely packed until 7 p.m., with lots of after-school activities. It would be too hard to commit to lighting candles on time every Friday evening.

Then they heard Avery's powerful talk. They heard about how Shabbos warms her up and brings her peace and all the other beautiful things she said.

Well, not only did they commit to lighting Shabbos candles every week, they also decided to do the full Shabbos dinner every single week. They rescheduled all their activities for different days of the week so they could be home at 4:00 p.m. on Fridays. Together they prepare all the traditional Shabbos foods and turn off phones and TVs.

Andi told me, "It will be the first time we will ever sit at my mom's dining room table."

Andi's mother had passed away five years ago, and her dining room table had ended up in Andi's house, but they had never used it.

But now her Mom's neshamah is shining upon them at her dining room table while they sing Sholom Aleichem, make Kiddush, wash and have challah in their own home!

Andi shared this with me one night as we were making challah together in honor of her commitment.

This is just one of Avery's many accomplishments. I feel humbled and privileged to be considered a friend by Avery and Kimber Sax.



בית MESIVTA OF שלום POSTVILLE

Two of my sons attended the Mesivta of Postville, both benefited enormously. They grew intellectually and in their Yiddishkeit. The atmosphere was warm and heimish. The teachers and administration cared about them, and were always available. My sons still talk fondly of their time in Postville. This yeshiva helps a boy become a mentsch.

Rabbi Dovid Kaufmann, *New Orleans*

"The time preceding a wedding is as precious as time can be, since the preparations that are made then affect one's entire life."
(Igros Kodesh,XIV,p82)

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You will be contacted אי"ה promptly.
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