

My friends, I would like to begin tonight by thanking all of you who have written or emailed or verbally expressed words of support during my mother's illness. To all who planned to ask me after services "How's your Mom," the answer is she is doing amazingly well. Although she still has some serious issues and obviously no one lives forever, my mother has gone from a hospital to a hospice. The hospice discharged her because she was too stable, and she went to a rehab facility, and this coming Wednesday, God willing, she will be discharged from there to go home.

For those who do not know the details, the amazing thing is this: when she went to the hospice, we were told that although she seemed relatively well, she had a severe infection. Although no one knew when it would happen, they said that at some point, in the space of thirty to sixty minutes, that infection would overwhelm her and she would not survive. I never expected her to live to her birthday on May 7, when she turned 83. I was certain she would not see Mother's Day this year. Well, I was next to her on Mother's Day with Arlene and my father and my brother. She was dressed, out of bed and in a wheelchair, watching the Phillies game with us. And I do not mean sitting and looking at in the general direction of the television while the game was on—that's what my father, God bless him, thinks it means to watch baseball. My passion for baseball and the Phillies comes directly from my mother. She watched that game like she was managing the Phillies, and when when of the Phillies thought there were two outs when there was only one and ran himself into a bonehead double play, before the announcers could explain what went wrong, my mother was asking, "What the h-e-double hockey sticks is wrong with him?" My Ma knows her baseball.

Before her discharge was official, I spoke to this wonderful woman who was in charge of my mother's case; a woman who had grown up with my cousin Rabbi

Edward Sandrow as her rabbi, and as an adult attended my childhood Beth El and knew well my beloved Rabbi Kahn, he should rest in peace. When she finished chronicling my mother's improvement and the possibility of discharging her, I had one question: what about this infection that was going to rear its head and take her away in less than an hour? The answer was, "Well, she beat that."

I asked how that was possible? She smiled and said, "You're the rabbi. You tell me."

Of course, I was praying for my mother, and she is on our Mi She'beirach list of the sick for whom we pray for a speedy recovery. Did Mom get better because we prayed for her? That's entirely possible. Some say it has been proven that people for whom prayers are said are more likely to recover than those for whom no prayers are said, even when the people don't know whether anyone is praying for them. I've not seen any proof with my own eyes. But do I believe it is possible that our prayers helped my mother. I go beyond that. I simply believe that they did help my mother.

My problem is that the answer to one question leads to more questions. First of all, no one lives forever. Eventually, everyone for whom we pray will pass on. What, if anything, does that say about God and the power of prayer?

Second, there is a saying that I absolutely hate. If you believe in this saying I can still love *you*, but we feel very differently about this saying: God answers every prayer, and sometimes the answer is no.

I began to truly loathe that saying when a premature baby was born in my former congregation. We all prayed for him, but he only lived five days. The Sunday after his funeral, there was a story in the newspaper called something like “The Miracle of the Lost Shoes.” Some little girl had lost her shoes and was going to miss the school bus, so she and her mother prayed and God answered their prayers and led them to the missing shoes in time.

If that doesn't illustrate why I feel the way I feel, nothing does. If God says yes, I will help you find your shoes, but no, I will not save your baby, then there is a God and that God is at best capricious, more likely evil, and certainly unworthy of love, respect and worship. But what do we do with the reality? We prayed for the baby; they prayed for the shoes. They found the shoes; we lost the baby.

I'm not sure I have ever put it in these terms before, my friends, but given that we are talking about a matter of faith and belief, not a matter of knowledge, it comes down to this: what kind of belief can you live with?

My friend and I used to discuss this all the time. Our views were polar opposites. My friend believed that God was omnipotent, all-powerful, which is the traditional theological view. The problem with that view is that it means that God sometimes chooses to say yes to finding shoes, and no to saving babies. My friend simply could not live with the idea of a God Who was not omnipotent. To his credit, he did not give pat answers to my challenges. He acknowledged the problems with his theology and they troubled him, but he just could not give up the belief that to be God, God must be all-powerful.

Not I. I believe God cannot be God unless God is just. I believe God cannot be God unless God is moral. I believe God cannot be God unless God is ethical. I believe God cannot be God unless God is loving. I believe God cannot be God unless God is merciful. I believe God cannot be God unless God never says no to prayers for a baby's survival. But unlike my friend, I can live with the idea that God can fail, that God's answer to the prayer to save a baby can be "Even I, God, could not save this child." And when that is God's answer, I believe God weeps with us.

Each of us must decide what belief we can live with. There may in fact be a right or wrong, but no one on this planet knows what it is. So we decide for ourselves.

As for my mother, she's going home, thank God, but she still has serious problems. Please keep praying for her. May God continue to be able to respond, "I can help here."

And in conclusion, as I leave to think about whether you like my friend's traditional theology or my less traditional one, I remind you of the verse that tells us—I do not think orders us, but simple tells us—that we will love the Lord our God. I find it a lot easier to love the God I believe in. You might find that you do so as well.