

Chapter Seven

By now we were into the next calendar year, and my father's *yahrtzeit* was coming up. The date fell neatly within the life-expectancy parameters the doctor had so unceremoniously offered to my mother along with her diagnosis. Ever the romantic, my mother thought that maybe she would go on the same day. That idea actually gave her some peace. It would make her exit relatively quick — six weeks or so from the day of the diagnosis — and connect her on yet another level with my father. There was something very neat and orderly about it that appealed to her. From my standpoint, it was still way too soon. I was still scrambling to adjust to a reality that she seemed to be taking in stride. But if it was her time, I, too, liked the idea that my parents would share the same *yahrtzeit*.

The *yahrtzeit* began *leil Shabbos*. We lit the *yahrtzeit* candle and then the Shabbos candles. The little den, where by now we

were having all our meals and spending most of our time, shone with light. I told my mother that, in addition to giving *tzedakah* and saying Kaddish, it was customary to study Mishnah as a source of merit for the soul of the departed. An allusion to this custom is found in the letters of the Hebrew word *משנה*, Mishnah, which — as Arizal and Sh’lah point out — can be rearranged to form the word *נשמה*, *neshamah*, or soul. Although any section of the six orders of Mishnah may be studied for this purpose, there is a widespread tradition to learn chapter 7 of tractate *Mikvaos* because the initial letters of its final four *mishnayos* spell the word *נשמה*, *neshamah* (*The Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Nusach Sefard*, p. 850, according to R’ Yitzchak Isaac of Komarna). My mother was more than happy to do anything that would be a source of merit for my father’s soul, and she listened attentively while I read the Mishnayos to her from the siddur.

I had been reciting this chapter of Mishnah on the *yahrtzeits* of my father and sister during the years I lived in Jerusalem. It was moving for me to now be doing it in Baltimore, in the house where I grew up, with my mother who herself was close to death. I was bringing her full circle back to many of the more Orthodox observances which hadn’t been a part of her adult life. Even though she didn’t understand everything I was reading, she could feel the *kedushah*, the holiness, in the words and the practice. The room had an air of reverence that was palpable to both of us.

When we finished, it was time to recite the prayer that typically follows such studies. I knew this prayer always touched me deeply. I wondered how it was going to affect my mother. I read aloud:

Please, O Hashem, full of mercy, for in Your hand is the soul of

all the living and the spirit of every human being, may You find favor in our Torah study and prayer for the soul of Eliyahu ben Avraham, and do with it according to Your great kindness, to open for it the gates of mercy and kindness and the gates of the Garden of Eden. Accept it with love and affection and send it Your holy and pure angels to lead it and to settle it under the Tree of Life near the souls of the righteous and devout men and women, to enjoy the radiance of Your Presence, to satiate it from Your good that is concealed for the righteous. May the body repose in the grave with proper contentment, pleasure, gladness, and peace, as it is written: "Let him enter in peace, let them rest on their beds — everyone who has lived in his proper way." And it is written: "Let the devout exult in glory, let them sing joyously upon their beds." And it is written: "If you lay down, you will not fear; when you lay down, your sleep will be sweet." And protect him from the tribulations of the grave and from worms and maggots. Forgive and pardon him for all his sins, for there is no man who is so wholly righteous on earth that he does good and never sins. Remember for him the merits and righteous deeds that he performed, and cause a spiritual flow from his soul to keep his bones fresh in the grave from the abundant good that is concealed for the righteous, as it is written: "How abundant is Your goodness that You have concealed for Your reverent ones," and it is written: "He guards all his bones, even one of them was not broken." May it rest secure, alone, and serene, from fear of evil and may it not see the threshold of Gehinnom. May his soul be bound in the Bond of Life. And may it be brought back to life with the Resuscitation of the Dead with all the dead of Your people Israel, with mercy. Amen.

"Amen," my mother said softly. She sat quietly, deep in thought. I didn't want to interrupt her reverie. I could only imagine how it felt to hear those words on the eve of one's own death. Even arranging for the coffin and burial didn't give the

grave reality like this prayer did. And it made the need for Hashem's protection on the other side, for His mercy as the soul continues its journey in the next world, very real. What was my mother thinking about? Was she reflecting on her own life and where she was headed, or was she connecting with my father's *neshamah* which, in that moment, we had been trying to help. I chose to honor her privacy and she chose not to share where she had been. By the time she spoke, she had moved on. We went ahead and made Kiddush and began the Friday-night meal.

My mother was a little surprised to awaken the next morning feeling no different than she had the day before. It looked like she wasn't going to die on my father's *yahrtzeit*, after all. I could tell she was a little disappointed, so I let her know that it was fine by me that she was still here. She had to chuckle. And to concede once again that "*dehr mensch tracht un Gaut lacht* (man thinks and G-d laughs)."

These questions, of when to respect my mother's silence and when to draw her out, or even just name what was happening, were ongoing for me. I wanted to participate in this experience with her as fully as she was willing to let me. At the same time, I didn't want to invade or intrude into places in which she didn't want me to go. Because by nature my mother was such a private person and shared so little of her own inner world, it took some cajoling to get her to open up. Yet when she did, she seemed happy to have done so. Part of the problem was that by nature she was not as introspective as I was. Some of my questions would take her by surprise. "I don't know" she would say, "I never thought about that." Then a day or two later she would sometimes come back to me and say, "I thought about what you asked me," and go on to tell me whatever she had come up with. If it was a question she wasn't interested in

answering, she just wouldn't get back to me on it. Then I had to decide if I wanted to try again or leave it alone.

I was very aware of the short amount of time left in which to ask my mother anything. After a lifetime of almost taking for granted that she was there, time was now running out. Anything I didn't talk about with her now would be left unsaid between us. At the same time, I didn't want these days to be weighed down with heavy conversation. A lot of the pleasure we were having with each other was in lighter moments — reminiscing, sorting through things in the house, looking at photographs, and just chatting.

For years my mother had talked about cleaning out the house, getting rid of lots of things that had been there for decades. Like many people, she had good intentions to take care of that chore herself and not leave it for me. There were all kinds of books, papers, jewelry, shoes, clothing, and other assorted objects that needed going through. In her room alone there were closets and dressers that contained things from forty or fifty years ago. We decided to tackle a few of those drawers together and soon found ourselves transported to another era, when ladies wore gloves, carried handkerchiefs, and covered their hair with kerchiefs that have long disappeared from the scene. It was an era of a certain elegance that suited my mother. We were like a couple of girls playing dress-up as we both donned elbow-length gloves and old costume jewelry. My mother remembered aloud where she had worn these things many long years ago. And it was like we were there.

We were having so much fun. It was hard to remember that she was dying. We seemed to have settled into a routine, a new way of life, and it felt like it would go on indefinitely. Friends continued to ply her with beautiful flower arrangements. The

upstairs den where we spent most of our time was green and blooming. We loved watching the plants blossom, feeling their vitality feed ours. There was so much love in that room that visitors who came to see her went away energized and enlivened. People couldn't get over it. They would come to the house with some trepidation, knowing they were visiting a dear friend who was terminally ill. Their awkwardness, their fears about what to say, even their sadness, would be washed away when they saw my mother dressed and put-together as always, sitting in her favorite yellow chair, reaching out to them with the same smile and dancing eyes they had come to love. She put everyone at ease. She reassured them that she was ready to go when called, that she had lived a long and full life, that everyone has to go sometime. And she continued to show interest in all of them, in whatever was going on their lives at the moment. Nothing was too small or insignificant. She was still there with them in their trials and tribulations.

This matter of getting dressed and fixing herself up every day was no small thing. I marveled at her willingness to invest the time and energy. I often thought that had it been me, I would have opted to stay in bed some days, especially when the pain was really bad. But she had never been one to lollygag in bed. And she had never lounged around the house in bedclothes. She always got dressed in the morning in something neat and presentable and she didn't want to do anything different now. As the days went on and she grew weaker, it became harder for her to dress herself. I became her wardrobe manager, picking out her clothes with her and helping her to put them on. We decided that there was no longer any point in saving anything for a special occasion. She might as well wear the nice things that she had. If not now, when? We did the same with jewelry. We took all the special pieces — most of them gifts from my father — out

of their hiding places around the house and we both wore them. It was time to enjoy all that she had.

Getting dressed made a big difference. So did making the bed. With all the medications, the restricted diet, and medical emergencies, this wasn't going to be a sick house. It was a house where there was still a lot of living and loving and learning happening. Every day was different. Some days the pain was better and other days it was worse. Some days the liquids went down easily and others there was more choking. We had to be inventive, creative, and do whatever we could to tackle the different challenges. The biggest one of all was working with the medications. Because my mother was highly sensitive to any kind of medicine, she tried to avoid it whenever she could. When her blood pressure soared after my sister's death, she tried various blood pressure medications for a few weeks, only to suffer horrendous side effects from all of them. Taking matters into her own hands, she started doing biofeedback and getting Zero Balancing treatments and managed to bring her pressure down without pills. But now she had no choice. The pain from the tumors and from nerve pressure was too great. She needed medicine badly.

The Duragesic patch which the emergency-room nurse had introduced us to was still working well for her, though we had to up the dosage along the way. But that only addressed one aspect of her pain. She needed something else along with it. That meant we were going to have try other pain medications, a prospect that frightened both of us. The problem was, that in order to find out if a particular medicine would work and if she could tolerate it, she would have to take it. Once she took it, she was susceptible to the array of terrible side effects listed in the package insert which, by the time one got through reading them, seemed worse than whatever ache or pain the medication

was intended to help. We talked over the options with the hospice nurse. Nothing sounded great but we had to try something. Each prescription the nurse gave us filled us with trepidation. My mother would take the medicine and then we would wait to see what was going to happen.

One night, when we were trying yet another prescription, her eyes rolled back in her head and she went limp in my arms as I tried to help her into the bathroom. She was out and I had no idea what was happening. I remembered the instructions from hospice to call them and not 911 in case of emergency. Shaking, I dialed the hospice number and asked the operator who answered to get hold of the on-duty nurse immediately. Within a minute I got a call back and the nurse on the line talked me through what to do. She told me she would be there within the half hour and not to try to move her by myself. Together, we got her back to her bed and back to consciousness. She seemed disoriented and didn't remember what had happened. While she rested, I talked to the nurse about other possibilities for pain management and she had a good idea which the day nurse hadn't thought of. It turned out to be the answer to the pain problem for the next period of time. It was remarkable. For the second time, an emergency was the vehicle for getting us the right pain medication. I had to thank Hashem for this gift in disguise.

Within a few hours, my mother was sitting up in bed chatting on the phone with a friend. I was so relieved. When she had collapsed in my arms, I was sure she was dying. Listening to her now talking on the phone was, for me, like witnessing a resurrection. The whole episode was a good gauge for me, as the emergency nurse pointed out when she sensed my fear and distress. "She is dying," she told me. "There's nothing to be afraid of. The body knows how to do this." She reminded me

that I had to get myself prepared, that one of these days an episode like this could well be the end, that there would be no revival. I guess she could see that I was still holding on.

The nurse's words reverberated in my mind all that night. "The body knows how to do this." I hadn't been thinking about death in quite those terms. But it was true. The process that I was witnessing was one that, since the sin of Adam and Chavah, Hashem had made part of the Creation. Death is "natural." Man is supposed to die. The body and soul are supposed to separate. The body is supposed to return to dust and the soul is supposed to go on to the next world. At some point in the future, the two are supposed to be reunited through a resurrection of the dead. Hashem programmed into us the wherewithal to do all of these things — to be born, to live, to die, and to be resurrected. Our bodies and souls know how to navigate through each of these transitions. We really don't need to be afraid.

I remembered a book I had read years before called *Gesher Hachaim: The Bridge of Life*. The author, Rabbi Tucanzinsky wrote: "Emergence from the womb constitutes corporeal birth, while detachment from the body is the birth of the soul. 'The born are to die and the dead to live' (*Avos* 4:22). One is born to die, and dies to live. 'Once a man is born, the countdown begins for him to die; once he dies the countdown to birth begins' " (*Koheles Rabbah* 7:1).

Rosa, the wonderful housekeeper who, since my sister died, came every few weeks to help my mother, said something similar to me the next day, when I told her what had happened the night before. "Ain't none of us come here to stay," she said. "We all got to walk this road sometime." I felt like Hashem was sending me messages, reminding me that what I was

witnessing was nothing more or less than a part of His plan. I could relax into the rightness of it and trust that events would unfold exactly as they needed to for Him to take my mother from this world and usher her soul into the next. I could consider myself the midwife, helping her to allow her body to do what it naturally knew how to do, helping her to birth her soul.

Pain management became more complicated as the days wore on and the pain intensified. My mother was adamant that she wanted her mind to remain clear. Hospice offered her morphine repeatedly, but she always declined. She was determined to stay in control of her faculties for as long as she possibly could. So we had to keep trying different combinations of medicines and different dosages to reduce the pain. One particularly difficult day, I suggested that she try acupuncture as part of her program. Always a little uncomfortable with needles, she initially rejected the idea. I went ahead and got the name of someone good from Diane in case she changed her mind. A week later, I brought it up again and she agreed. By then, she was willing to try anything that might help, anything that might give her relief and still allow her mind to remain clear.

I called Stacey, the acupuncturist Diane had recommended, and she came to the house the next day. She and my mother hit it off instantly, as Stacey patiently explained to her how acupuncture worked and just what she would be doing. Always eager to learn and to have a new experience, my mother listened attentively and finally announced she was ready. Stacey gently inserted a few needles in different parts of her body. Having had so much energy work from me and from Diane, my mother could instantly feel her energy moving in response to the needles. To Stacey's amazement, she tracked perfectly the path

that the energy was taking. By now, she was fascinated and asking lots of questions. Stacey loved it. Here was this eighty-eight year old, terminally ill woman as interested and inquisitive as the best of her acupuncture students. They agreed that she would come once a week and more if needed. By later that day, my mother sensed that the acupuncture had helped. She started to keep a little journal of the date of treatment and the effect it had on her. It was her own little experiment in the efficacy of another form of alternative medicine. If she could have found a way, she wouldn't have used anything else.

But, unfortunately, she still needed the drugs. Anything we used other than the patch had to be in liquid form, which required some coordination with the pharmacy. Doses had to be given at different intervals during the day, depending on the drug. The patch had to be changed every few days. Before long, we started using a second patch on a different place on the body, to increase the dosage and help equalize the distribution. That way one patch would be new and at the height of effectiveness, while the other was starting to wane; it helped us manage the pain better.

It was getting complicated; I could no longer keep straight in my mind what drug was administered when and when a patch needed changing. I started to keep a log, writing the date and time of each dose administered or patch changed. I also included notes if there was a bad reaction to a particular food or breakthrough pain. Keeping a record in this way was helpful on a lot of levels. It not only made it easier to administer all the medications, but it gave a sense of order, a feeling that we were starting to get a handle on this cumbersome routine. Our team, as it were, was functioning well. With G-d's help, we were meeting the challenges being presented to us daily and, strange as it may sound, taking from that a certain sense of

accomplishment. We also felt ourselves working together more and more effortlessly. Some invisible barrier between us was disappearing. We were totally united in intention and purpose and taking pleasure from the flow that created.

I was also starting to hold my mother more. Touch is an integral part of me; it is also an important medium in my work. For my mother it was less so. As warm and caring as she was, her German upbringing had not educated her in the language of touch. Now she was growing more frail by the day. Always small in height and weight, she was becoming really tiny. Her bones, as I helped her bathe, protruded from her chest. I wanted to lend her the solidity and softness of my body as hers grew weaker and more angular. I would climb into her bed behind her and sit her up against my chest. My arms around her, I would encourage her to relax into me. At first it was hard for her to do. She worried that she was too heavy, that she was hurting me. When I assured her that I was fine, that she was light and comfortable for me, she let go a little bit. But she was still holding herself up. She couldn't yet relax enough to give me her full weight, to really rest into me and let me truly hold her. I felt her tension and embraced it. I appreciated how hard it was for a woman who had been holding herself up her entire lifetime to finally let go. I realized that this could well be the first time she was held with absolutely no expectation of anything in return. I had no desire but to give to her; I wasn't looking to her for anything. I only wanted her to be able to feel in the cells of her body that I was there for her, holding her, containing her, making a safe space for her.

I had worked many years to create such a space for myself. I had to learn, in the same way that I help my clients to learn, what it means to hold and contain oneself. I also had to learn how to come fully into my body, to feel myself held in the

container of my own being and by G-d. My mother no longer had years to do this work herself. I wanted to transfer to her vicariously some of what I had come to know. I was patient and loving beyond any capacity I had known before. I simply sat behind her, my arms around her, breathing slowly and deeply, and I felt an enormous love, a love that truly wanted nothing but to give. I stayed there as long as it felt good to her. And then I moved away. Each day I could feel her body releasing a little more. Each day I could feel her trust of the space grow. Each day I could feel more tension drain out of her. Each day I could feel her give me a little more of her weight. Until one day, I felt her finally let go. She relaxed totally and let me hold her without any effort on her part to hold herself. My heart was so full I thought it would burst. What a gift to be able to give my mother such a complete feeling of safety, of being cared for, of being held, loved, appreciated, and respected.

My work with myself over many years had allowed me to honor her defenses — those same defenses that had so frustrated and frightened me long ago. It seemed that once I was able to embrace and honor them, she was able to let them go. I had finally made room for her just as she was, and she, in turn, made room for me. She let herself receive from me, she let me give to her from the depth of my being — something that had previously frightened her. Neither of us spoke any of this out. It was all there in the touch.

Even Rosa noticed a difference. My mother seemed to be softening and opening. Her vulnerability was shimmering beneath her strength, creating a glow around her. One day, a florist delivered a beautiful, huge flower arrangement sent to my mother by Bess, one of her oldest friends. I had run out to the grocery store for a few minutes, knowing that Rosa was there if my mother needed anything. While I was out, the

flowers came. My mother saw them, read the card, and apparently burst into tears — something almost unheard of for her. Rosa, a big, warm, gentle woman herself, instinctively wrapped my tiny mother in her arms and held her as she cried. As she held her, she sang to her an old folk song she had learned as a young girl in the South.

Give me my flowers while I still live

So I can enjoy the beauty they bring.

*Friends and loved ones always give you flowers when
you're sick or on your dying bed.*

*But I'd rather have one tulip right now than a
truckload of roses when I'm gone.*

*Please give me my flowers while I still live, so I can
enjoy the beauty they bring.*

Rosa just kept crooning that song, rocking her gently and letting her cry. It was a perfect response to the moment. By the time I got home, my mother was smiling inside her tears. She told me later what had happened. From her telling I could hear that the whole experience had surprised and deeply touched her. I was so grateful to Rosa for her big heart and her soulful understanding. She had given my mother a gift as beautiful as the flowers.

My mother wasn't the only one being transformed. I also was unrecognizable to myself some days. I had endless patience, boundless love, and enormous energy even when we had to be up four or five times during the night to take care of one problem or another. Usually I need a good night's sleep to function at my peak. But now it seemed that Hashem was giving me extra strength and energy, so that even a few hours of interrupted sleep was enough. I reflected on the intense love I

was feeling and realized I had never known a love this pure before. I really didn't want or need anything for myself. I was so deeply gratified by giving, by enveloping her in my affection. And that it was my mother engendering these feelings in me was also startling. Though our love and commitment to each other never wavered, we hadn't always had the easiest relationship. Our strong wills had come up against each other more than once. Yet somehow, all of the years of struggle had gotten us to this point where we were able — maybe for the first time — to really see and appreciate each other in our own right. I knew this woman from a deep place inside her and inside myself. I had worked long and hard to understand her over the course of my life. When we talked about it, she joked that I probably knew her better than she knew herself. I had certainly given the subject more thought. And now I was reaping the fruits of that lifetime of labor. I was freed up and able to access this deep well of love for her that knew no bounds. The blessing was mine.