

Introduction

G-d gave my mother, Gusti Rosner Millhauser, z"l, and me, her daughter, an assignment. He asked us to walk through the door of cancer into the hall between worlds. And He asked us to wait there. To look head-on at life and what lies beyond. To join hands and solidify what had always been a committed and intense, though at times difficult, relationship. He encouraged us to find and name the strengths that lie buried within us. He gave us boundless resources from which to draw, each of us in our own right. And He gave us the inspiration to describe our experience, to offer it for whatever it is worth to help the many others who will walk into this same hall in the days and years to come.

These are the words I wrote while caring full-time for my mother who was dying. When first diagnosed with esophageal cancer the year before, she was told that she had a few weeks to a few months to live. Never wanting to endure a long,

protracted illness as a prologue to death, my mother took the short prognosis in stride and readied herself to exit this world. Each morning she awoke took her somewhat by surprise, as the days stretched beyond the time allotted to her by the doctor who had pronounced her death sentence. She couldn't quite understand what she was still doing here.

I offered her the spiritual explanation that the soul leaves this world only when it has completed whatever it is that it came into this world to do. If she was still here, there must still be something her soul needed to do. She pondered that for a while but couldn't fathom what it might be that remained unfinished. "I just don't know what it is," she would say to me from time to time with a puzzled look on her face. There was something endearing just in the way she was giving herself over to the question. It was all part of the wonder of this time. The spiritual dimension of existence had slipped into our everyday conversation in a way it never had in the past. That was territory that I had always been more comfortable inhabiting than my mother. Now we were there together.

One day, a few weeks after we had first talked about this idea of completing the work of the soul, I said to her, "Maybe we're supposed to share everything we're learning as we go through this experience. Maybe we should write a book from our two vantage points that will help other people who are facing death or serving as caregivers for loved ones." She thought about that for a time and decided that it was a good idea. She had always wanted to die in her sleep, to avoid a long illness like my father, *z"l*, had suffered many years before. And yet, here she was, terminally ill, and finding the experience powerful, enriching, and meaningful in ways she could never have imagined. Maybe she really did need to share what she was learning before she could leave.

I took a yellow pad and a pen and sat down beside her. Together we began making a list of some of the ideas and events we wanted to talk about in the book. And, I wrote the words of introduction above. We both felt good about this new focus. We had spent months meeting the constant challenges of managing the illness and were in a place where, at least for the moment, things were steady. There was almost a false sense of settling into life again, with the massive changes brought about by the illness absorbed into our routine. That my mother no longer left the house, or even the upstairs floor where her bedroom, the bathroom and a recently improvised dining area were located, seemed almost natural to us. We had made a new life for ourselves in that limited space and we were busy living it. At least for the moment, the shadow of death had receded from its prominent place.

My mother's mind was completely sharp, but she could no longer write or read on her own because of side effects from the pain medication she was taking. We decided that the easiest thing to do would be for me to talk through ideas with her, try writing them up in draft, and then read them back to her to see if my words sufficiently captured her thoughts. That was *our* plan for moving forward.

G-d had a plan of His own. We never had a chance to work on the book again. Instead of moving us deeper into this new version of life we had created, G-d decided to open the gates and move my mother closer to death. Apparently the book had only needed to be conceived by the two of us together for her soul to be freed up to leave. Its birth, if there was to be one, would be my labor alone.

But that was all for another time and place. Our attention now was once again riveted on the physical and the changes

that were happening that heralded the beginning of the end. We moved forward into these last days as we had all the days before, accepting G-d's decree, ready to do whatever the situation demanded of us, and bound by an enormous love that transcended anything we had ever experienced together before. My mother was going home. And I, her sole surviving daughter, was blessed to be able to walk her there.



Years after my mother's death, I finally decided to write this book about the journey of a lifetime — the journey to the door of the Next World that we will all one day take and that many of us will be privileged to participate in as caregivers for those we love.

May it be a source of comfort, guidance, laughter, and inspiration for those who read it. May it speak to mothers and daughters everywhere in whatever stage of life they find themselves. For this is not just a story of caring for a parent in her dying time or grieving after she's gone; it's a story of loving, growing, and reaping the fruits of relationship, of coming to know oneself in the cauldron of challenge, and of seeing oneself in the mirror of life's most primal connection.