



# Walking Mom HOME

**"To everything there is a season,  
and a time to every purpose under  
the Heaven"**

BY MIRIAM MILLHAUSER CASTLE

**M**y mother was dying. We were thinking together about what she would need during her last days and about her funeral. It was almost surrealistic. I ached from anticipation of the loss. And I worried about what horrors might lie in store for us along the way. From that night on, I prayed to G-d to please take her to Him like a mother gathers her baby to her breast. I begged Him to grant her a peaceful passage, to spare her and me the type of trauma that had marked both my father's and sister's deaths in different ways. I felt our fate in His Hands more starkly than I ever had before. He would decide how these days and weeks would unfold, what would happen to my mother, and how she would ultimately be taken from this world. I was totally powerless to influence the events that were to come. I just had to be prepared to do whatever was asked of me by the circumstances. It was that simple — and that hard.

**"... a time to weep and a time to laugh"**

I lay in the bed beside hers that night, feeling deeply the turn in the road we had just taken. We were no

longer digesting the diagnosis, taking tests, or exploring treatment options; we were getting ready for death. I had decided to sleep in the other bed in her room so I would always be by her side if anything happened or she needed anything in the night. I had made that decision the moment the doctor told her she had only a short time to live. I didn't want her to be alone with that reality. I wanted to be with her, to give her whatever I could, to do whatever she needed. She had embarked on a journey and I wanted her to feel me firmly by her side. Our roles had reversed. I was now the one taking care of her, tending to her needs, providing support and comfort. We had come full circle. The torch was about to be passed. But I wasn't sure I was ready to take it.

I listened to the sound of her breath as she slept. She was still alive, still in the world with me. We could still talk and laugh. We could still share memories of my father, my sister, and all sorts of things that had happened in our family over the years. We held these people and events in our hearts. By talking about them we continued to give them reality in a more tangible way

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than one person alone could.

Who would I reminisce with when she was gone? There wasn't anyone else left alive who had these memories. I would be holding them alone. What if I forgot? Would I be able to hold onto a sense of my past without her, or would it fade away with time? I felt like I was

not only about to lose her, but also my one remaining connection with my father and sister. Between us we kept them alive in some way. When she died, they would die for me all over again. The loss that was about to occur felt so enormous. I wondered if my vessel was strong enough to hold all the pain.

As I lay there anticipating what was to come, I realized the futility of my thoughts. There was no way I was going to be able to deal with the totality of this situation all at once. I couldn't come to grips with the loss while she was still here. That was too much

to ask of myself. I had to stay in the moment, to appreciate every second I still had with her. There would be time later, when it was reality, to face the loss. I reminded myself of Yaakov Avinu and his inability to come to terms with the death of Yosef, for the simple reason that Yosef was not dead. He had been separated from his father but he was still alive. Yaakov, of course, didn't know this. He thought his son had died. But his soul, unlike his mind, could not be deceived. And so all his efforts to grieve amounted to naught. He remained inconsolable. I took that as a lesson for myself. I wasn't going to be able to get a head start on the grieving process. As it says, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: ... a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance" (*Koheles* 3:1,4). Now was still the time to laugh and dance, even in the face of the heartache. The weeping and mourning would have to wait.

**"... a time to keep and a time to cast away"**

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 objects, 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.

**"a time to be born and a time to die"**

With all of the sweetness and love that we were experiencing, there was still the reality of this very eviscerating disease. My mother was growing steadily weaker. Each day, it seemed, she was confronted with the loss of some capacity that only the day before she had still taken for granted. It was hard.

... One night, when we were trying yet another prescription [to deal with the



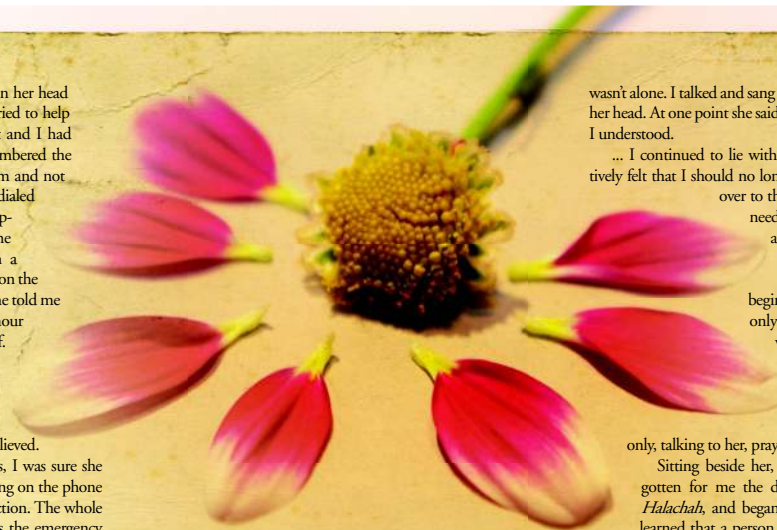
relentless pain], her eyes rolled back in her head and she went limp in my arms as I tried to help her into the bathroom. She was out and I had no idea what was happening. I remembered the instructions from hospice to call them and not 911 in case of emergency. Shaking, I dialed the hospice number and 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.

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 Tucazinsky, 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."



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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.

### "... a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing"

... The house was eerily silent. I was aware of how much life-force we had generated up till then. It had not felt like a house of death, though clearly she was dying. But now it was starting to. Her essence was less palpable. Her sleep was less the sleep of rejuvenation and more the sleep of transition.

... Periodically, she would cry out, "I can't anymore," and always I would tell her that she didn't have to, she could rest, relax, let go, do whatever she needed to do. The amazing thing was how strong, clear, and resonant her yell was. I had never heard such a powerful sound coming from my mother. In a funny sort of way, it impressed me. I decided to lie down with her, to hold her in my arms and give her whatever comfort I could. I saw that something was getting more difficult, that she was going through something more challenging. I wanted her to feel in her cells that she

wasn't alone. I talked and sang to her a little bit and gently stroked her head. At one point she said quietly, "I want to go home." And I understood.

... I continued to lie with her for a time and then, instinctively felt that I should no longer be touching her, and I moved over to the bed beside her. I sensed that she needed the space to ready herself to go and that my continuing to be in physical contact with her was no longer beneficial. It was time to begin the next level of separation. The only thing I continued to do physically was to swab her mouth with water from time to time and administer the morphine at the required intervals. Otherwise my contact with her was verbal only, talking to her, praying, and reciting Psalms.

Sitting beside her, I picked up the book Abby had gotten for me the day before, entitled *Mourning in Halachah*, and began reading the sections on death. I learned that a person in his last hours of life, i.e. in the final process of dying, is termed a *gosses* and that there are halachos on how to deal with a *gosses*. One is not allowed to touch a *gosses* (Rambam, *Hilchos Aveilus* 4:5). The footnote expounded on this prohibition, citing a quote from Tractate *Semachos*, "Whoever touches [the *gosses*] is shedding blood. To what may this be compared? To a sputtering candle. If someone touches it, it immediately goes out."

I was very moved to see my intuitive responses so clearly reflected in the halachah. Halachah is spiritual law; it directs our actions according to the needs of the soul. In this situation, my soul had told me at some point to stop touching my mother. It had alerted me to the fact that my touch at this time would somehow interfere with her dying process.

### "... a time to mourn and a time to dance"

As much as it looked like I was clearing out my mother's house, what I was really doing was the even more challenging task of grieving. I knew that I was at a major turning point in my life — my last parent had just died and I was about to head back into the world alone, without immediate family. I knew from earlier losses that grieving was the bridge from where I was to whatever new life I was about to embark on. I needed to integrate all that I had just been through, to let this deep and profound loss open me to new possibilities. I knew from experience that the pain and heartbreak of loss is not meant to constrict, to diminish us. It's meant to expand and grow us into the next stage of our lives.

As I thought more about it, I realized that in many ways, life is a continual encounter with ending after ending and moving through to the next opening. And that it is the emptiness that follows the ending that carries us to the opening. We don't need to be afraid of the sensations of lack, the unfulfilled longing, the powerlessness to make it otherwise, the uncertainty about what's to come. They are the waves on which we can ride to new places in ourselves and in our lives.

... Learning to let go of what was before in order to fully partake of what's to come is a lifelong process. We are continually asked in a sense to say goodbye — to people, places, things, time, feelings,

dreams, ages, abilities, events. Everything in this world is finite. So by definition, it has to end, we have to let go. And willingness to experience loss is the key to this core movement of life.

The day of my flight, I paid one last visit to the cemetery, to my parents' and sister's graves. I had gone there many times in the months since my mother's death. Once I made the decision to go back to Israel, visits to the cemetery felt even more precious, as I knew that soon they would be out of reach. That last day, I arrived ready to say goodbye and saw instantly that the tombstone that extended across the width of my parents' grave was cracked straight down the middle. The crack hadn't been there before and, for a split second, I thought to myself that my mother must have up and left her side of the grave to come with me to Israel. I almost had to laugh. It was such a bizarre thought. But I wouldn't put it past her. With tears and a heart overflowing with love, I said my goodbyes.

[Not long after my return to Jerusalem,] I received a call from a friend of mine in Shaarei Chesed about a *shidduch* she thought sounded good for me. He's a Rav, she told me, and also an author of *Sifrei Kodesh*. Two weeks later we met. Four weeks later we were engaged. Five weeks after that, the week before Pesach on the exact English calendar date on which my mother had died — April 18 — we were married. The significance of the timing was not lost on us. On the same English date that I had walked my mother home — to her eternal home — Hashem walked me to my rightful earthly home.

Shortly after the wedding, I called one of my mother's close friends, Bobby, to tell her the good news. Then in her early nineties, Bobby was elated and asked me if my new husband had children. "Yes," I answered. "How many?" Bobby asked. I told her the number, *bli ayin hara*. There was a long silence and then she burst out laughing for what seemed to me to be an unusually long time. I couldn't imagine what had gotten into her. When she finally pulled herself together, she said, "I can see your mother, *aleha hashalom*, in front of my eyes as clearly as if she were standing here right now. She would always say, just you wait, she's going to marry a man with exactly that number of children that you just said!" Bobby continued, "She must have said it to me at least a half a dozen times." I was hearing this for the first time. My mother had never said any such thing to me, nothing even close. And these conversations with Bobby had taken place long before she became ill. I was surprised and delighted. My mother had her little streak of clairvoyance after all, though she would admonish me from the time I was a child not to fly off to such places. For all I thought I knew about her and her inner world, there were obviously volumes which I would never know. Somehow, I liked that. There was a sense of mystery, a recognition that every soul is so much bigger than any of us can even imagine. It reminds me in my life today that I am only seeing a fraction of even those people to whom I am closest. They are all — we are all — so much more than meets the eye or even the heart. We are vast, infinite sparks of Hashem. ■

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