

# A hair from a cup of milk

BY CARLA HOWARD

*Raba was sitting before R. Nachman as he lay dying. As he sank close to death, Raba asked R. Nachman to please reappear to him after he died. Rabbi Nachman appeared to him in a dream, and Raba asked him, "Did you suffer pain?" He replied, "As little as in taking a hair from a cup of milk. And if the Holy One, Blessed be He, were to give me the chance to come back to this world I would not, for the dread thereof." (Talmud, Moed Katan 28a)*

**THE HOSPITAL CALLED** me. Could I go visit a young woman with advanced cancer who was in spiritual crisis? When I arrived, I found Nancy, a woman in her mid-forties whose body looked like it should have given up the fight long ago.

She welcomed me, asked about my life, played Jewish geography with me (turns out she'd dated my brother), and thanked me for coming. I asked if I could visit again and she said yes. We saw each other twice a month for three or four months, with no mention of death. I read psalms to her, to try to open a door, but she set the agenda – talk of her cats, her friends, her ex-husband.

One day I arrived when the hospice nurse, Lenore, was changing the dressing on

Nancy's wound. They made light conversation back and forth. I turned to Nancy and said, "Is there anything you'd like to ask Lenore?"

"Yes," Nancy said. "What will it be like at the end?"

She wanted the topography of her last breath charted.

Once the answer came and Nancy was reassured that there would be no struggle, she turned to me to get down to business. She wanted to express her love for her best friend who had been through it all with her.

Through the fog of morphine, Nancy placed two drops of water on her knee. With her finger, she blended the two drops into one. Two drops become one. Was she telling us that she and her friend, who even shared her name, would maintain a bond after death?

To be at the bedside of one who is facing death is to get as close as one can to life itself; it is to watch laboring from one existence to another. The umbilicus that connects and sustains us until we reach our destination is invisible. I was once an apprentice midwife. And now I attend the

dying. To be a witness at both gates of life is the highest of honors – to stand at the edge of what we don't know, with another human being.

Judaism obligates us all to be there for the sick – the mitzvah of *bikur cholim* – and all the more so for one who is dying. According to Jewish law, such a person is "regarded as a living being in respect to all matters in the world." (Semachot I)

This means that regardless of which of their faculties may have already left them, they are there, and so must we be. Why? Because something happens when we are. The Psalmist tells us, "Be still, and know that I am God."

In the profound silence, we find a divine world that we don't know.

Hospice, a word that initially meant hosting a traveler in a way station (as in hostel, hospital and hotel) – a place for those on a pilgrimage to rest – is a way of caring for those at the end of life, to soften the suffering so that it is "as little as taking a hair from a cup of milk." Hospice allows us to manage the pain

and cradle the soul, and revere the silence and mystery of life at its end.

A student of mine who had always wrestled with the existence of God was called to the bedside of his dying father. The nurse and other caregivers had been unable to calm his father's agitation as he moved in and out of consciousness. He mumbled words that no one understood. As the son drew close, his father whispered to him in an unfamiliar voice, "What is *kadosh*? What is *kadosh*?"

The son was stunned at the question from his father, whom he had always considered to be non-religious. He leaned in and replied, "Dad, it means holy. It's the chant the angels sing to God."

Having heard his son's reply, the father's face relaxed and his breathing calmed.

The son believed that he had helped his father to understand his vision and to lose his fear of dying, while the father had opened a doorway to God for his son.

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