

# The Compassionate 'Doula of Death'

» by **Oren Peleg**, Contributing Writer

**BEFORE RABBI CARLA HOWARD CO-** founded Jewish Hospice Care in 2001, no place catered specifically to Jewish families seeking help for end-of-life decisions.

"You'd go into a phone book, you'd look up Trinity or find whatever you could," Howard told the Journal in a phone interview. "But the thing is, we're Jewish, so where do we go for Jewish hospice care?"

Back when Howard was fresh off her ordination and was doing independent spiritual counseling work, she received a call from a young couple in Cedar Sinai Medical Center's neonatal unit who were grappling with taking their newborn off life support.

Howard, who was a midwife at the time, said, "They had nowhere to go. They had no one to walk them through end-of-life counseling; no Jewish spiritual or crisis guidance."

dia and whatever else."

With its end-of-life care, JHCLA emphasizes catering to the family members of hospice patients. Howard invokes Torah to outline what makes JHCLA unique.

"The Torah commands us to provide for our fellow human beings a good death — and that comes from v'ahavta ... love your neighbor as yourself. But a good death? What does that mean? It means treating a death as an entire family experience," she said. "Even though it happens in the body of one person, everyone is affected. The whole family is the unit of care. You have a mini-community that is complicated. Every person brings their own spiritual and psychological piece to it."

Nearly two decades into her mission to bring Jewish end-of-life care to Los Angeles, Howard said she still finds fulfillment and purpose.



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And so, Howard took the Hebrew word for a midwife — *doula* — and applied it to her new role: "Doula of Death." She then co-founded the Jewish Hospice Project, the city's first Jewish end-of-life service. The nonprofit organization rebranded itself in 2005 as the Jewish Hospice and Healing Center of Los Angeles (JHCLA).

Howard, along with a staff of three chaplains, an operations manager and a committed core of volunteers, works out of a Pico-Robertson office providing mobile hospice care to patients all over the city at homes or nursing facilities.

The JHCLA client base includes a broad range of Jews, non-Jews and patients dealing with various crises beyond bereavement, including relationship problems, feelings of social isolation and LGBTQ issues. JHCLA works closely with JQ International, a Jewish LGBTQ-advocacy organization.

"Spiritual care should service anybody in crisis," Howard said. "We work with a lot of young people trying to connect in this world of disconnect, of Tinder, social me-

"It's meaningful work," she said. "That's how I'm sustained. Most people face death with terror. We try to help each patient and their families release in peace."

When Rabbi Michael Berenbaum, a professor of Jewish Studies at American Jewish University, was dealing with the impending death of his mother, he found comfort in JHCLA's care.

"As my beloved and feisty 92-year-old mother was facing the last of her days, I turned to [Howard]," Berenbaum said. "I found her guidance compassionate and wise and also so deeply Jewish. I have referred many other people to her and to the Center, all of whom have reported back on the meaningful nature of their experience."

Howard hopes word continues to spread about JHCLA's communal impact.

"In my opinion, we're the best-kept secret in Los Angeles," she said. "We're a nonprofit so we don't have a huge marketing budget. However, unfortunately, our services never go out of need." ■