

The Souvenirs We Don't Choose

Reflections by Rebbetzin Gail Michalowicz | Simchas Torah 5787

Usually, we choose the souvenirs we bring home. A snow globe from Florida, perhaps (now that's an oxymoron!), or a key chain from Jerusalem. Little reminders of a journey, something to look at later and remember where we have been.

The souvenirs from chemotherapy are a little different. We don't browse through them, choose our favourites, or decide which ones deserve a place in our home. They arrive uninvited.

Losing my hair was one souvenir I could manage. But the second half of my chemotherapy brought something much harder: neuropathy. Numbness, tingling, burning, pain. What began as pins and needles became what felt like spears and knives, travelling from the soles of my feet up to my thighs.

By Shabbos, the pain was overwhelming. Eventually, it brought me to the emergency department with my daughter. A four-hour visit ended with prescriptions for morphine and medication for the neuropathy.

Through the pain, I kept returning to the words of Rabbi Efraim Wachsman's song, playing them over and over in my head:

*"I believe in Hashem, and I trust in Hashem.
There never is a moment when I am alone and I am on my own.
I believe and I trust in Hashem.
And I understand that He is holding my hand,
and every step is perfectly planned.
He is holding me tight, and I'll be all right.
I believe and I trust in Hashem."*

Those words became my refrain, carrying me through the pain.

Learning to Be Cared For

Sitting with my daughter and experiencing her taking care of me felt surreal. She rubbed my back and went to the nurse to ask why everything was taking so long. As it turns out, a four-hour wait in Emerg is considered very reasonable!

I was reminded of a telling poster on the elevator doors at North York General Hospital:

**“In a blink, a lifetime of caring
becomes a time to be cared for.”**

It's not an easy transition.

At about 2:30 in the morning, my daughter and I were driving along Yonge Street, looking for a twenty-four-hour Shoppers Drug Mart so we could fill the prescriptions. Toronto, apparently, was still very much awake. The street was busy, people were everywhere, and finding parking on Yonge seemed unlikely.

My daughter turned to me. “We’re going to have to ask Hashem for a parking spot.”

“Hashem, please help us find a parking spot.”

And there it was: a perfect spot, right on Yonge, directly in front of the door.

Hodu LaHashem ki tov, ki l’olam chasdo. Give thanks to Hashem, for He is good; His kindness endures forever.

It is all under Hashem’s supervision: your chemo, your medications, your parking spot.

We got home after 3:00 a.m., and I was tucked in. Later, I needed to get up. I felt dizzy and hot, and before I knew it, I had passed out on the floor.

As I became aware of what had happened, I also became aware of what had *not* happened. I had fallen, but, Baruch Hashem, nothing was fractured. Not my nose. Not even my pinky. Even there, on the floor, there was something to be grateful for.

I crawled back towards my bed, but getting into it was another matter. My legs felt like rubber. I slept on the floor for four hours before finally making it into bed.

Every Breath, Every Connection

There are more souvenirs from this second phase of chemo. This time, there has been a great deal of shortness of breath. Stairs and walks that I once managed easily now require much more energy. Taking a full breath, something I rarely thought about before, has become something I notice and appreciate.

I find myself thanking Hashem for my neshama, my soul, and for every neshima, every breath. Each breath feels more precious when it no longer comes so easily.

As I continue my treatments, I ask Hashem: “Please let me come home without any unwanted souvenirs. I don’t want a snow globe filled with pins and needles, or swords and knives.” That is my honest prayer. I would gladly leave them all behind.

And if there are souvenirs I must bring home, please help me receive them with love and acceptance.

My father used to say in Yiddish, “It’s oched git.” Those words come back to me now. Sometimes I can hold on to them firmly. Sometimes I have to repeat them gently, giving myself time to reach towards what they mean.

There are moments when my resolve wanes, when I am tired, hurting, or simply wishing this were easier. At those times, I recall what so many of the women I learn with and teach have said to me: “Baruch Hashem, you have all those classes in hashkafah, emunah, and bitachon to lean into.”

The learning gives me words to return to, thoughts to hold on to, and a way to keep turning towards Hashem when I feel overwhelmed. But I also draw strength from the women themselves: their courage, their honesty, their questions, their faith, and the ways they keep going through their own challenges.

I draw on their inspiration and strength, just as we have shared learning together over the years. Now, when I need support, I feel the value of that connection so deeply.

Dancing Together

As Simchas Torah approaches, I think of us dancing together. Some of us will be there in person. Some may join only in our mind's eye. Still, I picture us united, holding one another in our hearts as we rejoice with the Torah that has carried us through so much and continues to propel us forward.

May we approach those moments as an *eis ratzon*, a precious opportunity for prayer.

As we dance, let us ask together for Hashem's healing: for ourselves, for those we love, and for a broken world struggling on its journey through darkness.

Let us ask for clarity where there is confusion, strength where there is exhaustion, and connection to Hashem for all of humanity.

I would never have chosen these souvenirs. I continue to pray that the rest of this journey will be easier.

Yet along the way, I am becoming more aware of other things I want to carry with me: gratitude for a breath, the tenderness of a daughter tucking me in, the strength of women who hold one another up, and my father's words, returning when I need them.

May Hashem help us feel His closeness through every part of the journey.

And may we soon dance together in health, in joy, and in the healing light of Moshiach.