

# Dead, Slightly Dead and More Dead

Category: Holding On

written by Judy Abelove Shemtob | January 31, 2020

When the walls of his failed heart collapse, he suffers a damaging heart attack. He lacks any blood flow, so the EMTs declare him dead. Shocked, he fluctuates between slightly dead and more dead. The ambulance volunteers bring him to Northern Westchester's cath lab.

Unafraid, he sees The Light. He meets Moses carrying tablets down Mt. Sinai, greeting newcomers going up. Relatives weigh his mitzvahs: pro bono work with clients, sick friends, nursing home visits. The judge calls his wife to the witness stand. She says, "He should live." They await the verdict.

He's transported to Presbyterian with a shoved-in stent for weeks of stifling smells under starless skies. Copious notes and Xs mark that month's calendar.

The blinking alarms look like Star Wars. Haw-hoo-wah! Rushing blood flows through lifesaving machines. Schush-schwee-schush. The pale patient drifts in and out.

Broken recliner levers raise his wife's legs, position her beside him. She can't hold his hand—too many attached tubes. He's not allowed to move.

She rushes back to Yorktown and then returns. Their 20-year-old suffers, too—carrying 185 naked pounds outside when his dad's heart stops. She stays late, rises at 4:00—there's little left to spread around.

Doctors discuss progress, next steps. She can't chance missing rounds. "Thursday's quadruple bypass will move up. Less chance for infection."

A staff rabbi recites a familiar healing prayer, Mi Shebeirach, then say, "I'll see you Tuesday."

"I'll do my best, but I'm not sure I'll be here," says the patient.

A dear rabbi they know wishes him a speedy recovery. "I'm sorry," he says.

Seven hours into his surgery, she searches for Jewish funeral homes on the Caregiver's Support Center. The director says, "Not a productive use of your time. All's going well. The surgeon would've alerted us."

She wants their old life back. He grabs his swim jammers and does laps for 60 minutes, while she makes tea and writes on her laptop. That's not happening.

She suctions never-ending red blood from his mouth. Sh-shuh-shee!

This 63-year-old man is alive because of a parade of parents whose children she taught—the EMT's daughter, the cardiothoracic surgeon's godson's brother, the cardiologist's son, who perform jobs above and beyond. How does that line-up occur in the universe?

Ten days postop, she strokes his forehead. "If it weren't for you being here when I wake up each day," he says, "I wouldn't have had the will to live."

"Wouldn't have missed it," she says.

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