

Authenticity Affirmed

Category: Showing Vulnerability

written by Fredda Cohen | September 3, 2019

I was a young, eager chaplain at a community hospital, completing rabbinical school. So eager, in fact, that I misread a referral regarding a patient who actually requested no chaplain visits. When I went to visit her, there was another woman with her. The patient then advised me that she didn't want any chaplain visits.

But she was kind and compassionate, and must have seen that I was a novice. She invited me to sit with her. As I came closer, she said to me: "Rabbi, I can't believe that I have only three weeks to live."

What do you do with that spiritual concern? I dug deep and asked her about her life story. She told me that she and the other woman in her hospital room had been student nurses together fifty years ago. They both married and the other woman had two children. When each of the women divorced, they decided to move in together and be a family. They raised the children together, in the mother's Jewish tradition and her Catholic tradition. They continued working as surgical nurses and rearing the children.

I asked her what touched her about her patients. She told me about the strength that many patients displayed despite dire prognoses. She spoke particularly about one Orthodox Jewish patient who prayed faithfully three times a day. Or, as she put it: "He *davened* three times a day." *Daven* is the Yiddish word for pray, and it touched me that she had this word in her vernacular, clearly having learned it by osmosis from her Jewish family.

At this point in my career, I was very comfortable with my chaplaincy formation, but my rabbinic formation was another story. My struggles with God plagued me. How could I be a rabbi when I continually questioned my faith?

Paralyzed with feelings of inauthenticity, I lost all judgment and professionalism. "I wish I could have that faith," I cried to her.

This is what she said to me: "Do you *daven* every day? Do you eat kosher? Do you go to shul on Shabbos?"

I nodded.

"Then you have faith," she said, "and don't ever talk yourself out of it. Faith is in the doing."

I thanked her for her generosity and her words of wisdom. And I told her: "I will never forget you, and I will tell people about you."

Faith is in the doing.

Fredda Cohen

White Plains, New York