

Chapter 8

A Gift from Beyond the Grave

In early January 2021, there was an outbreak of COVID in the complex medical unit. Although I had had my first COVID vaccination two weeks prior, I caught COVID and was sick, though mercifully not dangerously so, for about two weeks. When I received the positive diagnosis, I contacted some of my colleagues and learned that they, too, had been infected. Several patients and staff on the unit had also contracted the disease. After I recovered, I was ready to go back to work but was told that the unit was in quarantine. It was another month before the unit was released from quarantine and I was permitted to return.

When I returned to the hospital in February 2021 and went down to the unit to work with my group of patients, I was shocked and deeply saddened to learn that three of them had succumbed to COVID. Granted they were old and suffered from background diseases, but because the last time I'd seen them they were relatively healthy, the news of their passing was particularly upsetting. I also noticed that the population of the unit had changed since before the COVID outbreak. The new patients tended to be sicker and less able to participate in group gardening activities around the table. Most were bedridden, and I visited and worked with them individually in their rooms.

Yitzhak was one of the few new patients on the unit who sat in his wheelchair at the table in the common room. Dressed in hospital pajamas (some patients wear their own clothes), he had a slight build, gray hair, sparkling gray-green eyes, and an impish expression. He sometimes slipped sideways in his chair and needed a boost to return to an upright position. I introduced myself and asked if he wanted to smell the herbs I had brought with me on the cart. "Yes," he whispered, with a smile on his face and a glint in his eyes.

He held each sprig under his nose, inhaled deeply, and tried to guess which herb it was. We chatted about how the herbs are used—some for tea, some for seasoning in cooking, some for sachets. "Herbs revive the spirit," he said, grinning. I showed him the flowers on my cart. He took the jar and smelled the flowers. Given his enthusiasm for the flowers, I asked if he would like me to make a small bouquet in a cup, which he could put on the stand next to his bed. He appeared delighted.

Yitzhak welcomed me warmly when he saw me enter the common room the following week with my cart full of plants and flowers. Once again, he smelled herbs and tried to identify them. "Would you make me a bouquet to take back to my room?" he asked shyly. I was delighted to. At the end of the session, he thanked me for the visit with a broad smile.

At our next session, Yitzhak was ready to "work." With

great zest, he filled eight pots with potting soil and meticulously planted a succulent cutting in each pot. Although he protested at first that the watering can was too heavy for him to lift without help, after I initially supported the can, he watered them all himself. I was thrilled to see him work independently and energetically. He seemed stronger than he had during my previous visits. His face expressed his pride at his accomplishment. I had the sense that if there'd been time, he'd have gone on planting as long as the supply of pots, soil, and plants lasted.

On another occasion, he briskly filled six pots with soil, separated cuttings, planted, and watered them without any assistance. "This reminds me of a time when I was asked to help plant trees for the army," he told me.

"Really? Tell me more about that," I replied.

"I was a truck driver for the army, and they needed extra help planting trees at a base in Sde Boker [a kibbutz in the south of the country]." He continued, "They asked all the truck drivers to help." Clearly, this was an event he remembered fondly, and he mentioned it again during subsequent meetings.

One day, I brought Yitzhak wads of cotton from one of the cotton plants in the garden. I showed him that the cotton contained seeds. He massaged the soft cotton balls in his fingers. "I can feel the seeds," he told me. I asked him to remove the seeds from the fluffy cotton. Then, he filled trays of small pots with soil, carefully made a hole in the soil with his finger, and planted a seed in each hole. He meticulously covered the seeds with soil and watered all the pots. I put an orange tag with his name, the date, and the word "cotton" in each tray and took them up to the greenhouse.

A couple of weeks later, Yitzhak was seated at the table but complained that he was in a lot of pain and didn't have his usual energy. Nonetheless, he spent a half hour filling pots and preparing and planting cuttings. I then showed him that all the cotton seeds had sprouted. He was thrilled.

After a few weeks, I again brought the cotton seedlings



down from the greenhouse. It was time to transplant them into larger pots. With great joy and efficiency, Yitzhak filled six large pots with soil. He tenderly removed the delicate plants from their small pots and placed them in the hole he'd made in the soil in each of the larger pots. He added soil to each pot, as needed, and watered them. His face glowed and his eyes twinkled. Yitzhak's spirit and gentleness moved me deeply. I always looked forward to working with him.

The next time I saw Yitzhak, he was in his room in bed. We chatted a bit. Together, we made a small flower arrangement in a cup, which I left next to his bed. Two weeks later, I again found Yitzhak in bed. This time he appeared feeble. We spoke briefly. I gave him herbs to smell. He smiled wanly. While he didn't have the strength to help make a bouquet as we had done the last time, he agreed that I could make one for him to put on his windowsill. He thanked me for my visit. I wished him well.

“Did you hear that Yitzhak died?” Thus a colleague greeted me when I arrived one morning at the rehab center. I was shaken but not surprised. I had last seen Yitzhak the week before when I visited him in his room, hoping to make a small bouquet with him or at least make one for him that I could leave next to his bed. I found him deeply asleep, curled in his bed, his cheeks hollow and his face gray. I sensed the end was near. Poor Yitzhak. He was such a sweet soul.

After hearing the news of Yitzhak’s passing, I went into the small greenhouse on the roof. The first thing that caught my eye was a pot with an orange tag bearing the name Yitzhak, a date, and the word “cotton.” The two stalks in the pot stood tall and straight. They were topped with bright green leaves. Though I never said goodbye to him, I felt as if Yitzhak had left me a farewell gift. I took the plant home with me.



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18-3-1
17-2-1
16-1-1



