

Pulls of Life

A doctor ponders the healing power of faith and family

BY RABIN RAHMANI, M.D.

I am standing under the chupah, the traditional canopy used during Jewish weddings. The violinist is immersed in his music; I'm joined by friends, family, and everyone else I have ever cared about, and more importantly all those who have cared for me. I look around to see their faces, their eyes, and their emotions. I see my father beaming with pride, my mother with a teardrop welling up in her eye, though she tries to conceal it, and my beautiful soon-to-be wife standing beside me. Life simply does not get any better.

And then I see her, my grandmother. If it wasn't for one thing, people might mistake her for my mother; after all, she's only 54. Except, there is one thing. Her hands are shaking, she seems a little sad, and if you look carefully, you'll even see her head trembling a bit. She delicately touches her chin just enough to slow down the tremor. But I know that her shaking is not due to the excitement of her first grandson getting married, and though she may look a little sad, she really could not be any happier. As it turns out, she is not holding her chin to conceal the tremor of her head, but is using a neat little trick called "geste antagoniste" to alleviate, if only a little, those forces of nature which lately seem to always be pulling at her, turning her gaze where she has no intention to look.

The rabbi is now reciting the traditional blessing over wine under the chupah, except my mind is somewhere else. For a moment, I am 6 years old again. I'm picking figs in my grandparents' backyard. Then I hear her, she is close. Suddenly, my feet are in the air, and my figs fall to the ground. She kisses me. And I think to myself: Life simply does not get any better.

But as the rabbi prepares me for the ritual breaking of the glass to symbolize tragedies in Jewish history,

I remember learning as a teenager that she has been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and dystonia. She tells me she can't move like she used to, how her hands shake, that she feels her voice is changing a little. And worst of all, something is pulling, something is always pulling, and it sometimes hurts so badly. I tell her that she'll be OK, and that we'll take her to the best doctors. I feel the pain, though she tries to conceal it. She senses my sadness and tries to act happy. And though she may act happy, I know that she really has never been

sadder. And I think to myself: Life just can't get any worse.

It's now two years since I last saw them at my wedding. I walk quietly into my parents' house. My wife is behind me and she is holding our son Yoel's hand. I see my grandmother in the living room. I yell hello, and she runs, but not to me. Before I know it, Yoel's feet are swept into the air and his Cheerios fall to the ground. I'm not insulted; it is, after all, her first great-grandson. And then I think to myself: Thank G-d for doctors. If you look carefully, her hands are shaking and her face looks a little flat. But I know that she shakes not because of Parkinson's, but because she can't possibly

contain her excitement at meeting my son for the first time. And though her face looks a little sad, it's been a long time since I saw her so happy. Sixteen years to be exact. And then I realize that her face isn't really sad at all. She is trying to concentrate. And then she says out loud, with all of her might, the "Shehechyanu," the traditional Jewish blessing to thank G-d in times of joy, like when you wear a new suit, eat a new fruit, or meet your great-grandson for the very first time. And I think to myself: Life just can't get any better. NN

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Rabin Rahmani with his grandmother, Sarah