



MISHPACHAH II

Lessons From Our Sisters

Conversation Pieces

Laura

When all you want, really, is just a little control

At first I thought it was a persistent cold. And then bronchitis. I would drag myself to work, and would see – either real or imagined – friends and colleagues looking at me, a sad-sack with a psychosomatic illness. I didn’t know what was wrong, but I did know that I was not in control of my body, even having had many doctor visits to no effect.

Months later, a new doctor, who had performed more blood tests, asked me to come to his office. During that call, me being me, I persisted in asking him questions. His response, something about “abnormal blood protein” sent me on a furious dash to Google. Ever in control, I was not going to be surprised by anything. Deep inside, I knew that the word “cancer” would probably appear somewhere in my search, which was in very in short order confirmed by the doctor. But I had already decided that I would not be that person who, when diagnosed, would fall apart. Not me! I would always maintain control. End of discussion.

I continued my research even as the medical professionals took over. And amazingly, I was relieved when I was diagnosed with an extremely rare form of cancer that was making my immune system go haywire. Why the relief?? Because if there was something truly and objectively wrong with me, then I wasn’t crazy and out of control, which was how I had felt when I had all of those respiratory infections.

And this also might sound a little crazy. But when I learned that this particular kind of cancer was relatively common in Ashkenazic Jews, I couldn’t help but laugh a little. In truth, being part of this larger group of “my people” made me feel not so alone. I started to quip that when Jews were expelled or driven out by pogroms, we should have taken more pots and pans instead of helping ourselves to the free diseases. I was afraid that if I didn’t infuse the situation with humor, then people would pity me—and *that* I could not stand. I knew that for me, the only way to maneuver this new journey was through laughter, my last vestige of control. Additionally, if the word cancer did not control me, then it could not imply anything terminal and it would have no power over me.

While in treatment, I had to stop teaching because my immune system could not be compromised. I began to pester the staff in the treatment facility, asking if I could work with some of the other patients on journal-writing or stress management techniques. I realize now that I was desperately missing being in the classroom and was still trying to create a parallel world that would restore me to the pre-illness me by replicating interactions with students and colleagues. The social worker assigned to my case understood this as an aid to my recovery and found some projects for me in the hospital. If I could bring comfort to others, I could find some value in my situation.

Now, having made some peace with my illness (a word I use rarely) I have chosen to call it a “chronic blood issue” over which I have no control. Sometimes just naming it yourself helps. And most importantly, I have been working to re-invent myself as a Type B person. My family laughs at this and says that maybe I should just work on becoming a Type A-minus personality.

I realize now that there is very little in life over which we have control. I have learned that control comes in our own responses to situations that are seemingly insurmountable. And, since my cancer is generally considered an indolent one, until it actually begins to move and then it moves quickly, I do not view myself as being in a terminal situation right now. I know full well that many people with cancer do not have the luxury of time or painlessness, so I feel guilty if I complain about anything. Therefore, for now I have chosen to be an optimist, someone who sees that everything is created for us to love and enjoy, not control.