



AS TOLD TO LEAH GEBBER

It took 89 years for Savta to recognize G-d. In doing so, she created an heirloom I cherish to this day: the legacy of change.

Savta was a child of Viennese bourgeoisie; an opera singer, she worshiped culture, not G-d. "If there's a G-d, I'll meet Him when I go upstairs," she used to say. When my sister and I lived with her for two years after my mother's remarriage, I was repeatedly asked to tuck my Magen David necklace into my shirt, and told that the Shabbos candles would extinguish in an hour or two — what was the point of lighting them?

But at 89, Savta lay in a hospital bed, deathly sick. It was 2 a.m., and she'd indicated that she wanted me by her side. The phone had jangled through my sleep as a nurse summoned me. I pulled on my clothes and drove to the hospital.

I sat beside her and took hold of her hand. "It's okay, Savta," I said. "It's Orit. I'm here with you now."

She nodded, and then raised her voice. "The door's opening. Don't you see it?"

This was not dementia. This was a call to another World.

She quieted down, drifted in and out of consciousness. I sat by her side, at times comforting her, and at times reciting Tehillim. The first rays of sunrise filtered through the gray sky and she stirred. "You can go, now," she said, tipping her face toward me. "Thank you so much for coming." She paused. It was clear she'd been through a harrowing night, had felt close to death, and my being there had banished the horror and fear. "How can I ever repay you?"

"There is something you can do for me, Savta. There's a prayer you might remember from when you were a child: the Shema. Say it every night before you go to sleep."

I thought she'd kick me out of the hospital room. She didn't. "I don't remember all the words. Could you say it with me?" she asked.

"*Shema Yisrael...*"

I said the words aloud and she repeated them and promised to say Shema every night. The next time she was in the hospital, Savta ordered kosher food. We talked. "Do you know how much Hashem loves you?" I asked. "He's been waiting 89 years for you to acknowledge Him."

Shema Yisrael were Savta's very last words.

So Sava taught me that everyone and anyone can change. Hashem lovingly opens the door and waits, sometimes for decades, sometimes for a lifetime, until we're ready and willing to pass through.

Although I grew up in Brooklyn, I was serving in the Israeli army when my husband and I married. In Avraham, I found the stability and warmth I'd craved since childhood; growing up in a single-parent family, life was tense and money was tight. Spiritual yearnings were not a top priority, although I undertook to light Shabbos candles before the weekly cheeseburger at a take-out place.

Savta had tried to instill us girls with her own ambitions for scholastic achievement, but I knew early on that I wanted to work with my hands. When we were married only a few months, Avraham and I moved to America so I could earn my chef's degree. By the time I graduated, the arrival of our eldest daughter Shani had

transformed us into a family. It was no longer so simple to up and return to Israel. We stayed.

I set up an off-site catering company, Kosher Designers, in the tristate area, and threw my heart and considerable energy into event planning. I thrived on the constant buzz: trucks arriving, packing up the food, the excitement of the party. I designed themes, colors, flower arrangements, and the general pizzazz — that creative spark that makes for an unforgettable evening. My work was featured in the media and the taste of success was more tantalizing than any dish I could whip up in my chrome-plated kitchen.

Although I had some level of kosher supervision, I decided that I would like to expand my clientele and go for broke: *mehadrin*. *Mehadrin* meant surrendering my kitchen keys to the *mashgiach*, which for me was a huge psychological step. It also meant having a *mashgiach* on-site, constantly, supervising every delivery, looking over my shoulder as I prepared each dish. For convenience's sake, I hired two *frum* women to assist me with the grunt work, and we were ready to roll.

Working day in day out with *frum* people made a deep impression on me, and my natural inquisitiveness had an outlet. If there was a question that my assistants couldn't answer, the *mashgiach* was always happy to do so. I asked about everything, from the philosophy of kosher to those oddities called *mechitzahs*. As I chopped a hundred pounds of potatoes or prepared gallons of strawberry coulis, my mind was mostly free to talk and ponder. Slowly, I was pulled to Yiddishkeit.

My husband saw this change and resisted. "Let's make Kiddush this Friday night," I'd ask him. He agreed, but that was as far as he'd go. I felt torn. One Friday night, we were invited to eat dinner at a couple who was religious. As we returned home in the car, I suddenly began to cry. "I shouldn't be doing this," I said. "We're defiling the day's sanctity."

Although Avraham had stuck with me through some very difficult and tumultuous times, he wasn't interested in



Judaism. "You weren't religious when we got married; I don't want you turning religious on me now," he said.

Desperate, I turned to an old, mystical *segulah* I had once heard of: For 18 days, I lit a candle in the merit of Rabi Meir Baal Hanes and gave *tzedakah*. Each day, I prayed that Hashem soften my husband's heart and open him up to *teshuvah*.

The 18th day fell on Shabbos. I had asked a couple of men in the neighborhood to knock on the door and invite Avraham to join them at a minyan. When they came over, Avraham was sitting in the den, watching television. I have no idea how, but they convinced him to join them. In shul, they called Avraham up for an *aliyah*. He went up to the *bimah* and kissed the *Sefer Torah*. As he did, fire jolted through him. This was the defining moment of his return.

The very next Shabbos we celebrated in *kedushah*. I put a manager in charge of Shabbos catering events, which was a tremendous challenge for me. It was a huge *nisayon* to let go of my job for an entire day. But I knew it was what I needed to do.

I used my considerable energy to forge ahead in our Jewish growth. We pulled our

children out of public school and pushed into fifth gear — educating ourselves; taking on new mitzvos; making new, religious friends.

When our eldest was ready to start high school, we were ready for Bais Yaakov. Our neighborhood in New Jersey was Modern Orthodox, and so we applied to the Bais Yaakov in Passaic. The principal told us that it was primarily a neighborhood school, and encouraged us to apply to Bais Yaakov of Monsey. Shani was accepted there, and then we were faced with a new dilemma: stay in our wonderful community in New Jersey, or make the huge move to Monsey.

We moved to Monsey, and despite my misgivings about relocating to such a *frum* community, Shani adored high school and our sons Netanel, Binyamin, and Dovid felt right at home. Our religious standards increased, and we became more careful about where and to whom we catered, moving into catering for schools. Still, finances got tighter.

By this time, I was expecting my fifth. Three months into the pregnancy, my hand became numb. That frozen sensation then moved into my arm, and spread so that one side of my body felt lifeless. At first, I put it

down to a pregnancy quirk; my doctor, however, didn't agree. He sent me to the hospital for an MRI scan.

I suffer from claustrophobia, and entering the MRI machine was terrifying. The only thing that stopped me from screaming was the *pasuk* in Tehillim I whispered over and over: "I shall not fear for You are with me."

The results came fast. "It's not a stroke," the neurologist told me. I breathed again. "But there are lesions on the brain, compatible with a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis."

Multiple sclerosis? The only thing I knew about MS was the 20-mile marathons that raised money for MS research. I looked at him, unseeing.

"But MS is not formally diagnosed until after two episodes," the neurologist continued. Ah, so I didn't have MS. I pushed all the new information to the back of my mind, and as soon as I felt my mobility returning, plunged back into life: catering, mothering, pregnancy.

On Chai Kislev, Chaya Rivka was born, and we were ecstatic. Three months later, I had another episode of MS: My body froze, the sensation of anesthesia rushed through my limbs. After more testing and consultations, I received a definitive diagnosis.

I took it surprisingly well. Hashem had planted the idea months before and allowed me time to chew over the diagnosis, research the condition, and accept it on some level. The doctors assured me that, with regular injections of a drug that impedes the development of the disease, I had years of

mobility and quality of life ahead. It all sounded manageable, but there was one caveat: The drug was not proven to be compatible with pregnancy. I could have no more children.

That was devastating news, and I mourned for the children I wouldn't be *zocheh* to carry. Out of my grief, however, came a resolution: that if one day I was asked to adopt or foster someone else's child, I would do so. Amazingly, not long later, we received a phone call asking us to take in a teenage girl from Israel, who was struggling with the Israeli system. I made up the guest room, drove to the airport with a little sign to wave at all the passengers, and soon enough, Michal became part of the family.

Michal settled down fast, and it was a pleasure to watch her acclimate to our easygoing family life. This was one of the subjects my husband and I discussed when, a couple months after her arrival, we snatched an evening for ourselves and went out for a meal. For the first time in ages, I allowed myself to relax, and together, we talked over the many changes we had experienced in the last few months. There was also the issue of finances: since the move, our profit margin had dropped, and the situation, although not dire, wasn't healthy.

We were paying for the meal when my cell phone jangled. One of the kids was on the line, screaming. I couldn't even identify the voice. I dropped my credit card at the front desk, told them to take care of it, and we jumped into the car and sped home.

We pulled up outside the house. The children ran over and thrust Chaya Rivka into my arms. She was blue.

Avraham called Hatzolah and Michal lay Chaya Rivka on the ground and performed CPR. She worked and worked until Hatzolah arrived and took over. I didn't understand what happened, just that somehow, Chaya Rivka had fallen into a full bathtub. Michal, the girl I was supposed to be doing the *chesed* for, was instrumental in saving my daughter's life.

I still bless my presence of mind — or the *seyata d'Shmaya* — that pushed me to look around, as we climbed into the ambulance, and tell the children, "It wasn't you. None of this was your fault, Hashem wanted this to happen."

The ambulance doors slammed closed and I wailed: "Hashem, save her! Save her!" It was one of those times when you know how to pray. Your whole body screams out for mercy; every cell, every pore in your body quivers with fear and is subsumed into one terrible cry.

At the hospital, Chaya Rivka was medically induced into a coma and preparations were made to fly us in a medical ambulance to the specialist unit in Westchester Medical Center. I was traumatized, terrified, scared of heights, and claustrophobic. And yet, as the helicopter lifted off the ground, one thought came to me: "Hashem, You're lifting me up toward You. I'm in Your Hands." That helicopter ride, my baby comatose beside me, should have been one of the worst

WHO AM I, HASHEM? IYOV? MY LIVELIHOOD, MY CHILD, MY HEALTH — ALL WERE BEING TUGGED AWAY FROM ME

experiences of my life. Instead, Hashem gifted me with a profound feeling of His presence and a serenity that I drew upon in the difficult days ahead.

In the Westchester Medical Center tests confirmed that Chaya Rivka had been without oxygen for over five minutes. The prognosis was grim. “She’s probably hemorrhaging,” the doctors told us. “She won’t be the same child.” They condemned her to life as a vegetable, but we refused to accept their words. Chaya Rivka was born on the 18th of Kislev, the *gematria* of Chai, life, and some *binah yeseivah* had caused us to give her the name Chaya. How dare the doctors condemn her to a life un-lived?

I geared up into spiritual *hishtadlus* mode. We spread her name, until thousands of people — including whole schools of *tinokos shel beis rabban* — davened. I spoke to Hashem constantly. I sat by Chaya Rivka’s side, and talked, wept, pleaded, explained, and simply cried.

After 24 hours, the doctors began easing Chaya Rivka out of her coma. She swam through the blackness back to the world. I was the first face she saw when she opened her eyes and I saw the spark of recognition. She knew me. I rejoiced.

Miraculously, Chaya Rivka developed normally, beautifully, as if nothing untoward had ever happened. Avraham and I, meanwhile, felt uplifted by the ordeal. We’d been so close to losing her, but we had her back — along with the gifts of humility, awareness of Hashem, and our utter dependence upon Him.

Soon after, my legs began to tingle. I dismissed the pain as an effect of my trauma. My legs began to spasm, and severe sharp pain flashed through me like a knife. I was dizzy, off-balance, and knew something was wrong. There was; the MS was back. The attack was so severe that I had to be hospitalized. I lay

in my hospital bed, processing everything we had been through: I had almost lost my daughter, and my body had declared war upon itself, ravaging my central nervous system. I was in a *nisayon*. Hashem was testing me, hiding His Face. I strengthened myself with my usual determination: *I won’t let go of Your love, Hashem. I know that You’re right here, beside me, and I just have to reach out to You. This is just another challenge on the road toward You.*

Besides, I comforted myself, this is as bad as it gets. Nothing else could happen now, right?

Wrong. An electrical fault sparked a fire in the building that housed my catering kitchen. The kitchen was gutted, everything destroyed. Just two weeks before, the insurance policy had expired.

When I heard the news, I fell back on my pillow, shocked. *Who am I, Hashem? Iyov?* My livelihood, my child, my health — all were being tugged away from me. I was so close to being broken. So close.

As soon as my health was stabilized, Avraham and I flew to Eretz Yisrael, to visit the *gedolim* and ask for *brachos*. We needed guidance from outside ourselves, we needed to know if and how we were going wrong, and if Hashem expected us to put our lives on a different track. The answer we received was uniform, no matter whom we approached: Move to Eretz Yisrael.

It wasn’t the advice we’d anticipated. Avraham was born and bred in Israel, and I’d spent my high school years there, but ... we were so settled in Monsey. We loved the community, the schools, the lifestyle. It was a hard decision, but I felt pushed toward it — I felt like our family had been through enough, and that somehow, moving to Eretz Yisrael would protect us. Also, our eldest daughter Shani had just finished high school. “She’ll get married and move to Eretz

Yisrael,” I told Avraham. “If we move, then we’ll wind up living close to her.”

Summer approached. We wound up our business affairs, packed cartons and suitcases, and set off at the age of 40 to start a new life across the ocean.

We started a new catering business, working together frenetically to establish ourselves and achieve a steady income. The harder I worked, the worse the relapses became. It was a hard time for me. By nature I’m a doer, runner, mover, shaker. Now, although my manpower and skills were desperately needed, I was confined to home. It was a reality that was very difficult for me to accept, and at times my spirits plunged.

Slowly, I realized that Hashem no longer wants me to run. He wants me at home, calm, working on serenity, and trying to build a sanctuary for Him. MS, I realized, was destined to bring me the *emes* of my life, my *tafkid*, my goals. With this in mind, I began delving into seforim that deal with *emunah*, and sending daily e-mails to my family and friends. I call it the daily dose of *emunah*, and in it, I share thoughts and ideas that keep me close to Him. Friends forwarded my e-mail to other friends, and now, baruch Hashem, I have almost 600 people on my e-mail list; more visit my website. I spent most of my life catering for people’s bodies; now, I’m engaged in catering for souls.

We’re educated to have intellectual *emunah* — sure, we know that Hashem is here, that He runs the world, and sends us our life’s circumstances. For me, it took hardship to knock those lessons into my heart, to feel it rush through my veins. Life, pain, challenges, all force me to constantly reinvent myself.

And that was Savta’s heirloom: the gift and mystery and adventure called change. ■