



By Beth Perkel

# Closing the Gates

THE DOCTOR'S SOUL HAD  
BEEN CLOSED FOR SO LONG.  
ONE PATIENT MIGHT OPEN IT.

**D**r. Shari Shafee was having another childhood flashback. It seemed to occur on schedule, immediately following appointments with her (admittedly) favorite patient, Evelyn Steiner. The current memory was about her Bubbe, a light in her childhood that had been taken from her too soon when Shari was nine years old. Dr. Shari could practically taste Bubbe's European-recipe *teiglach*, as she stared at the foil-covered plate of similar creations that Evelyn had just handed her after her appointment for a stomach virus a week before Rosh Hashanah.

Dr. Shari had left *frumkeit* years ago, but there was something about being in Evelyn's presence that always made Dr. Shari secretly wonder if she had gotten it all wrong. It was as if her *pintele Yid* awakened in her whenever Evelyn told her Jewish-related stories and asked when she might be able to lure Dr. Shari over for a Shabbos meal or take her to the lovely *shul* she was always describing.

"The flowers, Shari *sheifeleb!*" Evelyn would say, using her favorite Yiddish endearment as a play on Dr. Shari's name. "You should have seen the gorgeous Shavuos flowers around the *Aron* this year. It reminded me how my *Tatte'le* used to always tell me that Torah is always in bloom!"

Or today's: "The shofar! I just went to *shul* this morning to hear it in Elul. Most women wait until Rosh Hashanah, but I always like to hear it at least once beforehand, to calibrate my heart to its sound. The one in our *shul* was rescued from a *shul* in pre-war Europe. It's long, twisted and gleaming—exactly how I imagine the horns of Yitzchak's ram at

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the *Akeidah*!”

Evelyn knew that Dr. Shari had grown up *frum* and understood the lingo, and perhaps divulging that info was where Dr. Shari had gone wrong. By sharing that detail at Evelyn’s first appointment ten years ago in an effort to develop rapport with her new geriatric patient, it had set off a full-fledged *kiruv* effort: Evelyn brought in at least one Jewish book at every appointment to gift Dr. Shari with a warm, inscribed message about how *this* one was sure to reveal the beauty in the religious practices Dr. Shari had left behind. The books piled up and gathered dust, but the same could not be said for Evelyn’s determination. Once Evelyn realized the book effort had fallen flat, she regrouped and changed tactics, bringing in articles from *Aish.com* that she insisted on reading aloud to Dr. Shari as she took Evelyn’s vitals. Dr. Shari switched back to using old school mouth thermometers to get a reprieve.

But it would be an outright lie if Dr. Shari claimed she didn’t appreciate the nonagenarian’s unwavering grit. Evelyn was so endearing, Dr. Shari just couldn’t be mad at her unrelenting attempts to rehabilitate her. When the articles didn’t work, she would take Dr. Shari’s hand and share stories and *meshalim* from *chasidische rebbes* while Dr. Shari used the other hand to scroll through Evelyn’s medical chart. Evelyn’s stories got longer and Dr. Shari didn’t have the heart to cut her off, so she started scheduling all of Evelyn’s appointments for the last slot of the day. At least that way she didn’t have appointments backing up while a stooping woman with bright blue eyes and pale wrinkled skin tried to save her soul with animated hand gestures and parables.

On that seemingly innocuous Tuesday in late September, Evelyn came in to visit Dr. Shari with complaints of pain in her back and upper abdomen along with symptoms of indigestion, nausea and lack of hunger. But she had just been there a

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few days before Rosh Hashanah and they were still waiting for the test results.

As Dr. Shari examined her aging patient-turned-friend, Evelyn began to go on and on about how Yom Kippur was in a few days and how she looked forward to the holiest day of the year. She began humming her favorite Yomim Nora’im tunes. Dr. Shari smelled a trap.

“Would you like to join me in *shul*, Dearest? The one I’m always telling you about. It would be a delight to have you there, to have you hear that shofar I love, to show you how the tunes sound with a whole *kehillah* singing them. I feel like an angel on Yom Kippur; you should have the opportunity to feel that kind of joy, too!”

“Evelyn. We can’t keep doing this. It’s a waste of both your time and mine, especially when we move into the realm of making appointments just to get me...”

Evelyn cut her off.

“I’m not making up more symptoms,

*sheifeleb*. Everything I said is real. Especially the part about how I feel on Yom Kippur.”

Dr. Shari rolled her eyes, but after a closer look at Evelyn’s face, Dr. Shari ordered a few additional tests. She did not like Evelyn’s pallor.

“One way or another, the Jewish soul can’t deny the power of Yom Kippur,” Evelyn called as Dr. Shari left the room. “I hope that it’s love that ultimately brings you to *shul*, instead of letting fear keep you away.”

Dr. Shari had barely made it to the break room when the latest flashback hit her. She was seven years old, sitting in *shul* with her *Bubbe* on Yom Kippur, watching the adults sway to the melodies, *shuckling* back and forth. There was a sea of white around her, forming almost an ethereal glow as the room got dark and the setting sun shone its fading embers through the windows. Everyone was standing except Shari and the other children who were munching various snacks on chairs throughout the room. Everything was peaceful and serene—until her mother came into sight, pulling Shari’s arm to get her up from the chair.

“Don’t you know you are supposed to stand for *Ne’ilah*? It’s disgraceful to be sitting on the chair munching pretzels!” her mother whispered fiercely.

“But all the other kids are sitting,” Shari wailed.

*Bubbe* intervened. “Chaya, she has been perfectly behaved. Leave her to me for the rest of *davening*. I want her to experience the power of the end—”

It was the last *Ne’ilah* that Shari ever went to *shul* for. For the rest of her childhood, she would just stay home for the end of Yom Kippur; by the time she was in her early teens, she was already off the *derech*.

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The test results came back the next day, and caused the blood in Dr. Shari’s own

face to drain. Dr. Shari had just gotten home from a long day seeing patients; it was only by chance that she logged into the hospital system from her home and noticed that they were in.

Dr. Shari read the results three times to make sure she wasn’t just imagining the signs of disaster. Her fingers were shaking as she called a colleague who was a pancreatic expert and forwarded them over. The next hour was a whirlwind, as she coordinated emergency next steps for Evelyn, whose iron levels were dangerously low. She needed to be taken to the hospital immediately. Dr. Shari attempted to call Evelyn’s number but to no avail—the calls went straight to voicemail.

“Come on, Evelyn—pick up!!” she pleaded into the ether. “We need to get you into the hospital NOW!”

Dr. Shari’s heart beat an uneven staccato as she found herself talking aloud to no one yet again. She suddenly realized that she must be praying...

*Praying?*... Yom Kippur!... In the intensity of the past hour, Dr. Shari had forgotten all about their conversations. No wonder Evelyn was unreachable.

There was only one thing to do, and with a plummeting heart, Dr. Shari grabbed her bag, looked up Evelyn’s address in her medical chart, and hopped a cab to Evelyn’s home. Surely she couldn’t have gone to *shul*.

Shari reached the area about an hour later. She had never gone on a high-speed chase after one of her patients before. But she was ready to engage in a *first* to save her beloved patient from all the *lasts* that were about to pile up otherwise. The cab let her out in front of Evelyn’s lovely brownstone. With a hammering heart Dr. Shari jogged up the steps and banged on the front door. Evelyn’s live-in aide answered.

“Hi, Dr. Shari. To what do we owe a house call?”

“I need to find Evelyn and she wasn’t answering her cell phone.”

“That’s because it’s her Yom Kippur holiday. I wheeled her to synagogue earlier this afternoon. She is going to be there through sundown.”

Shari asked the aide directions while she trotted down the walkway, taking the stairs two at a time.

Jogging through the neighborhood in scrubs, Shari felt especially underdressed. The neighborhood was alive with mothers pushing strollers full of children through the streets, many of them dressed in pristine white. Dr. Shari began to feel flashbacks at every turn.

Feelings of nostalgia overcame her as she watched the families walking together, the quiet streets empty of cars, even the façade of the old synagogue as it came into view with the Magen David on the front circled by a Torah verse, reminding her deeply of the *shul* where she spent her childhood Shabbasos.

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She looked around the room, hoping for some inspiration. Not an empty seat in the whole place... except next to Evelyn?



Shari found herself catching her breath both physically and spiritually as she entered the building and made her way to what she assumed was the women's section. The sound of the Yom Kippur davening brought a lump to her throat as she felt the rays through a stained glass window pitch darker and realized what she was hearing were the tunes of *Ne'ilah*.

*Why am I feeling so emotional?* She chided herself. *I've left this behind, rejected all this long ago. My G-d is medicine, not ancient chanting.*

Shari cleared her head and smoothed her shirt scrubs before opening the heavy oak door that led to the ladies. She quickly scanned the crowd and recognized a stooping, gray-haired figure standing at the front.

*It had to be the front row?* She inwardly groaned. *For Evelyn*, she kept telling

herself as she made her way through the aisle to bewildered glances, feeling like a seven-year-old unwittingly traveling down the aisle and sticking out like a sore thumb yet again during *Ne'ilah*. *I'm doing this to save Evelyn.*

When she reached the front row, Evelyn turned wide-eyed with surprise but quickly recovered and graced her with a welcoming smile.

Evelyn patted the seat next to her as if Dr. Shari showing up to *Ne'ilah* in scrubs was the most natural thing in the world.

"No, Evelyn, we need to talk outside the room. Please come with me."

Evelyn just smiled and patted the seat again.

"Evelyn, it's an emergency!" she shriek-whispered in desperation. "We need to get you to the hospital!"

Evelyn merely patted the open seat next

to her a third time. "You have a bigger emergency than me, Dearest. This is the holiest day of the year and the first time you have been in *shul* for it in decades. I'm so glad you are finally here. Sit a while."

Dr. Shari refused the gesture and stood resolute.

"I am taking you to the hospital, Evelyn. I will stay with you there for a blood transfusion, the CT scan and ultrasound; I will advocate for you and stay on top of your chart until we figure out the best plan for treatment options for you. All you have to do is come with me."

Evelyn reached out and squeezed Dr. Shari's hand before looking her straight in the eyes. "I found out about the pancreatic cancer last week from one of my specialists. I know all about it."

"Then why are you here?!" Dr. Shari shriek-whispered again, loud enough

to garner several "*sha*". "You are very sick; you need to be treating this if you're to have any hope."

"Treatment has already been ruled out for me," Evelyn replied resolutely. "The doctors told me the surgery is highly risky for a woman my age and the position of the tumor makes it almost impossible. But you, *sheifeleh*, you have hope. There is a chance for you, and I'm so happy you have come to your treatment."

With this, Evelyn patted the seat next to her a fourth time.

Shari gave in and sat as she battled her bewilderment. She took a deep breath and tried to pinpoint a shift in tactics. She looked around the room, hoping for some inspiration. Not an empty seat in the whole place...except next to Evelyn?

"Wait, doesn't this seat belong to someone?" she whispered again to Evelyn, as she quickly sprung from it as if it were on fire. "Yes, Dearest, I always reserve it for you in case you decide to come. Don't you remember I invite you every year?"

"Why would you do that? Evelyn, I don't believe in G-d. You know how I hate rules and rigor. You know my feelings on all this—it's antiquated and off-putting."

Evelyn cut her off. "As the Holy Berdichever said to a simple Jew with exactly your feelings of disappointment in religion: *The G-d you don't believe in, I don't believe in either...* Hashem is a G-d of love. That's what brought you here today, wasn't it? You want to save me, and I want to save you. *Sheifeleh*, it's time to come home."

In that moment it all came together. Evelyn's days were numbered and this was what she was spending them doing... Dr. Shari looked around at the happy children and the women swaying with joy and rapture on their faces. Maybe she had been missing something all along...

As the haunting but familiar—from-a-previous-life tunes swirled around her, Dr. Shari gave in to all the feelings she had suppressed for so long. When the *Shema* began to be called out in unison, the floodgates of Dr. Shari's soul burst open. Evelyn's gnarled index finger pointed to the next words in her well-worn *machzor*, and suddenly Dr. Shari could see things clearly. Both women joined in the final words of *Ne'ilah* as the roar of the *kehillah* drifted over the unlikely pair:

***"Hashem Hu Ha'Elokim, Hashem Hu Ha'Elokim, Hashem Hu Ha'Elokim."***

Dr. Shari clutched Evelyn in a hug literally for dear life as the shofar rang out. And there it finally was. The power of the end.

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