

The Gift of Life

Abridged version: Bina Magazine,

November 9th, 2007

A few weeks ago I sat on a coach-bus waiting for it to fill up with a group of women taking a journey. I was impressed with the way each of the women presented themselves and greeted each other. Each lady was beautifully put together and wore a radiant smile. As I was the first on the coach I observed the arrival of each woman watching their choice of greeting – a joyous hello, an upbeat cluster of words, a hug, a kiss, – until each woman was finally settled and we were on our way. An onlooker would never have imagined that each of these women had suffered or was suffering; that each woman had been touched by cancer.

I talked to Rachel and Shifra during the morning of the **Beit Natan Recovery Retreat**. The retreat was held at The Chofetz Chaim Kibbutz-Guest Complex an hour outside of Jerusalem. The hostess was Chaya Heller, the founder and director of Beit Natan, a women's cancer support and resource center established 10 years ago. The bi-annual retreats are just one of the many initiatives and services offered by this organization.

Rachel sits before me wearing fashionable navy separates. Her brown eyes sparkle. Her fair skin is rosy pink. At forty she looks the picture of health and beauty. Three and half years ago while 30 weeks pregnant with her third child Rochel was diagnosed with breast cancer. Rochel's grandmother seventy years ago at the age of 45 years old discovered the same cancer at stage four and didn't make it. Breast cancer bypassed Rochel's mother but hit Rochel when she least expected it.

"One morning I found a hard lump and my world collapsed" said Rochel, trying hopelessly in words to describe the day. Her face now reveals a new mask with dark shadows of pain and anguish. The serene, attractive mask of a few minutes ago has been discarded. Rochel wants to share a little of her story – to offer other women facts and hope. She reports on the events after her discovery. "My husband said it was probably nothing – a by product of pregnancy. But I knew it didn't feel right so I asked my sister-in-law who is a doctor to check me that same day. My own doctor confirmed our fears the next morning.

There are many reasons a woman may contract cancer. Extensive research still does not have definitive answers. But research has shown that

hormones, stress, nutrition and genetics are key players.

Beit Natan is an advocate for early detection education programs which they initiate around Israel. This effort often translates into saving lives. Supported by **SUSAN G. KOMEN FOR THE CURE**, Beit Natans early detection telephone outreach program has attained international acclaim., and reaches 10,000 women annually across Israel.

Cancer patients are bombarded with many new



Laughter workshop facilitator with patient

realities in a short space of time – the pressure and stress of the situation is daunting. Choices and decisions present themselves at every turn. "Everyone and everything became precious overnight. When I put my children to bed I thought, will I be here next week to see them? I faced morality head on. I was petrified."

Rachel met Chaya Heller 6 months ago. **The Beit Natan support group** helped Rochel put her life into perspective and taught her how to ask for help as well as give from her own resources to help another woman in need. Chaya points out many women go through a change of life attitude. "When first diagnosed, women with cancer are disorientated and in a state of shock. They can experience extreme fear, as their life is threatened. They often cannot access coping skills. The medical labyrinth is overwhelming. How a woman chooses to deal with her cancer can make all the difference to her treatment and potential recovery. **Beit Natan**

offers support at every stage.

Each year, about six hundred women seek out the **Beit Natan support help-line** and are matched with recovered-patient volunteers. Each week twenty-five women come together in several different support groups. "The goal of everything we do it to help a woman with cancer at any stage of her need. If we can help a woman lower her stress level, help her deal with her trauma day to day, we can help her live where Life has put her."

The women of the retreat are taking a break before the next session begins which offers positive ways to deal with challenge. The session after that is guided imagery. A woman in an attractive hat in the corner of the room looking out the window onto the green lawns has stage four cancer – the cancer has traveled outside of its zone and is entering her bones. A lady near by me dressed in shades of purple has stomach cancer. A nurse gave her a morphine shot for pain control half an hour ago. The woman walking across the room slowly but surely has end of life cancer – this retreat is a vital life link for her. She feels so alone among her healthy family. Here she feels understood. Once a week a volunteer from Beit Natan's "**HaTomechet**" program visits her in her home. This program trains volunteers to be companions to patients who are without treatment and facing the end of life. **This program is funded by the UJA/NY Federation and the Harry & Jenette Weinberg Foundation.**

Shifra joins us at the table. She is a sweet looking woman in her early fifties. "When I discovered my cancer two years ago, it was trauma for me but I had to be strong. I had surgery, then chemo, then radiation and then I joined the Beit Natan support group." Shifra looks around the room and smiles. "A person in the midst of hardship discovers all sorts of strengths he is not aware of. My cancer made me work on myself. Hardship provokes growth." I look at Shifra. I want to cry but I control myself. The day is moving along and I am hearing one story after another that seems too big for my small shoulders; reporting on this retreat has taught me many important life lessons.

The gift of life is a beautiful gift indeed. The gift of choice is even greater.