

Layers

Personal Narratives of
Struggle, Resilience, and Growth
from Jewish Women



Shira Lankin Sheps

LAYERS

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FOREWORD BY

Rachel Hercman, LCSW

The Toby Press

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For all the women who share their stories.

For those who listen with love.

*For my family,
Shmu, Ayelet, and Dovi,
for filling my life with light.*

*For HaKadosh Barukh Hu,
who made humans “betzelem Elokim,” in the image of God.*



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Foreword

The Layers Project first entered my life after a *Shabbos* meal conversation three years ago. Some guests were discussing an issue they had read about on *The Layers Project* blog that week and how refreshing it was to see a taboo topic getting visibility.

As a social worker and speaker in the Jewish community, I was intrigued by The Layers Project's ability to bring awareness in a way that was translating into meaningful conversation. After all, it's not easy to challenge systemic denial. There are reasons why we don't want to hear or read about things going on right in our backyard. It brings up fear, anger, and confusion, and it pops the bubble of innocence that we desperately chase.

Within minutes of laying eyes on *The Layers Project*, a blog that featured the images and raw intimate stories of Jewish women, I knew there was something different about this endeavor. The way issues were getting focus – it was a totally new forum and space that I'd never seen before. The profiles brought an awareness to issues in a way that was deeply impactful. Wherever I heard people talk about *The Layers Project*, the buzz was always the same: gratitude that stigmatized conversations were finally happening, and relief that others understood.

When the project grew and Shira Lankin Sheps invited me to join *The Layers Project* magazine as clinical director, I joyfully said yes. I knew this was more than a project or a magazine. It was a growing movement that was slowly changing the

Jewish community and the way we speak not just about challenge, but about life itself. I certainly wanted to be part of that, and it's been deeply enriching ever since.

The Layers Project magazine has become a healing space through facilitating carefully curated conversations, and our crown jewel is *The Layers Project* magazine profile. Through a storytelling process that is typically six to eight parts, we bring our thousands of readers into the experience of someone else. We virtually gather around into a healing circle and gently listen to a story unfold. Through vivid photographs and delicate narrative, we go on a journey as a group and are together changed.

Some of my most poignant moments at *The Layers Project* magazine have been seeing the responses to our posts. In a world where social media posts can invoke judgment and conflict, almost every comment on our profiles has been validating, supportive, and appreciative. Time and time again, our profiles have yielded a group embrace that has been overwhelmingly loving and kind. The most common sentiment we hear is the notion of people no longer feeling alone. They feel more a part of a group, more understood, and more connected to those around them.

We have learned many lessons about what it takes to cultivate a healing space. The process entails intention, sensitivity, and a heightened awareness of emotional nuance. When those things are in place, safety grows and people feel seen, heard, and for some, truly understood for the first time. And it begins with starting a conversation.

This book is a resource for starting conversations and expanding our perspectives on the complexities of life. In these pages you will read stunning stories of Jewish women in the Land of Israel today. These women are our friends, cousins, neighbors, sisters, grandmothers, mothers, daughters, and aunts. Their stories have real-life endings, imperfect and multilayered. And they are not really endings, because only in fairy tales is the story over and with a neat ending. In real life, the story continues, and we as a community can learn how to be present for each other through it.

If conversation is the melody of this book, the harmony is self-care. Self-care played a significant role in the book production process from start to finish, and as you will see, continues to be a recurring theme between chapters.

Like anything we publish, we spent considerable time ensuring that the women we profiled for this book didn't just have a story to tell but felt ready to tell it and have it published. Opening up the past can be loaded and triggering, and it was essential that all participants felt secure in taking those risks as they entrusted us with their vulnerability. This meant giving people permission to have ownership over their stories – how they were told, which photos were used, and which parts of themselves they ultimately did not want us to share.

For us, going over these stories went beyond an intellectual exercise. Every story was unique and powerful, and its details would reverberate for days after reading it. Seeing chapters of history come alive through stories of the human experience, and looking eye-to-eye at the people who went through it, felt like a tremendous honor but also a heavy responsibility that we took seriously.

As the clinical editor of this book, every story I read became a part of me. There were many times in the production process that I'd find myself going over a story with tears streaming down my cheeks, feeling simultaneously defeated by what the person went through yet uplifted by her capacity to show up for life despite it. There were times that I'd have to take a break away from the work in order to emotionally recharge, and then return to it when I felt ready. I was keenly aware of how the stories impacted me, and I continually considered how they would ultimately impact our readers.

Shira and I regularly took time to pause, reflect, and process together all the feelings brought up for us by these stories. It generated deep and meaningful conversations, and gave us the necessary space to keep moving forward. Having that space inspired us to incorporate sections between chapters to do just that – pause, reflect, and process.

These stories are deep and descriptive. Perhaps a theme will resonate with you in a way that feels uncomfortable, even triggering. Be mindful of your feelings as you read, paying attention to your breathing, your body, and what comes up for you. Each of us will react differently to a story, so keep an awareness of where these narratives land for you. We often find that talking to someone you trust can be a great way to process the experience of reading meaningful or challenging chapters.

This book is the beginning of many conversations to come – we are just getting started – and we invite you to partner with us in creating conversations in our communities. These conversations can connect us in ways that break the glass wall that keeps us isolated from others. It can be empowering to learn that you are not the only one who has traveled this road, and while it may have been lonely up until now, it no longer has to be that way moving forward.

We can choose to honor our journeys. We can let go of the shackles of shame that keep us silent. And finally, we can build a community that is woven by threads of empathy, understanding, and hope.

Rachel Hercman, LCSW
New York
January 2020

Introduction

MY STORY

This work was born out of my own story of pain. During my twenties, I suffered from unexplained chronic illness and pain. Whatever made me ill left me feeling weak. I became allergic to everything and my blood sugar was out of control. I had pain all over my body that made it hard to function. As a newlywed and a young mother, I watched as my life slipped away from me. I had no energy to work, to be a mother, a community member, a wife, or a member of my family. I had always been the type of person who wanted to do everything on my own. My independence, control over my own life, and freedoms were central to my sense of self.

The sicker I got, the more I lost control. I watched as my grasp on the things that I cared about was loosened. I broke as all my strengths were stripped away from me. At the beginning of the end of my illness, I had little but the essence of everything that I loved and my Maker. It was in that space that I discovered who I really was.

Revealed by illness, I discovered gentleness. I nurtured empathy for myself and others. I learned about patience. I asked, “Why?” and looked for answers. With time and searching, I found some. I was being molded into a different person, someone who understood that the inner life of a person could be vibrant, even through suffering. I was learning that our lives can appear as a distortion of an inner reality, and that we were put on this earth to struggle. We live to love, to overcome, and to grow.

I was prepared to listen as I had never truly listened before. I was engaged in

taking stock of what had brought me to the point that broke me and what I needed to do to heal myself. Only when I was ready to live in a different sort of mindset did my body heal. The steps that I took to rid myself of emotional pain made space for me to engage with physical healing.

I had spent the better part of five years keeping my suffering quiet, like a terrible secret. Few but my close friends and family knew the struggle of what I was experiencing. I was so ashamed of being “sick,” as I was only able to see the world through the binary of able bodies and broken ones. At a certain point in the winter of 2015, I reached my limit. I tried to submit some pieces of writing to several blogs. I asked to keep those pieces anonymous. Though the editors liked my writing, they encouraged me to publish with my name. If I wanted others to pay attention to the message behind my words, I had to stand up alongside them. I was so afraid of what people would think of me if they knew that I wasn’t the strong, capable person I wanted to be. I was terrified that people would pity me. I was still so ashamed and I didn’t want anyone to know.

But I was sick of feeling alone. I was sick of feeling different. I had reached a point where I realized that I was keeping myself a prisoner in this state of seclusion. I was carrying the burden of my pain alone. It wasn’t fair to me or my husband to keep these realities hidden. I wondered what would happen if I spoke my truth and let other people hear about my reality.

On the second night of *Hanukka* in 2015, I started a blog about my secret. I shared my anger, fear, and struggles. Ultimately, I ended my first post with this:

Last night after we lit the *Hanukka* candles, I sat with my son in the shadows and watched the fire breathe. In those quiet moments, I sang his bedtime ritual, *Shema Yisrael*, *HaMalakh HaGoel*, and *HaTikva*. I witnessed the flames dancing to the music of whispered promises of redemption, inheritance of blessings, and the covenant of faithfulness.

I invite you to join me on my journey of healing. Not just a healing of the body, but an invigorating of ability to see the good in the struggles that we all face. A reclaiming of the promises of our potential, and a prayer to live in the light.

For now, may we all continue to find the strength to have faith in the dark.

As I hit “publish” on that post, my heart was pounding. Then the messages began to come. Within the first moments of publishing my essay, I was flooded with comments. My friends and family offered so much sweetness and support. I remember I just sat in front of my computer weeping while the notifications continued to ring.

Then came the private messages: from friends who had no idea that I was going through a hard time and just wanted to reach out to me, from acquaintances who wanted to tell me they were inspired by my story, and from those who shared their own stories, not just of illness, but of all sorts of pain. Most of those people were like me, keeping their secrets close to their chests; I was the first person to whom they disclosed their stories. Even though I was a trained social worker, all of a sudden, I was offering support and a listening ear in a new way. This time it was personal. Through all these varied dynamics and exchanges, a new identity was forming.

From that moment on, I chose to operate under the assumption that everyone I came in contact with knew that I was struggling with chronic illness. This enabled me to release myself from the yoke of shame, the feeling that I had to maintain a secret that was suffocating me. I entered every interaction with the confidence that I was attempting to accept what God had given me with acceptance and humility. The meaning I created when I took control of my personal narrative emboldened me to live that life to the best of my ability. I resolved to embrace the positive personality and dynamic changes that illness brought on its tailcoats.

Two weeks after I published that post, I received a call from my mother. Someone she knew had seen my blog. After reading it, this woman had a feeling that she might know my true diagnosis and suggested to my mother that I speak to her son, who had experienced exactly the same symptoms. After our first, two-hour-long call, he told me radically new information. I went to a new doctor whom he recommended and who confirmed the new diagnosis.

That moment changed my life forever. I now knew what I was wrestling with and how to begin to fix it. Thank God, after months of hard work, I saw improvements. I hoped to be honest in my self-reflection, earnest in my *emuna*, and grateful for the tough lessons I received from illness. I reached out for connection and found healing. I never forgot that lesson, and so this work was inspired by my own journey.

THE LAYERS PROJECT

Until now, *The Layers Project* has taken the form of an online magazine.

I launched the project when I was just coming back to myself. It started as a small photojournalism blog where I interviewed and photographed Jewish women. We discussed taboo or stigmatized topics that had yet to be explored out loud in the communal space. The blog following exploded when we touched on issues that women couldn't wait to talk about. We launched an online magazine a year later when it became clear that our followers had too much to say and we needed to make a space for them to express themselves.

My role in it is simple. I listen to the stories of Jewish women. I am present with

them in their pain. I help them decide which parts are healing to share. I give them all the control; they get the final say on every word and every photo. I want them to feel that the way we tell their stories is exactly how they want to be portrayed. Then my part comes in. I present them the way I see them. Through my lens and through my own eyes, each woman glows in her own unique beauty, bravery, and resilience. These are ordinary women who live their lives in extraordinary ways.

Each of these stories tackles different life situations or taboo topics, but regardless of the specific circumstances of these women's experiences, the way they find meaning in their struggles and the way they express faith, doubt, and strength reflects so many readers' own individual struggles. These women teach us how to love through suffering and how to live beyond heartache. They teach us how to be sensitive to those who are different from us and they open our minds to realities we never knew.

Each woman who participates in this project has touched thousands of lives. I have received the most remarkable messages from women whose experiences were validated and felt like they were no longer standing on the outside, alone. I have heard from women who received support for the first time in their lives because they had shared a particular story with loved ones, who were then finally able to understand what these women had been going through. I have been contacted by many women who are eager to be empathic to their friends and neighbors, now that they can see difficult issues through new eyes.

The readers of *The Layers Project* have created a beautiful community of support and stigma breaking. Almost every single comment on our hundreds of posts has been loving and respectful. That is practically unheard of in the world of the internet. The women who stand up and the people who reach back out to them with support have created a tremendous community of healing, one in which I feel humbled to be included.

WHY TELL THESE STORIES?

As readers, it can be challenging to read a story that doesn't end in the traditional, happy, feel-good way. The stories in this book come to teach us something else. Sometimes issues, struggles, or problems don't go away. That is just a fact. But what can happen is that we can learn to live full, rich, beautiful, and happy lives, regardless. Pain and joy are not mutually exclusive. I tell these stories because within struggle is beauty. There is nothing as awe inspiring as human resilience. Life is not binary; exclusive to darkness or light. Pain does not need to overtake our lives but may be woven throughout, a reminder of the vulnerability of our humanity and the importance of cherishing every day, good or difficult, that may come.

The whole purpose of these profiles is the meaning-making. We all live with struggle. We muddle through it, wrestling with our challenges, sometimes pinned down by our pain, sometimes coming up for air, and oftentimes we are able to understand it and walk away a changed person. Pain can be a growth opportunity, but the work resides in making meaning of our experiences. We don't have to understand or know why things happen. We just have to make a decision that can help us process it. We need to spend time figuring out the story we tell ourselves about our challenges and whether that story serves us. We need to learn how to live with our hurt and still be okay, maybe better than okay. Maybe we can live with hardship and feel full of blessings, too.

I collect and write these stories because I know what it was like to think that the world around me was perfect, and I was the only one on the outside. I thought that everyone had it together: happy family of many children, successful career, perfect marriage, robust health (mental and physical). But it's simply not true. There is not a human on this planet who lives a perfect life. I believe that we are born to grow, and often, growth begins with struggle. I think that the more we can learn about how others cope – the more we can glean from their meaning-making and figure out how to apply those lessons to our own lives – the better off we are. I know that in a world that is becoming increasingly shallow, false, and full of facades, the way to move forward toward healing lies in sharing our rawness, vulnerability, and honesty.

THE ANATOMY OF A PROFILE

Every chapter of this book features a profile of a Jewish woman. The actual process for writing one of these stories is quite long. I connect with the woman who wants to share her story. She tells me a short synopsis, the key points. Then we meet in person or speak on the phone and we conduct our interview. With permission, the interview is recorded so that I can transcribe our conversation at a later date. We speak anywhere from one to three hours, depending on how long it takes each woman to share her story with me.

Then we meet (perhaps at the same time as the interview if it is in person) for our photoshoot. I do my best to make each woman feel as comfortable as possible, but as women, most of us are unaccustomed to being photographed alone, especially being captured in this raw and intimate way. I find that many of the women whom I profile have a difficult time being photographed. It can be so hard to have the lens focused on you. I struggle with it just like everyone else. It is hard not to nitpick every detail of the image. We are so accustomed to the airbrushed and overedited images we see on the covers of magazines that it hurts us to be so raw. I give the women being profiled total control over what we use. I show them the

images as I take them, asking for their feedback and direction as to what they like and how they want to be portrayed. It is the women who are being featured who choose the images we use, not I.

The same rule applies to the text. I know deeply how one changed word or phrase can mean something totally different than what a person meant. After I transcribe the interview and shape it for chronology, narrative thread, and grammar, I send it back to the profile subject. She then has the opportunity to take out anything she wants and add in anything she needs. A word, sentence, paragraph, section – it is all up to her. In the text, you will notice that we kept the spelling of the Hebrew or Yiddish words authentic to the pronunciation of each individual. Jews from all over the world pronounce words differently. The glossary in the back of the book reflects two different denominations of spelling utilized by the women in this book. My goal is that when the profile is finished, every woman is portrayed in images and in words exactly how she wants to be seen and heard. The opportunity to rewrite and reshape our narratives is incredibly empowering. It is a thrill for me, every time, to give that gift to someone. It can be life changing.

A fascinating part of this process was discovering that even if someone is prepared to share her story, that does not mean that she is looking to share every detail. The details we choose to offer are reflective of what feels safe or productive to share. The things we tell are connected to crafting our own narratives. You might read some of these stories within this book and still have questions. You might think, “But she didn’t explain X.” The truth is, none of us are owed all the details. These stories have been written deliberately. If there is something that feels like it’s missing, it wasn’t for us to know. There are things the profile subjects can’t or won’t want to share. We all have things that we would rather keep to ourselves.

The voice of every chapter in this book is different, as it is specific to the person sharing her story. I do my best to retain each woman’s uniqueness, from her perspective to her speech pattern to interesting phrasing. What you will read in this book is truly a reflection of each woman. One of my favorite compliments from my work on the *Layers* magazine was from a woman who told me that her best friend read her profile and told her, “I felt like I was hearing your voice and you were sitting in the room with me.” I try to recapture that feeling every time.

These stories are meant to make you, the reader, feel as if you are sitting in the room with us. It should feel like someone you just met is telling you this personal narrative about who they are and what they have experienced in life. It is meant to feel intimate; I try to recreate eye contact with the subject by using images and showing the woman’s personality through the way she expresses herself. Aren’t those deep, revelatory conversations the times that connections are bonded and

friendships made? For me, those moments are some of the deepest joys that I have known as a human.

WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO WRITE THIS BOOK

I took on this project within the first month of my *aliya*. *Aliya* had been a dream of mine for many years. Illness both derailed the opportunity and also brought it to fruition. Only when our future seemed bleak were my husband and I able to reevaluate what we wanted out of life and look for a different kind of future. In a way, being ill brought me home.

As you can imagine, writing this book during our *shana rishona* of *aliya* was a challenging undertaking. I think perhaps it is a testament to how badly I wanted to do this work. While I was attempting to acclimate to a new climate, language, culture, society, and life, I was also intensely working on this project to which I could not say no.

In order to tell the stories of Jewish women living in Israel, you have to know Jewish women living in Israel. Surely this book is limited by who I was able to meet in my first year here. Leaving the States behind, I also left behind my network of connections, curated over the course of my life. I arrived here almost empty-handed. I am so grateful to my online *Layers* community for helping to connect me to the women whose stories are shared here. I am also grateful to family, to new friends, and to profile subjects who became friends, who all shared their networks with me. I spent many days and nights stressing over how I would find women who would want to share what I thought needed to be said.

I found that working on the magazine had not prepared me for writing this book. These stories were far more complex than any I had worked on before. I would show up being prepared to tell a story on one topic and three more topics would unravel while I was listening. At first, I thought that I would organize this book by topic or theme based on the stigmatized, taboo, or painful issues covered in the stories: cancer, infertility, mental health, and others. That is how I organize my profiles in the magazine and it seems to work. But here it was a totally different ballgame. It felt ridiculous and reductionist to simplify a story into a single theme. These are real lives and real stories. They are complex and, dare I say, layered. Maybe I was looking deeper into what was already in front of me. By the time I started this book, I had done many, many profiles for *The Layers Project* magazine. I looked at these stories differently. They became longer, more intricate, and more nuanced than any I had ever written. I experienced a renaissance of my work.

Ultimately, I decided that in order to retain that sense of suspense that readers experience in the online format, I would not organize these chapters by theme.

When you begin a chapter, there is no indication of what it will contain. We have included an index at the end of the book for those who would like to be aware of the type of content in a chapter before they read it. I absolutely understand that some topics may be triggering for some people, and some readers may be searching for a particular theme that interests them. My suggestion is to refer to the index if you would like to choose which topics to read and which to avoid.

I was surprised by my own emotional reaction to writing this book. When I wrote profiles in the past, I lived deeply and empathically in each woman's story during the week that it took to interview, write, and publish online. We worked intensely together and I sat with the pain that was shared with me. I believe that feeling is integral to give over someone else's story in the most authentic way. After publishing, the profile subject and I debriefed, and then I let it all go. I released her emotional life after sitting with it and meditating on it. I walked away from that pain, and somehow, came back to myself. It is always an intensely emotional experience for me, but one with resolution.

With this project, there was no release. I met with women, wrote, and ruminated over the stories for periods of months. I was writing in a vacuum. Gone was the rollercoaster of emotions, the intensity, and the letting go. No one knew that I was writing these stories, as I didn't share them with anyone but Rachel Hercman, my clinical editor, business partner, and close friend. I received no mass feedback or catharsis. Because these chapters were waiting to be shared, I never let them go. The emotional baggage of other people began to build in my own emotional life. I held on to much of it because it wasn't ready to be shared. I was working on it, crafting pain into stories that would help heal others. But in that process, I became overloaded.

I found that there were months when I was so encumbered by the emotions of others that I could not write. The chapters in this book were written in spurts. Weeks would fly by and I couldn't focus in order to get out what I knew needed to be written. Then I would have months when everything would come pouring out from my fingertips onto the keyboard. Beginnings, middles, and endings came flying out of me after storing them away and feeling them deeply for months. Even when the chapters were ready to be placed in the manuscript, I still couldn't let them go. Maybe only when my readers are ready to read will I be able to say goodbye to those journeys.

Surely, the path I took to get to the end of writing this work went in many directions. I collected stories from all over Israel, and in that way, this work gave me the opportunity to see the country during my first year here. My husband, Scott, who is my partner in all things, traveled the country with me, visiting places we had never

been or had never seen together. In discovering the women of this country, I also discovered the land that had previously only lived in my dreams.

Due to the fact that I am an English speaker, my Hebrew is not fluent, and I speak no other languages, the range of women that I was able to interview was limited. In the end, most of the women I feature in this book are immigrants (or refugees) who have come to live in Israel. It was a humbling opportunity to learn from the lives they have built, hear their experiences, and understand how they define themselves in the space between the place where they were born and the place that they chose.

Rereading everything that I have written within these pages, I see a love letter to the Holy Land. She is revealed here in many of these stories: messy, needy, chaotic, fearful, glowing, gorgeous, holy, hallowed, missed, and beloved. These stories are unflinchingly honest about what it means to live here, often not having been born a *Sabra*. They showcase the joy and so much struggle of coming home, while feeling oftentimes like a stranger, often like a sister. We come here for many different reasons, but ultimately, it is the land and its people that pull us homeward.

I took a lot of time to consider the meaning and impact of exile and redemption, *galut* and *geula*. I was astounded by the opportunity to record, in my own way, a piece of the ingathering of the exiles, Jews returning to Israel after three thousand years in the Diaspora. I reflected often on my grandparents who survived the *Shoah* and what they would have thought of this gift that was given to me, in my lifetime. I spoke to women who were born all over the world, women who were born Jews, women who became Jews by choice, and women who discovered ancient lineages and returned home to their nation. I learned much about world Jewry, our history, challenges, and hopes for the future in this one year of meeting the people of this great country.

Ultimately, I learned that there are many types of exile. There is the exile of being kicked out of your birthplace, the exile of isolation and silence, and the exile of feeling like you don't belong where you are. Individual and national exiles blur in personal stories. Luckily, so do the blessings of redemption. Inherent in redemption is the promise of healing, a healing of things that pain us and keep us on the outside of what is sacred to us.

I know that God has blessed me with a personal redemption. He has brought me and my family home to our homeland, and we were additionally reunited with my parents and siblings who have settled here. He healed me from illness. He sent me on the path that led me to my work, my *tafkid*, my hope for the future. I pray that He blesses all of *Am Yisrael* with a personal and national *geula*, *bekarov*.

Within these pages in your hands are thirty-four real-life stories of challenge and

triumph. These Jewish women, heralding from all over the world, have settled in Israel as part of the Jewish people. They exhibit awe-inspiring resilience, patience, fortitude, gratitude, and love. They also may experience anger, shame, fear, isolation, guilt, and pain. These experiences are not mutually exclusive, and together they form a picture of real life. These chapters contain meaning-making that all of us, both women and men, can learn from. The women profiled here are all different, each with her own perspective, life experience, history, and hopes for the future. It has been an honor and a privilege to listen to their stories, and it is humbling to share them in this format with you.

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Laura's Story

Loss, Cycles, and Sisterhood

Neve Daniel, Gush Etzion

AS IF THEY NEVER EXISTED

When I was ten, my mother was pregnant and she didn't know that she was expecting twins. She went into labor at six months, and she left to the hospital and we heard almost nothing about what was happening. Back then, the feelings of the rest of the children in the family were not considered in the crisis of our mother and our new and tiny sisters in the hospital. Born very prematurely, the babies were in incubators and it was understood that the babies needed all the care and attention. No notice was given to the fact that their siblings were home worrying about our mother and these babies. We were not allowed to come visit, or even peek through the window. We never met those babies.

Perhaps the prevailing thought was that because my three siblings and I never met them, we weren't attached to them. Maybe it was thought that our lack of knowing them meant that we didn't feel towards them. But those babies were our sisters. We knew what being a sister meant and we were eager to cherish our new arrivals. But after one day on this earth, one of our brand-new sisters died.

The family and community pivoted all their energies and prayers to focus on the twin who was still alive. They named her Rachel Sarah. Still, we were not allowed to meet her. They didn't even take a picture of her. Rachel died after a few weeks. Because her life was so short, our family was not required to sit *shiva* for her. So

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there was nothing, and we never had the opportunity to grieve for her. Both twins were simply erased from our lives as if they never existed.

For me, as the oldest girl, I carried this trauma with me into my adult life. When I grew up, I decided I wanted to be a maternity nurse and I worked with new moms, sometimes in the nursery. Usually, thank God, everything was fine. Both mom and baby were healthy. But once in a while, there would be a premature birth or fetal death and the trauma would resurface for me. It manifested in an explosion of emotion, every time.

Whenever I heard of babies born prematurely, it felt like I was experiencing the loss of my sisters, over and over again. I felt as if I could not move forward. I never had a healthy grieving process, so I was stuck in that never-ending cycle of fresh mourning. I would do whatever I could to help my patients and do my best to work with the parents of premature babies or parents who had just lost their children. I know I did my best to be sensitive to their pain. But it forced me to realize that I had never worked through my own grief.

THE BURDEN OF TRAUMATIC LOSS

When I was working in the field of maternity nursing, sometimes it felt like I was punishing myself. I don't think that when I went into the field, I was consciously aware of what it was stirring up for me. Consciously, it was much simpler. When I gave birth to my firstborn and I was in the hospital bed holding her, I remember thinking that it was the best feeling in the world. I felt like I wanted to work with newborn babies professionally, because it felt so good to me to be with healthy babies. Maybe subconsciously, the feeling of the full-term baby in my arms was a relief. Frankly, it was odd that I wanted to go into the field, because I had



zero interest in being a nurse. It was such a mismatched occupation choice because of my triggers and my lack of technical prowess. I was only willing to work in maternity or pediatrics. I was putting myself in scenarios that would trigger me all the time, yet all I wanted to do was work with the new moms and new babies.

Perhaps subconsciously, I knew I needed to work through my unresolved pain to find resolution and peace.

In 1999, my mother realized that we had been living with this familial grief for all these years and that we had never mourned these babies. She decided that the babies deserved to be remembered, and that we all deserved the opportunity to grieve for them properly. She did something incredible, and put together everything that was missing all those years ago. She put headstones on their graves, made a big extended family reunion, and we all gathered around and flew to New York for the event. We held a graveside ceremony – it was the first time that any of us had ever been to the place where they were buried. We all wrote something to say to these sisters we had never met. We spoke to them and gave them the messages we never had the opportunity to give, messages of love and longing. We stood together and cried.

My mother made a scrapbook to hold every piece of memorabilia that she had from their short lives. There are no pictures, but their hospital bracelets, birth and death certificates, and copies of all our speeches are there. It was a beautiful tribute to their impact on our family.

We spent *Shabbat* together as a family. After we said *Havdala*, the huge stone that was sitting on me all these years was lifted. The triggers were processed. I carried that burden of grief for twenty years. Now I know I was subconsciously putting myself in situations where I could achieve closure. When I finally processed the loss of my sisters, I left the field of nursing and I never looked back.

ATTACHED

When we made *aliya* in 2002 on the first Nefesh B’Nefesh flight, I brought four children with me. I had an “*aliya* baby” during our first year of transitioning to life in Israel. After that baby was born, I wanted to have another child. It wasn’t long before I got pregnant. I was excited and looking forward to growing our family.

In the middle of my second trimester, something didn’t feel right. I went for a sonogram so that I could find out if everything was okay. The look on the technician’s face told me something was very wrong. She said, “There is something not right.” I thought she meant that the baby was in the wrong place, or had moved into a funny position. I thought it was something that was fixable. She didn’t speak English so it was difficult to understand what she meant. She was using euphemisms because she didn’t want to say out loud what she needed to tell me. Eventually, I got it. I had lost the baby.

I was in shock. Some people have said to me, “Thank God you have other kids.”

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But it doesn't matter how many children you have. I lost a baby. The minute I saw that plus sign on that pregnancy test, I was attached. That baby was my child, and now my child was gone.

Everyone already knew that I was pregnant, so my loss was very public. I was wearing maternity clothes and showing. I couldn't quietly slip into a non-pregnant existence. I was also too far along to just pass the baby naturally. The baby was dead inside of me and I had to go to the hospital to deliver the baby. They gave me Pitocin to induce labor, and I had to go through the whole process of labor and delivery of this tiny child. It's impossible to describe the hours of stress and pain that one goes through to deliver a child that you know will never live.

During the delivery of the body, I hemorrhaged and needed a dilation and curettage (D&C) to clear the uterine lining. I lost a lot of blood. They put me on bed rest for a week because I was weak from all the blood loss and the physical trauma. I was experiencing things that a mom usually experiences when giving birth to a baby: delivery, hospital stay, my neighbors coming over and bringing meals for my family, and the physical ramifications for my body. But in my situation, my baby was not coming home with me. I was in so much pain.

SWEETNESS REBORN

At the time of my miscarriage, I was alone without family here in Israel. My neighbors were wonderful and supportive, but I needed the support of my sisters and mother. They, too, were feeling sad that they couldn't be here with me. They wanted to do something meaningful to send me the message that they were thinking of me. Together, my four siblings and my parents purchased a pomegranate tree for us. We had just bought a house here in Neve Daniel, in Gush Etzion. We had no landscaping at our brand-new place. We were the first of our family to put down roots here in Israel and they thought that it would be really meaningful to give us a tree.

We planted the tree in our yard and

