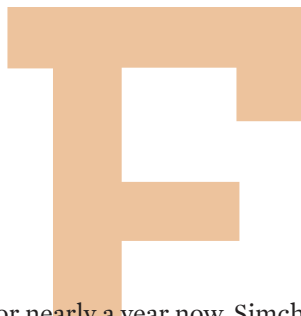


Holding God's Hand

A silhouette of a woman holding a child against a sunset background. The woman is on the right, holding the child on the left. The sun is a bright circle in the center, and the sky is a gradient of orange and yellow. The foreground shows some grass and small plants.

Diagnosed with stage-four cancer, Simcha Esther Gershan sees joy as her "most important weapon."



For nearly a year now, Simcha Esther (Shari) Gershan has been looking the Angel of Death in the eye and smiling back at him. She's also been telling the world about it on her Internet blog, and plans to share more of her story in her forthcoming documentary.

The day after Purim 2008, the Pas-saic, New Jersey mother of four went to the emergency room with what she thought was a slipped disc. But the doctors were suspicious. They ordered MRI and CAT scans, which revealed seven malignant tumors growing in the forty-one-year-old woman's lungs and spine.

Always healthy and never a smoker, the petite, vivacious Gershan was in shock. After wading through initial feelings of anger and despair, she realized she needed help. So, while still in the emergency room, she phoned a local rabbi. He helped her see that she had a choice: She could either grasp the belief that God was challenging her for a reason or she could be a victim. Gershan chose the former, ultimately embracing her stage-four cancer diagnosis as "the greatest gift Hashem has ever given me."

The following day, Gershan sent an e-mail to everyone she could think of, telling them about her diagnosis and asking for their prayers and moral support. The response was overwhelming. Lying on a hospital gurney awaiting an MRI scan, Gershan listened as her husband, Yoni, read the e-mails pouring in over his BlackBerry. "I felt Hashem lifting me higher and higher, holding me up through all these people," she says.

Most inspiring were the reports of acts of charity and kindness done in

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her merit, from Tehillim recited to challahs baked to relationships mended. "People were growing in their *avodas Hashem* [servitude of God] just for me," Gershan says. Even Gershan's own father, though he doesn't regard himself as a religious man, began laying tefillin.

Gershan's initial group e-mail became the first posting in a blog she later created called Time of my Life. (The blog, hosted by www.caringbridge.com, a web forum for seriously ill patients and their families, can be accessed at [//www.caringbridge.org/visit/timeofmylife](http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/timeofmylife).) The blog keeps readers updated on Gershan's physical—and spiritual—condition. To date, it has scored more than 30,000 hits. Gershan is blown away by the response. "I receive many private e-mails in which people tell me amazing changes they've made on account of the blog," she says. Gershan's postings have included accounts of difficult, albeit uplifting—and sometimes even humorous—experiences; she tells of her friends singing in a crowded hospital elevator while escorting her to chemotherapy and of days spent in bed getting over its nasty side effects.

The blog has also struck a chord with other cancer sufferers who identify with Gershan's openness about a disease that is often kept hidden. "I've been approached by people in my community who have been sick for years and haven't told anyone," Gershan says. "It's catastrophic to have to go through this alone." Her ability to cope with her illness with *emunah* (faith) and *simchah* (joy) has also made her a resource for the newly diagnosed, who frequently contact her for encouragement.

Raised in the New York area, Gershan started her own theater troupe in high school and went on to study directing at New York University. But

she quit just before graduating, disturbed by the unsavory aspects of thespian life. In her late twenties, Gershan made her way to Jerusalem, where she became Orthodox, inspired by Yoni, her soon-to-be husband, and her first teacher of Torah, Rabbi David Aaron, founder of the Isralight Institute, an international *kiruv* program.

An intensely spiritual person even before her illness, Gershan describes her experience with cancer as an "amazing, awesome and holy journey."

"I [understand] that I've been chosen for this mission because G-d loves me so much," she wrote on her blog. Gershan sees her situation as a call to *teshuvah* (repentance). She has answered that call by making many changes in her life—including taking on her Hebrew name, *davening* and doing *mitzvot* with ever-increasing devotion, letting go of anger and resentment and mending various relationships. "People I had been

afraid to bump into in the supermarket joined my circle of healing," she recalls.

Since she first heard the news, Gershan has been upfront about her situation with her children, who range in age from four to eleven. She says that her kids understand what she is going through and are coping quite well. "They are kids; they


live in the moment," says Gershan. "*Baruch Hashem*, every time there's been a dramatic change, a physical decline, I've bounced back. They bounce right back with me."

Even with all the positive energy she has unleashed, Gershan does succumb to occasional blue moments, especially when she considers that she might not be around to watch her kids grow up.

"I know I can't protect my kids from my life," she says. "They were



Photos courtesy of Simcha Esther Gershan



More than anything, Gershan is rallied by the sense that Hashem is “holding her hand” throughout this ordeal.

chosen for this journey just as I was. [But if they] can grow up feeling that whatever God deals them is for their highest good, then I’ve given them a tremendous gift.”

More than anything, Gershan is rallied by the sense that Hashem is with her, “holding her hand” throughout this ordeal. She notes the many miraculous “coincidences” she’s experienced since being diagnosed: from the team

of Orthodox physicians who “happened” to be assigned to her, to her inclusion in a clinical trial for an experimental drug, with far fewer side effects than chemotherapy, targeted specifically for her tumor type.

Sadly, the drug recently stopped working and this fall Gershan began a course of chemotherapy. Nevertheless, she still manages to keep her spirits up. She maintains her optimism and joyful

outlook by focusing on prayer and Torah learning, and by working on her blog.

Gershan is also working on a full-length cancer documentary. Her initial impulse to get behind the camera came during a break between appointments at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. On the way to meet a friend in midtown Manhattan, she noticed a young woman lighting up a cigarette. Gershan spontaneously approached her and shared her story. The woman extinguished the cigarette on the spot, resolving never to smoke again.

“My first thought was that if I save a life, maybe Hashem would save mine,” Gershan recalls. She recognized that this incident could be developed into a movie and from that “Time of My Life,” named after her blog, was born.

Since most of Gershan’s creative experience had been on the stage rather than the screen, she began working with freelance film editor Tsvika Tal. “Time of My Life” takes viewers into Gershan’s private life, following her to chemo sessions, to carpool, to meetings with alternative healers and even to appointments with her *sheitel macher* (wig stylist), where she cuts loose, enjoying trying on different wigs. The film is aimed at the general public, though Gershan hopes that it will reach other cancer patients, whom she says are desperately in need of hope, inspiration and spiritual connection. “It’s the story of believing in God, of using suffering as an opportunity for

> Blog Excerpt

June 20, 2008

Out in the world, I felt self-conscious—I still do. I’m the one with cancer. Sometimes I felt jealous of the care-free, easy, eat-anything, do-anything life that everyone else seems to have. And the pain in my body is a constant reminder of the disease and my mortality. I realized that so many things I dreamed of and so many decisions that have been put off may never come to pass. ... I went shopping for a Shabbos robe with Mom and, at the cash register, I actually thought to myself that I should consider how many times I’ll actually get to wear [it] before potentially wasting the money. After all, one has to be frugal in times like this. I pushed the thought aside and bought the robe.

I started to think that maybe the sadness is necessary in order to move through the process of letting go. And then I got a glimpse of the end of the process, when real acceptance becomes possible, when I might actually have a life that I can truly fully live. What an unbelievable opportunity! Past the sadness is the here and now, each moment—precious, precious, precious. Without any certain future, that’s all one can have, that or deep depression, the goal of the *yetzer hara* [evil inclination]. We all want that precious present, but how much of our time is spent dwelling on the past or worrying about the future? There is tremendous freedom in living in the moment and I want that. ... Every moment is an opportunity to give and receive love, G-d’s greatest resource.



change and transformation and of coming close to the people in my life," she says.

The documentary, expected to be completed and ready for distribution by the summer, is re-energizing Gershan. "Making the film is saving my life," she says. A seven-minute preview was recently shown at the Arts and Torah Association for Religious Artists (ATARA) conference in Manhattan. After the screening, dozens of women followed Gershan out the door to tell her how moved they were by it. "If seven minutes could do that, imagine what an hour and forty minutes could do," she says.

While researching cancer documentaries, Gershan discovered that most protagonists die at the end. But she's not letting that get her down. "Joy is my most important weapon," she insists. "I'm not in denial. I realize that I might die, but I try to live like a child, always in the moment." ■

>Dov's List

On June 8, 2006, eleven days shy of his fifteenth birthday, Dov Matityahu Klugerman, of Silver Spring, Maryland, left this world. He had been struck by a speeding vehicle while crossing the street on the way home from yeshivah.

For nine grueling days, Dov lay unconscious in the hospital. While his parents, Rabbi Tzvi and Yaffa Klugerman, kept a constant vigil at his side, a flurry of activity carried the family through the crisis. Friends and neighbors arranged childcare, meals and carpools for the Klugerman's four other children. Family members initiated a worldwide effort to organize twenty-four-hour Tehillim recitations on behalf of Dov. Hundreds of Jews—religious and non-religious—responded, committing to devote a half hour each day to pray for Dov.

After Dov's death, e-mails and letters offering comfort streamed in from Jews around the world who were deeply touched by the tragedy. Moved by the hordes of condolence e-mails, the Klugermans created Dov's List (www.dovslist.org), an online network that allows anyone experiencing illness and crisis to connect with, and receive support from, Jews throughout the world. Among its other features, the web site enables visitors to send well-wishes to those afflicted with illness and to sign up to *daven* at a particular time each day for a patient of their choosing. The family hopes that those experiencing illness or other crises will be able to draw strength, as they did, from the hopeful messages and prayers of others.

Bayla Sheva Brenner is senior writer in the OU Communications and Marketing Department.



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