

only assure patients and families that while we don't have the answers, we believe that God does. Sometimes our lives seem out of control and nothing makes sense, and clearly, from where we're sitting, there seems to be no rhyme or reason for what's happening to us. But from God's perspective, in a spiritual dimension, there is an explanation for everything that happens. And, one day, when our souls return to the spiritual world from whence they came, everything will become clear.

Imagine, I tell the questioner, that you're a young child once again. It's a rainy summer day, and, to pass the time, you start working on a beautiful 500-piece jigsaw puzzle. After you throw all the pieces on the floor, someone grabs the box cover, which displays the puzzle's picture, and walks out of the room, leaving you to fend for yourself. You try to put the pieces together in some logical order. Sometimes, luckily, you discover a pattern, but overall, you're extremely frustrated. You're getting nowhere. Then the person who took the cover returns and shows you the big picture on the box. Now it all makes sense! So too we are born into a world where life doesn't always make sense, no matter how hard we try to rationalize events and put them in order. What's happening to us seems arbitrary, unpredictable, and, sometimes, downright unfair! Then, after we leave this world, God shows us the big picture on the box, and the puzzle of our lives makes sense for the first time. Similarly, some of my colleagues have compared our lives to a needlepoint: We can only view the back of the needlepoint and, from our perspective, it looks like a bunch of stray colorful threads. God, however, sees the front of the needlepoint, as if He were looking down from Heaven, viewing the intricate designs that are the patterns of our lives.

The Final Encounter

What precipitates an individual's final acceptance of his fate, his acquiescence to death? I believe that this decision originates deep within

Dealing with Serious Illness

By Tova Stulman Ross

Often, when serious illness occurs, it is all too easy for the patient and his family to feel alone and at a loss about what to do. The various issues that arise—financial, medical and halachic—can seem daunting. Factor in the emotional stress that accompanies any major illness, and the experience can be downright terrifying for all involved.

Attempting to assist patients and their families, the Orthodox Union's (OU) Department of Community Services launched "When Serious Illness Strikes..." symposiums designed to provide the greater Jewish community with information, tools and resources to help navigate the maze of halachic, ethical and medical complexities that accompany critical illness. The symposiums, attended by hundreds and run by the OU in conjunction with the Metropolitan Jewish Health System (MJHS) in New York, bring together experts on different aspects of end-of-life care: a rabbi, a palliative care physician, an elder-care attorney (to discuss financial planning and the costs incurred when treating a terminally ill patient) and a chaplain (to discuss common emotional reactions experienced by patients and their families when approaching the end of life). Introduced in 2005 and held throughout the New York area, the symposiums have included prominent speakers in the rabbinic, medical and legal fields. Speakers have included Rabbi Tzvi Flaum, former rabbi of Congregation Kneseth Israel in Far Rockaway and *mashgiach ruchani* of Lander College for Women; Rabbi Hershel Schachter, *rosh yeshivah* of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) and halachic consultant for the OU; Rabbi Mordechai Willig, *rosh yeshivah* and *rosh kollel* of RIETS; Eytan Kobre, an elder-care attorney in Manhattan and Dr. Beth Popp, oncologist, director of the Palliative Care Program at Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn.

"When serious illness strikes, the question is, Who makes the decision about treatment and end-of-life care—the patient, the physician or the rabbi?" asks Frank Buchweitz, director of the OU's Department of Community Services and Special Projects. "Unfortunately, illness can strike at any age, and information and education can help overcome the anxiety and stress that families facing illness experience."

The "When Illness Strikes..." symposiums have covered a variety of issues including halachic living wills and halachic hospice care.

"When, God forbid, illness strikes, it changes all the dimensions of family life," says OU President Stephen J. Savitsky, who has worked in the healthcare field for more than thirty years. "The more knowledge one has on this important topic, the easier it will be to handle the adversity."

Toby Weiss, project manager of the Department of Hospice and Palliative Care of MJHS, hopes that "people who come to these discussions will walk away with a greater understanding and deeper appreciation of what services are available to improve the quality of life for both a seriously ill patient and his family."

The OU's Department of Community Services is expanding its "When Illness Strikes..." program to meet the needs of communities around the country. Communities interested in hosting a symposium should contact Frank Buchweitz at 212.613.8188 or frank@ou.org.

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