

Miracle Ride

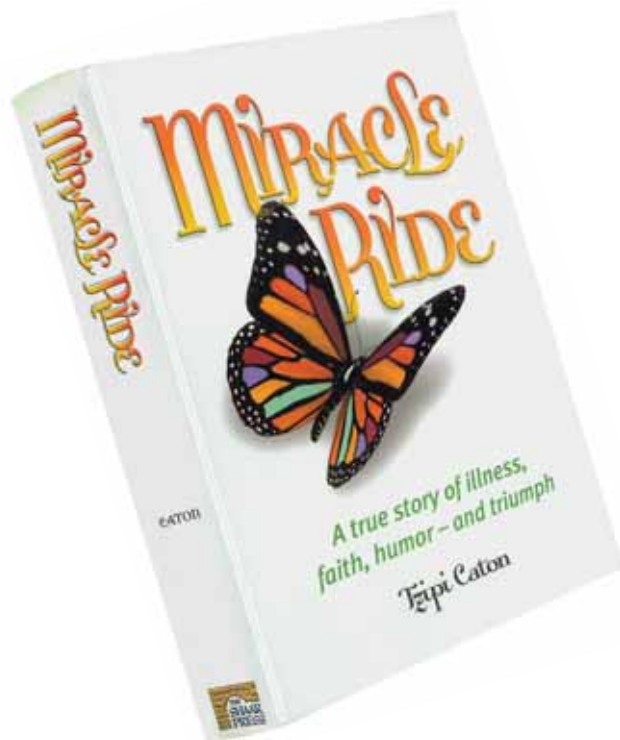
A true story of illness, faith, humor—and triumph

By Tzipi Caton

Shaar Press, 2008

314 pages

Reviewed by Dina Bar-Tov



Tzipi Caton is sixteen years old when she is diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease. In her own words, she is a "JAP ... the girl who loved everything about being a girl. The clothing, the shoes, the makeup, the shoes, the accessories, the shoes ... and did I mention the shoes?" Caton, full of what she calls "maturiosity" and what we might call mischief, is not ready to deal with cancer.

But, as her book attests, she rises to the challenge. *Miracle Ride: A true story of illness, faith, humor—and triumph* is organized in chronological order, with each chapter representing a day in the life of Caton. Fortunately, Caton has an off-center humor that keeps the reader engaged even when she is feeling her worst. Her two constant companions are a stomachache she names "David" and a headache she names "Louis."

To her credit, despite the frustration of being on the receiving end, Caton understands that allowing others to perform *chesed* is itself a form of

kindness: The taker is actually giving. The warmth that her friends, family and Chai Lifeline, a non-profit organization that provides support to the families of children with life-threatening illnesses, display permeates this book even as Caton writes about chemotherapy, nausea and the ever-present David and Louis. Caton also gives the reader some tips about doing *chesed* the right way:

- Less can be more. A note may be more welcome than a phone call, especially if the call is from someone who is not a close friend. Similarly, a single balloon with a caring note is more welcome than an expensive teddy bear that sheds and takes up space.

- A seriously ill person cannot always cope with unexpected visitors, especially if they stay for more than a few minutes. Call before you come and come when you promise. Nothing makes the reader feel worse than suffering with Caton as she waits hours for her friends to arrive, longing for a nap but not willing to miss their company.

- Nobody likes to be a charity case. There is a big difference between empathy and pity.

But even with these hints from Caton, I wonder if we can ever really get it exactly right. After all, everyone is different and I'm sure there is someone out there who would be thrilled to get a huge white cuddly teddy bear—even one that sheds. Perhaps the best we can do is to try to take the cue from the patient and proceed cautiously.

Caton's writing is somewhat uneven. Some of the action-filled chapters in *Miracle Ride* cry out for more description and personal reflection. Caton often labels emotions (she feels "excited" or "depressed") rather than let the scenes breathe on their own, which would allow the reader to reach his or her own conclusion. A dramatic confrontation in a grocery store, for example, begs for a physical description of her opponent, instead of the vague depiction of a woman "wearing a ratty old housecoat and a *tichel*." In a similar fashion, when describing photographs of herself, Caton writes: "They all came out beautiful, but when I looked back at them it was amazing to see what chemo had done to me." However, Caton neglects to actually describe the photos. Was her face gaunt or pinched?

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Had she lost a significant amount of weight? The reader doesn't know.

Nevertheless, when taking us step-by-step through her illness, Caton portrays certain scenes most vividly with details that pull us into the story: the siblings who squabble over the Chai Lifeline package, the long wait for the hospital technician to arrive, the Eveready Battery on her portable IV that *doesn't* keep going and the price of gas in New Jersey. We follow Caton from chemo to the mall, savoring the colorful characters who people this book, from rambunctious brothers to friends who, like Caton, are battling cancer. One friend, Michal, keeps her illness a secret, hiding it from friends and teachers as she copes alone. Only sending text messages to Caton saves her from despair.

But secrecy is not Caton's way. She spells out the dreaded word “c-a-n-c-e-r” clearly, challenging us as a community to drop the “yene machleh” reference that makes cancer patients feel more lonely and afraid. Caton is forthright in describing her illness, both in her journal and to everyone she meets. The Orthodox community comes in for some gentle criticism as well for its attitudes towards *shidduchim*. It may be time, Caton suggests, to give up our quest for perfection. We need to look past labels and view other people as simply that—other people. Even cancer survivors.

Even after she goes into the hoped-for remission, Caton's challenge is not over. Though she has both her hair and health back, her return to her eleventh-grade class is disappointing. When the assigned discussion topic is “hardship” and the hardship her classmates worry about is the upcoming midterms, Caton can't relate. She realizes, though, that this is her own problem. Her classmates are behaving like normal teenagers; it is she who has changed. The surprising way that she solves this problem brings us to the end of this engaging book.

Miracle Ride is written in the lively voice of this sixteen-year-old journalist. One imagines Caton carrying her notebook with her everywhere: into the classroom, the cancer wards and her doctor's office. Thus it is occasionally jarring when an adult voice comments and interferes with the natural flow as though instructing the reader how to view a particular incident. One wishes that these comments had been edited out or saved for an afterword. But these are minor flaws in a book that is inspiring and ultimately hard to put down. ■

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