

Gila Katz: A Study in Healing and Caring

By Peter L. Rotholz

When she came to after open-heart surgery to repair a congenital coronary artery fistula, a rabbi whom she had never met appeared at Gila Katz's bedside. She had just undergone a life-threatening and life-altering experience and had a need to talk. Instead of offering her comfort and friendship, however, the rabbi merely offered her his business card and left.

It was at that moment that Gila Katz made a commitment to God that she "would be there to comfort others and give them the opportunity to connect and not just give them a business card."

As a former school psychologist in the Los Angeles Unified School District and a hospital volunteer, Gila Katz has "always been drawn to people who are most in need and has recognized that giving someone comfort when they're in pain is one of the greatest *mitzvoit*. It's *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, on a one-to-one basis" she said.

Her own health problems, which involved frequent and sometimes extensive hospitalization, made her realize that "doctors and hospital staff are concerned with the 'mechanics' of healing but are not conscious of

the tremendous loneliness patients so often feel." She discussed this dilemma with her own rabbi who challenged her to do something about it.

Gila began by organizing a group of eight men and women volunteers who met periodically to study the ethics of *bikkur cholim*—the commandment to visit the sick. She also contacted the Little Company of Mary Hospital in Torrance, California, and offered her services and that of her group as volunteers to visit patients. There, she and her colleagues each gave four hours service per week, and at the same time received training in hospital requirements.

She also contacted the National Association of Jewish Chaplains and began the demanding course of study to become a Certified Jewish Chaplain. Among other requirements, this involved 1600 hours of supervised clinical work, often in a hospital or hospice setting. "Chaplains" Katz explained, "are members of the clergy who choose to minister to those in need." Katz believes that in order to be effective, a chaplain must be "a presence for someone in need who can create an opportu-



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nity for self-expression without being judgmental. When you walk in, you leave your ego at the door." There are currently 600 Jewish chaplains in the United States of whom 135 are certified and only three, including Gila Katz, are not also ordained rabbis.

As Executive Director of the Klein Chaplaincy Service of the South Bay, Gila Katz directs the only agency of its kind in the United States. It has a staff of 22 volunteers who serve some

10,000 patients and residents annually. "We create *Shabbat* for patients and also deliver Chanukah and Purim baskets and are supported by The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles as well as foundations, charitable agencies and private donations," Katz explained. The Service makes weekly visits at local hospitals, assisted living and retirement homes, nursing homes, extended care facilities, private homes as well as five area hospitals. They also provide spiritual support to psychiatric hospitals and three hospices.

In addition to her responsibilities as head of the Klein Chaplaincy Service, Gila Katz is also a Crisis Response Chaplain with the Los Angeles Police Department and a Red Cross Disaster Chaplain who served for three weeks at Ground Zero in New York following the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. She is on the faculty of the Academy for Jewish Religion in Los Angeles as well as a frequent lecturer and author of numerous articles.

Gila Katz was born in Haifa, Israel of German-Jewish parents. Her father studied with Martin Buber in Frankfurt, prior to leav-

ing Germany as a refugee from Nazism. Gila came to the United States when she was 11. She is a graduate of the State University of New York at Buffalo and holds a Master's degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio as well as an M.A. in Judaic Studies from the College of Jewish Studies in Buffalo, N.Y. She has pursued further graduate studies at The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and the University of Judaism in Los Angeles.

Gila and her husband, Julian Katz, a retired aerospace engineer and ardent sailor, live in Hermosa Beach, California, and have between them five children and five grandchildren.

Were it not for her health problems, Gila Katz might never have examined the spiritual component of open heart surgery nor asked the question, "when a doctor touches your heart, does he also touch your soul?" It was because she did ask such questions that she chose to reach out to people in great need, particularly the lonely and the dying, thereby fulfilling Judaism's commandments to comfort the sick and to help repair the world.