

I had been struggling with what my mentor called “rabbinic Chutzpah”. The confidence to go into a stranger’s hospital room, sit down, and get them to start sharing their feelings with me. On this particular day, my task was to randomly choose a Jewish patient to visit, practicing my rabbinic chutzpah and pastoral counseling skills. The patient I chose was a fifteen-year-old young woman who had recently been diagnosed with bone cancer. Chanukah was several days away, so I entered the room with gelt and dreidels, hoping to use that as a nice way to break the ice with the family. When I entered the room, the patient was watching one of my favorite movies while her parents ate lunch. She paused the movie, I sat down, and we talked about the movie for several minutes. That was it! I was in!

I then spoke with the parents, and noticed that the mother was feeling antsy and wanted to talk more, but not in front of her daughter. I asked her to talk a walk with me and immediately after we left the room she began talking. She told me the story starting with the week before when her daughter started feeling tired, collapsed at a soccer game, and was rushed to the hospital where they diagnosed her with cancer. She explained that the past week has all about her daughter and supportive that she hadn’t slept or left the hospital in a week. She also mentioned that she hadn’t had a chance to talk with anyone about how *she* was dealing with all of this, until I walked into the room.

We spoke of many things during the hour visit: her connection with the Jewish community, how she used to believe in God but she’s not sure how she can give her daughter’s illness, her worries and concerns for her family, how she’s going to give her family a meaningful Chanukah. She needed to talk, and I knew in that role I needed to listen. I have visited this family several more times in the hospital and have gotten to know more members of the family. Each time I take a walk with someone so that they can open up away from the patient and the rest of the family.

This experience has taught me a lot about Pastoral Counseling and about myself. My instinct to take them out of the hospital room to talk shows me that while they may have a large supportive family, it helps to have someone else to talk to while physically removed from the hospital room. I’m glad this was the patient I randomly chose to visit that day in December. I’m even gladder that by having “rabbinic chutzpah” I have been able to support this family. And I never even used the gelt and dreidels.