

## A Father's Story by Rabbi David J.B. Krishef

*In memory of our daughter, Bracha Pela, zikhrona livrakha.*

The night of Tuesday, July 23, 1996, was the night on which our sons Solomon and Zachary, and their sister Bracha were born. It was the night we were informed that our daughter had only a slim chance of living out the week, a night on which the Jewish traditions on the beginning and the end of life would come into sharp focus for me.

Rabbis Elliot N. Dorff and Avram Israel Reisner have written teshuvot, responsa, entitled “A Jewish Approach to End-Stage Medical Care,” and “A Halakhic Ethic of Care for the Terminally Ill,” respectively. That night and the next morning, their teachings regarding the cessation of ventilation for the terminally ill echoed in my heart. Our beautiful little daughter was dying, and by 6:00 a.m. on Wednesday morning it was the opinion of the doctor that she had no chance of surviving, and that the ventilator was merely prolonging her death, rather than extending her life. According to both rabbis, in such a case it is permitted to remove the ventilator support, and let death take its natural course.

I wept over our daughter's bed for hours Tuesday night, and apologized to her for the pain that I, through her conception, had caused. I asked her to watch over her brothers, and give them strength, and I asked her brothers to be strong, and through their presence in our life, help us to make it through the coming hours and days.

We held Bracha in our arms as she died the next morning, we kissed her and we comforted her. I can only pray that her death was made easier and less painful as a result of having two loving parents holding her at the end rather than the lying in a neonatal unit under bright lights, feeling the sensation of nurses forcefully pumping pure oxygen into her malformed lungs through a hard plastic ventilator tube, and connected by innumerable tubes and wires to various beeping machines.

After Bracha Pela died, my first thought was of k'riah. I asked the nurse for a scissors, and I ripped my shirt and said the *berakha*, *Barukh dayan ha'emet*, “Blessed is the righteous Judge.” I made a single phone call, to the Hevra Kadisha, which then notified the community, contacted the funeral home, and made all arrangements. I did not want to see or speak to anyone at that point except my immediate family - my wife and our two surviving sons, and our siblings and parents. I learned that indeed the Hevra Kadisha takes the burden off the grieving family at a time when they may not be capable of making informed decisions. Never have I appreciated the halakha of death and dying more than on the days which followed - it gave me comfort and structure, at a time when my life was cold and chaotic.