

BOX STORIES!

One of the beautiful things created by Bikur Cholim of Greater Washington are “shabbat boxes” small boxes for patients with practically everything they need to make Shabbat. A Shabbat box contains plastic candles, grape juice for kiddish and Havdallah, a challah plate and cover, a small box of spices for Havdallah and an artificial, but very nice flower in a small vase.

I realize that those who prepare boxes probably have little sense how much they mean for patients.

Although it may not seem like a lot, for a patient in an impersonal, cold, sterile hospital room it can transform their world. Having a Shabbat box can really touch patients because it enables them to bring Shabbat and a sense of home to their room. It enables them to create a sacred space in a place where the sacred seems so distant. They keep the kit for several days so the sense of home and of the sacred lingers. (When they switch rooms they will ask to bring it along) Being a patient diminishes your humanity, your sense of respect and agency. Having a Shabbat box and making Shabbat restores that sense of humanity and helps you connect with Hashem.

Every friday morning I pull a list of the Jewish patients in the hospital. I take the list and go from room to room and ask if they would like the box. I end up typically saying kiddish over and over again.

Here are three stories about the gifts of Shabbat boxes.

1. You Can't Say no to the Sister.

When I am not present the Catholic Sister or the Father deliver the boxes. Now while I have a relatively modest

rate at convincing patients to accept the boxes, my Catholic colleagues bat almost 100% Almost everyone takes a box. Why is that?

What my colleagues tell me is that they open the boxes with the patients and go through each item. They love to explain what each thing is for and how it is used. And they are overflowing with such joy “look with these candles you bring in the Shabbat” “and with these spices you smell the sweetness of the Shabbat” that their joy is contagious and the patients can’t seem to say no.

2. The Meaning of a Flower.

It is Shavuot and I am distributing Shavuot boxes. I have no idea what is inside. I visit a woman who is in for an extensive cancer treatment. She is very uncertain of the outcome and you can see the anxiety on her face.

I ask her what gives her spiritual strength and she tells me it is working in her garden. In fact just before coming in she worked for several hours in her garden, securing strength from just working in the dirt and weeding. She says “how I miss those flowers.”

We open the Shavuot box and there is a beautiful, pristine flower made out of paper. She picks up the flower delicately, as if it is made of the most fragile paper. I can see the tears in her eyes and she says with a deep heartfelt voice “I can’t thank you enough.”

3. The Candle Sticks Last a Long Time

I do not know the health status of the patients I will visit. I once visited a woman in the ICU who had just had a very serious heart procedure and her condition was marginal. She was in a coma state. I just took the candles out, said the blessing, prayed for her recovery.

I visited her the next week and she had improved. And I asked her if she wanted a box. She said shyly “I haven’t lit candles for years. It makes me sad because my mother always lit candles.” And she told me how when she was a little girl she loved to stand next to her mother, watch her light the candles and pray and feel the warmth and the mystery.

So I said “do you want to do it? Just think about being that little girl again.” And she did, and you could see her fragile and worn face begin to brighten.

She has been back to the hospital on several occasions and each time I come and bring her a Shabbat box and we bring in Shabbat together.

And she still has that first set of candles and she lights them every Shabbat and remembers the warmth and mystery of being with her mother.

Shabbat boxes contain much more than the simple items inside. It contains a chance for the patient to be restored to their humanness, to have a chance to connect with their spirit, to feel the sacred, and to begin to feel the blessings of Shabbat.