Ike many Jewish parents in the 1950s, Barbara Heller’s mother and father didn’t think nursing was good enough for their daughter. “Everyone was trying to talk me into teaching or medicine,” recalls Heller, whose career took off in the mid-1960s on the nation’s front lines—a level of dedication in medicine’s front lines—a level of dedication that’s sometimes overlooked.”

Heller pioneered the world’s first bedroom hospital in Baltimore, “from wearing a cap and tending to my father, who was my first patient, to traveling around the world and doing research.”

Heller’s career took off in the mid-1960s on the nation’s front lines—a level of dedication that’s sometimes overlooked.” In those early, uncertain days of Covid-19, the coronavirus surge at her hospital, where patients died lonely deaths in isolation units, one woman in particular forced Marcus to wrestle with her calling. “She was in her 50s, Covid-positive and a few days from passing,” Marcus recalls.

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The Good Fight A Denver mural celebrates nurses.

The once sharp line between medicine and naturopathy before deciding to be a professional for a young woman with a lot of aptitude. But I had older parents with health issues, and I felt I could do more good in nursing.”

By the time Blima Marcus was heading the nursing graduate program at the Henrietta Szold Hadassah-Hebrew University School of Nursing, What hasn’t changed, Heller adds, is that “nursing appeals to those with a nurturing side. It’s an opportunity to contribute to the welfare of the community.”

Nursing is America’s largest health care profession, with more than three million practitioners in settings as diverse as primary care offices, schools, midwife clinics, research laboratories and, of course, hospital wards. Despite the fact that, according to many accounts, Jews are underrepresented in the field, Jewish nurses have played crucial roles in

Hands-On Healing Honoring Jewish nurses of yesterday and today

By Hilary Danailova

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In those early, uncertain days of Covid-19, the coronavirus surge at her hospital, where patients died lonely deaths in isolation units, one woman in particular forced Marcus to wrestle with her calling. “She was in her 50s, Covid-positive and a few days from passing,” Marcus recalls.
So many of you responded—their experiences in the field. retired, to send us descriptions of who are nurses, both working and From aiding polio patients Jewish nurses. A former operating and meeting at a time—to concerns of trust,” says Marcus, who is ongoing need for accurate information prevalent in New York’s Orthodox communities. “There’s an ongoing need for accurate information that comes from a place of trust,” says Marcus, who is Orthodox. EMES now counts more than 30 Jewish health professionals in Orthodox communities nationwide—who respond—one phone call and meeting at a time—to concerns around circumcision, breast cancer and, now, Covid-19. Nancy Falchuk knows something about finding community with other Jewish nurses. A former operating room nurse and medical administrator as well as a past national president of Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, she co-founded in 1990 the Hadassah Nurses & Allied Health Professionals Council, the first national organization for Jewish nurses. “Nurses are the backbone of patient care,” says Falchuk, 73. “There’s a respect now for what nursing brings to health care, and that’s beautiful.” One of the Nurses Council’s youngest members is Rachel Rose Rudberg, a 23-year-old critical care nurse at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas. Rudberg knew few other Jews while studying nursing at Texas Christian University, and she rarely encounters Jewish nurses professionally, which is a primary reason she turned to Hadassah’s Nurses Council. Having endured numerous hospital stays throughout her youth—Rudberg has severe asthma and a gastrointestinal condition—she knew nursing was a good fit. “Doctors come by, but we’re the ones who really get to have the relationships with patients,” she notes. “We’re the ones guiding their care.” That care can go far beyond monitoring vital signs and catheters, administering IV’s and medications. Rudberg was moved by a young mother who was recently hospitalized for postpartum cardiomyopathy, a rare complication that causes heart failure. “When she was transferred here, her hair was muted,” Rudberg recalls. “So I brought my conditioners and my comb, and we had a pampering party.” Immunocompromised herself, Rudberg works with non-coronavirus patients, but the pandemic is not so easily bypassed. As the outbreak intensified, she says, her hospital has felt the strain of staff shortages as employees became sick or were quarantined. The Covid-19 risk has limited visitors at facilities nationwide, so Rudberg and other nurses report setting up FaceTime with families to keep patients’ spirits up.

In my second year of nursing, I was assigned to the ward for contagious diseases at Cincinnati General Hospital, which included a polio ward with iron lung patients. We gave our patients supportive care and stabilized them. Some were mentally alert but physically handicapped, as polio caused nerve damage leading to difficulty breathing and paralysis. We placed these patients in iron lung machines. Through porpoises on the side of the iron lung we fed, bathed, took vitals and gave comfort to patients. A small mirror was placed near their heads so they could look around the room. One patient had contracted polio while pregnant. After many weeks, she was able to be set up with a “rocking bed” instead of the iron lung. The bed forced the diaphragm to either pull in or force out depending on its upward or downward movement. She was able to return home and oversee the care of her infant child.

This was an unusual case, as most patients were discharged to permanent long-term facilities. Nevertheless, we were happy for this woman and her newborn and grateful for the small “win.” Ellyn Mae G. Friedman Norfolk, Va.

I have no idea what inspired me to become a nurse—maybe watching General Hospital with my grandmother. I began my nursing education in 1965, becoming a licensed practical nurse. In 1972, I graduated from a college program to become a registered nurse. Throughout nursing school, I heard frequent comments that Jewish girls do not become nurses. I worked for 44 years, hoping and thinking I might make lives a little different or better for patients. Ando Anselch Murrells Inlet, S.C.

My mother, Mildred Weissman, a Hadassah member, became a registered nurse when I was a freshman in college. She had always wanted to be a nurse but waited until all of us kids were older. She ended up inspiring me—also a Hadassah member—to become a nurse. I received a bachelor’s in nursing in 1970 and my master’s in 1980.

Once, we worked together at a Catholic hospital and introduced Hanukkah to the staff and patients. Jan Weissman Thousand Oaks, Calif.

After reading in Hadassah Magazine that Hadassah’s two hospitals needed nurses, I started the application process with Israel’s Ministry of Health. Before final approval came, the first Gulf War broke out. But the war didn’t deter me. Once approved, I flew off in January 1991 for a one-month stint in an operating room on the Mount Scopus campus, an experience I will treasure forever. This first volunteer assignment motivated me to find other humanitarian missions. I spent occasional weekends in a remote city in Mexico reached only by flying in a single-engine, two-seater plane, just a general surgeon and me. This was followed by trips to other parts of South America, mostly Ecuador, to repair cleft lips and palates in children and adults, with a team that included a plastic surgeon and anesthesiologist. We were housed with a local family, whom I am in touch with to this day. Dorothy Lasensky Irvine, Calif.
Post—another Hadassah past president and current chair of Hadassah Magazine.

“It’s a Jewish ethic, to be helping others,” says Post, 82, who grew up in the Catskills region of New York watching nurses treat polio victims. Then, as a teenager, she witnessed the nurses take care of others, “Watching nurses treat polio victims. The way nurses tended to her then-boyfriend was different than it was for Jewish nurses today. Founder of the Orthodox Jewish Nurses Association, she mentors Jewish colleagues on how to negotiate High Holiday absences and modest dress.

“We’re the voice for Jewish nursing on issues of inclusion in the workplace,” says Bressler. 47. She founded the association in 2008, starting with 50 nurses trading tips on a Facebook page. It has grown to 2,200 members from across the Jewish spectrum and was the first faith-based affiliate of the American Nursing Association.

Bressler’s journey is another example of how modern nurses shape careers around family and lifestyle. She is a gynecologist, to visits to Hadassah’s two hospital campuses in Israel. “It’s a satisfaction that you carry always,” she says. “As a nurse, you talk to the patients, change their spirit. You can hold their hand and feel that you’re getting through. You know you’re doing something good in life.”

Tobyl Danailova writes about travel, culture, politics and lifestyle for numerous publications.

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