

## FINAL The power of goodness to heal a broken heart

“To listen another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.”

(Author unknown)

On one of the first days of my chaplaincy at the NE Baptist Hospital, I did what I promised myself I would not do. I went into the intensive care unit, introduced myself and asked the nurse whether there was any patient, in particular, who she thought would benefit from a visitor.

She pointed to a room across the hall. She told me “She insists on being called ‘doctor’ although she is not one. She has pain of undetermined origin and she’s Jewish.” Hmmm, right up my alley, I thought.

I entered the room, introduced myself and this poor, tortured woman began to talk- and I listened with every ounce of compassion I had. I stood by the side of the bed. Looked directly into her eyes and I listened. After a while she started to speak about Judaism in her life. I told her that I was Jewish. She began to cry, reached out for my hand, told me she loved me and began again, to talk. This time her tone of voice was calmer, and her facial expression was relaxed. After a bit, I squeezed her hand, told her it was a pleasure to meet her. That I had to go visit another patient and I looked forward to coming back.

About an hour after I left this patient’s room, the nurse on that floor beeped me. The woman needed to go for an xray and she wouldn’t let anybody touch her to put her on the gurney. When I got to her room there was chaos. I slowly walked up to her. I smiled and I asked her what her Hebrew name was. Then, I began to sing Debbie Friedman’s *misheberach*. She held my hand and kept her desperate eyes on me. I motioned with my other hand for the staff to lift her onto the gurney. Still

holding my hand, our eyes locked together, I walked her down to the xray. I thanked her for helping us get her xray done and said I would see her later. I was simultaneously emotionally exhausted and exhilarated. I had “listened another person’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery.” She was calm. She was relaxed. Just by being present, those were gifts I gave to her. I profoundly appreciated what she had given me.

How many of you have seen the 2019 film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*? Tom Hanks plays the beloved American children’s television producer/presenter Mister Rogers. He was famous for his musical invitation at the beginning of each show: “Won’t You be, please won’t you be, my Neighbor?” But what made the show and now the movie an unusual treasure was it is an unabashed celebration of the power of human goodness and of deep listening, to heal broken hearts.

I remember when our kids were growing up, every afternoon they would sit on the sofa, eating a salad but deeply engaged in watching Mr. Rogers. Only the youngest, Gabriel, wasn’t enthralled. He told me the show was soporific!! I was inclined to agree with him until having watched the movie as a senior citizen, and a Rabbi.

In the movie, the journalist goes to meet Fred Rogers, first sitting through the production of an episode of his show, complete with puppets, toy trains and a miniature townscape. Now I realize that despite its apparent orientation toward our young children, the movie cannot be dismissed as simplistic, naïve or boring. I actually watched it twice. That was a first for me! Fred Rogers touched my soul as he had so many others, young and less young, before me. It made me feel hugged and brave and safe. It empowers me to help others feel embraced, supported and undeniably appreciated for exactly who they are. For me, it is an instruction

manual on how I want to walk through the world. It exudes human kindness, the power of deep listening and the possibility of the goodness of one, healing the brokenness of another. It brings out in me the qualities I most admire in myself, which are not always easy to share. The underlying, genuine invitation, “Won’t you be my neighbor?” and the softness of Tom Hanks’ face, melts away any hurt or anger one might feel.

The plot is based on a true story of when the real Fred Rogers met with journalist Tom Junod. His magazine had decided to run a series of short profiles around the theme of heroes. It assigned one of its most gifted journalists, Junod, to write the vignette about Fred Rogers. The journalist, however, was a troubled soul. He had a badly broken relationship with his father. The two had physically fought at his sister’s wedding. The father sought reconciliation, but the journalist refused even to see him.

The rough edges of the character showed in his journalism. Everything he wrote had a critical undercurrent as if his goal was to destroy the images of the people he had come to interview. Given the journalist’s reputation, he wondered why the children’s television star had agreed to be interviewed by him. Had Rogers not read any of his writings? It turned out that not only had he read every article of his he could get hold of; he was also the only person who had agreed to be interviewed by him.

When the journalist and Mr. Rogers met and talked, Mr. Rogers turned the journalists’ questions away from himself and back toward the journalist.

*Journalist:* You love people like me.

*Fred Rogers:* What are people like you? I’ve never met anyone like you in my

entire life.

*Journalist:* Broken people.

*Fred Rogers:* I don't think you are broken. I know you are a man of conviction. A person who knows the difference between what is wrong and what is right. Try to remember that your relationship with your father also helped to shape those parts. He helped you become who you are.

With those few brief sentences, Mr. Rogers helped reframe the journalist's self-image, as well as adding a profoundly positive attribution to his relationship with his father. Almost immediately sensing the core of unhappiness within the journalist, Mr. Rogers turned every negative question into a positive affirmation. He exuded calmness and quiet, listening deeply, in silence. In that way Mr. Rogers not only allowed but encouraged the journalist to talk about himself.

It is a remarkable experience to watch that movie, as Hanks, the character of Fred Rogers, exudes gentleness, immovable even under pressure. Assisted by his extraordinary power to listen, he with love and deep listening, allowed the journalist to acknowledge his own failings vis-à-vis his father. Fred Rogers proceeded gently, to give the journalist the emotional strength to forgive his father. In real life, the journalist and his father ultimately became reconciled within the limited time they had together with the family, before his father died.

Fred Rogers exudes love, acceptance and kindness. He is a rare, loving soul but he is not unique. Each of us has the capacity to be like that.

Rabbi Shai Held, recently gave a short zoom seminar entitled "Forgiveness and Love as a way of looking at others." As he understands it, those two characteristics, love and forgiveness, are integral parts of teshuva. "Do we have a

moral duty to forgive people who have hurt us-Always? Sometimes? Never? Does the obligation to forgive depend on whether or not the sinner has apologized? And, how, if at all, does God’s presence in our lives, potentially change things?”<sup>1</sup> The first three questions are interesting to ponder, but for another time. For now, I’d like to address the issue of God’s presence in our lives. Because teshuva itself is not mentioned in Torah, how, according to rabbinic writings, can our relationship with God, affect our ability to do teshuva?

We are created in the image of God. Ours is a forgiving God, Torah both tells us and demonstrates. We, therefore, must also be forgiving. Rabbi Held wrote that seeing through a lens of love “is pivotal to the process of interpersonal forgiveness.” He describes forgiveness as it is presented in Maimonides classic code of Jewish law, the Guide for the Perplexed. “First, one who wounds another person must apologize and conciliate them. Second, the one who was hurt must not be obdurate or be cruel toward the offender but should forgive him, when he apologizes. Third, Maimonides emphasizes the mitzvah of rebuke, [*tochecha* in Hebrew]. “When a person sins against another, the injured party should not hate the offender and keep silent.... Rather it is [his] duty to inform the offender and ask him, ‘Why did you do this to me? Why did you sin against me in this manner?’”<sup>2</sup> And to ask those questions not from a place of anger, but rather from one of genuine curiosity. “It is aimed not at expressing judgment, but arriving at understanding... It is not meant to uncover a vulnerability or a weakness, in which case we might be more likely to *excuse* [the other] rather than *forgive* them....the

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Shai Held-Forgiveness and love as a way of looking at others; Teshuva and transformation: a Yom Iyyun for Rabbis 2023

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Shai Held, Judaism is about love (forthcoming in 2024)

goal is to look at the whole person ...also find virtues....and render them meritorious.”<sup>3</sup>

Toward the end of the Mr. Rogers movie, we see the real Mrs. Rogers talking with the journalist. He asks her “what is it like to live with a saint?” “Oh,” Mrs. Rogers responded, “Mr. Rogers is not a saint-he practices! He practices swimming as fast and as long as he can. He practices punching a pillow. And he diligently practices being patient and kind and loving.” Love is a form of listening and seeing, which also needs practice. Love, listening and really seeing are the underlying forces behind teshuva. It does not come easily. We too must practice. Each one of us is vulnerable. Together as a community with compassion and understanding, we are less so.

All of us have been affected by events in our past. But we need not be determined by them.

All of us can “listen another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery”, each in our own way.

We need to honor the interior landscape of our own lives as well as those of others because the power of both *speaking with* and *listening to* another person can heal even the most broken hearts. Each of us has that power within-despite that it might need cultivating and loving attention. Coming together and listening in community is part of that practice.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l, wrote that the ultimate purpose of Judaism is “to honor the image of God in other people, and thus turn the world into a home for the divine presence.” That is surely the most powerful motivation in my life. It is also the lifeblood of our loving and caring community.

May we all be blessed during this new year, to honor the image of God in ourselves and in each other; to practice being genuinely curious and strive to understand why we sometimes do what we do or say what we say to each other. And may God help us, as we engage with deep caring, to hear, to see and to speak with each other through a lens of love-remembering that we are God’s co-creators striving for a just, peaceful, compassionate and loving world.

Shana Tova....

Shana Tova u'metukah, I wish for each of you and all of us together, a year of sweetness and love, of courage and hope, of deep listening and of gratitude.