

D'Var At TBZ For Metzora on April 5, 2014 (Men's Shabbat Service)

Parshat Metzora deals with an awkward and perhaps uncomfortable topic: how people with leprosy were completely cut off from the Jewish community before they were cleansed.

This makes me think of 2 topics which may initially seem to be incongruent but that I believe are related. One topic is the importance of having compassion for those who have challenges. The second topic is attempting to view those who initially appear to be disadvantaged in a new light of strength gained from life experience.

Regarding having compassion for those in our community who are particularly challenged, Jewish literature has often referenced the importance of having compassion for the poor, widowed, and orphaned. In my Mussar Group we are currently focused on the soul trait (middah) of kavod – to treat others with honor and respect – not just for those in our world who are similar to us and/or who are doing well – but for those who may be strangers, or different than us, or less fortunate.

When I was initially diagnosed with my first bout with cancer in 2008 I was on chemotherapy for 7 months. I would go to Dana Farber for chemo 2 out of every 3 Fridays. At Dana Farber I would observe and encounter other cancer patients and their caretakers. All of the cancer patients are ill; some are very ill. Some are going to die from cancer. Many of the cancer survivors will have short or long term side effects from the treatment protocols. Chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery can be very physically challenging. Many of the cancer patients lose their hair and wear wigs or head coverings. Many cancer patients look frail. And, over time I've noticed that healthy people who are not familiar with these challenges have definite difficulties engaging cancer patients; they sometimes have internal fears which result in them having real awkwardness in engaging cancer patients; they are unable to talk with the patients, to listen with empathy, or to touch the patients. This can lead to cancer patients (or anyone with a major or chronic illness) to feel shunned and isolated.

Another example of those who need compassion are the elderly. Both of my parents are deceased. My father died 12 years ago and my mother died 4 years ago. My mother lived until almost 90. She lived a healthy life until the last year of her life which involved 3 mild heart attacks and open heart surgery. During this time in addition to needing to incur many hospital visits, she needed to be relocated from an independent living facility to an assisted living facility. I devoted much time and energy to my mother. In particular, in my mother's last year of life I focused greatly on how I could best support her emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. What I eventually realized is that as much as anything she needed to be held. It became obvious to me that many people have great difficulty touching the elderly. My mother, who had been a very attractive/statuesque woman when she was younger, became quite frail in her last year of life; she lost most of her hair, walked slowly in a walker, and eventually lost use of her legs. During some particularly challenging times during her last year of life, I realized

that she simply needed to be held. I would lie down with her and closely hold her – for up to 1-2 hours; while we lay down together, we barely spoke. I just let her feel my deep caring, support, empathy, and love. She felt safe, validated, and connected.

As I explored the topic of those who may appear to have challenges, I was inspired by a book written by Malcolm Gladwell titled “David and Goliath”. This book was based on the famous story about how David, as a shepherd who was the clear underdog, triumphed over the giant Goliath. In this book, Gladwell presents numerous examples of those who initially appeared to be weak or disadvantaged who actually had many not so obvious strengths.

From reading Gladwell’s book, my thoughts turned to my experience with other cancer patients at Dana Farber. As I encountered other cancer patients during my months of chemotherapy, I saw inner fortitude in these patients’ eyes and their attitude towards their illness. When I received chemotherapy I was always in a room with 2-3 other cancer patients who were being treated; this communal set-up was by design at Dana Farber. More often than not, as patients we should share our lives with each other – our successes and our weaknesses, hopes and fears, etc. And, we all benefitted from providing support for each other and for being supported. This environment filled with ill patients became a warm, safe, and beautiful haven.

After my cancer treatment I volunteered at Dana Farber. Almost all of the volunteers were cancer survivors (and some caretakers). Dealing with a life threatening illness emboldened us all. It had become crystal clear to this group that only a few things were important in life – to be loving and to be connected with others – this knowledge was a gift that transformed our lives.

Regarding my mother, while we had always been close, we became much closer after the void created when my father passed away. And, my mom and I became extremely close during her last year of life. That year was full of love, support, and gratitude. My mother transformed during her last year of life. And, while my mother, who was physically beautiful when she was younger and became physically very frail in her later years, she never looked more beautiful to me as when she was 89 and we would quietly lay down together and experience the beautiful connection of mother and son.

Soon it will be Pesach. Many of us will be at Seders – often with people close in our lives. Rav Claudia has on occasion spoken about purposely inviting strangers to our Seders so that we can truly have empathy for those who are alone and need to feel connected. May we all have a nice Pesach holiday; and, as we explore what it means to be enslaved may we gain empathy and perspective for those who feel isolated and not valued.

Shabbat shalom.

Intro:

I am dedicating this d'var to honor the memory of Larry Diamond who passed away suddenly and unexpectedly this past fall. As some of you know, Larry was a member of TBZ for a number of years and co-led the TBZ Men's Study Group with me for the past 3 years. He was a tremendous inspiration to me.