

Yizkor 5763
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Healing Words Healing Touches

From the very beginning of our lives, sound and touch are so important. Even before a child is born, parents spend time singing or reading to him just so the baby will recognize their voices when he is born. Before Dahvi was born, Matt and I would talk, sing and tell stories to my stomach in hopes that she would hear us and recognize our voices when she was born. And there was nothing like holding her close when she was born and as she grew feeling her cuddle close to me and then smothering each other with kisses when we wake up in the morning. What's most amazing to me is how a simple kiss on an "owie" can make everything feel better. Dahvi might fall and hit her knee or elbow and run to Matt or me asking for a kiss to make it all better. And you know what, it works! She really does feel better with this simple touch. Even as she is growing older she reaches for our hands as we walk together.

How amazing that simple actions like kisses and hugs, loving words and touches can provide comfort. Even in our own lives do we listen for those familiar voices and reach for a loving hand. And in our lives, when we seek healing do we even more so listen and reach.

According to a story in Woman's Day magazine, every day since five-year-old Michael heard he was going to have a baby sister he would touch his mommy's tummy and sing "You Are My Sunshine."

Unfortunately, baby Sarah was born in critical condition. Doctors warned the family that she would not last through the week. Michael was unaware of the crisis and kept insisting he wanted to see his sister and sing to her. Though children weren't allowed in intensive care, his mother decided, rules or no rules, Michael would sing to Sarah once more before she passed away.

When an efficient but unfriendly nurse saw Michael she bellowed, "Get that kid out of here. Now!" But mom was adamant: "Not until he sings to his sister."

Michael looked at the tiny infant girl, touched her cheek and began to sing: "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. Please don't take my sunshine away."

As he sang, Michael's mom noticed that the baby's breathing became easier. Tearfully, she said, "Keep singing, Michael, keep singing." And the more Michael sang, the more relaxed the baby became. Even the nurse was overcome by what was going on right before her very eyes and she whispered, "Keep singing, Michael, keep singing."

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You'll never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don't take my sunshine away." Soon, the baby fell into a calm, healing sleep. Within days the baby was well enough to take home.

Baby Sarah needed to hear that familiar voice. There was something soothing about her brother singing to her. Something familiar that she focused on and was able to finally relax and be able to breath more easily.

When have we reached out with the desire to hear a familiar voice? What voice do you hear when you are in need of strength? Is it your mother or father? Is this the same voice that still comes to you when you are in need? Or does this voice still resonate somewhere deep down inside providing guidance just at the right moment? We may even hear those voices from our past, voices of those who are no longer with us today.

I can still hear my Gramma Thelma's voice, especially when I'm in the kitchen. And sometimes even more so as I teach my daughter Dahvi how to bake just as Gramma Thelma did. Or my Gramma Mary's soft soothing voice who

shared stories of her family in Iron Mountain, Michigan. And most recently, I hear my Uncle Jay's quivering quiet voice as he recalled incredible stories especially from World War II. My familial voices seem to be filled with storytellers encouraging me to pass on these stories from them to my own family and on to the future. They are voices of comfort and guidance and sometimes even voices providing a boost to move forward through a challenge.

But sometimes we need a touch as well. A hug can be so powerful. One person putting their arms around another providing a sense of comfort and protection. Especially in times of greatest need, during an illness, do we need touch. We read in the Talmud that when Rav Hiyya ben Abba was ill, Rav Yohanan went to visit him. Rav Yohanan asked Rav Hiyya if his illness was welcome to him. Rav Hiyya replied no. So Rav Yohanan asked him for his hand and held it and it is said that he helped him to heal. Rav Yohanan later fell ill himself and another man, Rav Hanina went to visit him and held his hand. However, the question is, if Rav Yohanan was able to help Rav Hiyya when he was ill, why couldn't he help himself? The reason that the sages of the Talmud tell us is you cannot heal yourself with your own touch. You need that touch of someone else.

A couple of years ago I visited a friend in the hospital. He had just had a heart attack and the outlook was uncertain. I walked into his room and saw him lying motionless in his bed. I approached his side and began stroking his head and talking to him. For some time I sat there continuing to stroke his head and speaking to him and praying. Later, when I spoke to my friend he told me that it was my touch that brought him back to a consciousness of that moment. He had no recollection of anything from the time he blacked out until that moment when I touched his head and stroked his hair. He could not respond but he heard and felt everything. This is why we are commanded to visit the sick, because along with the doctors and nurses who are providing the medical treatment necessary to heal the body, we can provide the touch and words necessary to heal the soul and mind.

Whose touch do you feel right now? Who do you long to hold you and make everything feel alright? Think about that person you want to hold you right now. (pause)

When we know that a loved one is sick, we recite words of *Mi Sheberach*, prayers for healing. But healing and curing are two different things. "Healing" does not imply a kind of magical or supernatural cure for or intervention in someone's illness or suffering. When we recite *Mi Sheberakh*, we ask for "*refu'ah shelemah, refu'at hanefesh, urefu'at haguf*-a full healing, of soul and of body." The understanding of the term "healing" is not necessarily that one's physical condition should improve. What is sought after is a sense of comfort. What is possible is peace of mind and body with one's circumstance, and the acceptance that maintains or rediscovers hopefulness and faith, however such hope and faith are understood by the individual.

Visits by friends and loved ones when we are sick bring comfort and *re'fuah shleimah*. As do services for healing. A woman suffering with cancer named Shira came to one particular healing service at her synagogue. During this service images of Miriam's well which are said to have had healing qualities were incorporated through song and dance. When approaching the bima for this service, Shira danced a slow rhythmic dance down the aisle as her husband carried her oxygen tank behind her. She was dancing toward Miriam's well seeking a moment of healing. Shira had the courage to live in that moment with hope and presence of self even as her body was deteriorating. Shira's dance illustrates that healing is possible, even when a cure of the body is not. In that moment of the Healing Service, Shira could stand in the presence of others and be witnessed, embodying a prayer of wholeness, even when fracture loomed: dancing with simple praise for life, even in the face of death.

"It isn't always possible to cure, but healing always is possible." The implication is that healing is not about the alleviation of physical symptoms, but rather about drawing upon Jewish resources and the Jewish community to develop strength, courage, a positive identity, a sense of meaning, and the feeling of belonging both to an ancient tradition and to a caring community. Unfortunately, when an individual is ill, he or she suffers alone. But this does not have to be the case nor should it ever be.

Each of us has the power to provide healing if only we reached out and tried. All it requires is a touch and a kind word. And even when the end is imminent, these touches and words can guide a loved one on as they pass on from this place to the next. And these touches and words give us comfort as we say goodbye.

At this Yizkor moment, we seek healing for our own pain that is rooted so deep within us. This pain is the pain of loss and the fear of loneliness. Yet we sit here in this sanctuary together remembering. Each of us here today has experienced a loss. And each of us has the power to heal. Our voices will rise up together when we recite familiar words of psalms, blessings and Kaddish and these words will bring us comfort. But let us also take a moment to use the power of touch. Now extend your hand to someone near you, feel the power that a single touch can invoke, and remember. Allow it to provide comfort and allow yourself to be comforted. And when we leave from this place of worship, may we hold on to the image of Michael singing to his sister or Shira as she danced toward the well. And may we provide healing for others and may we allow healing for ourselves.