

Sermon/Drasha Shabbos Chol HaMoed Pesach (5773/2013):An Empathetic Sense of Touch

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The traditional five senses in humans are vision, hearing, taste, and smell, and touch. If you had to choose, which sense would you say is most important? At first thought, many of us would choose sight, or maybe hearing; after all, to get around in the world we mainly rely on our eyes and ears. Touch, however, is a sense that's significantly unappreciated - and is absolutely vital in the way we understand and experience the world.

I don't know if you ever thought about it, but the sense of touch is the only of the 5 senses not centered in the face. Our sense of touch is located and accessible throughout the entire body, inside and out. At this moment you can feel with your fingers the arm rest on your chair -- and if you remain completely still and pay attention, you can feel your heart beating. The sense of touch is the earliest to develop in the human embryo. The skin is the largest sensory organ of the body -- and perhaps next to the brain, the skin is the most important of all the organ systems. There are perhaps two dozen physical functions performed by the skin, one of which is a base for sensory receptors, the seat of the most delicate of the senses, touch.

But as important as touch is physiologically, it is as important, or more important behaviorally. Think about common expressions we use:

We speak about 'rubbing' people the wrong way, and of 'abrasive' and 'prickly' personalities. There's the person who has a 'magic touch', a 'delicate touch', and all he 'touches turns to gold'. To describe someone as generous or easily taken advantage of, we say he's a 'soft touch.' In the constant search for human contact we get into 'touch' or 'contact' with others. Some people are 'hard' to deal with, others are 'softies'. Some people have to be 'handled' carefully (with 'kid gloves').

We speak of someone who is quick to take offense or oversensitive as 'touchy'. Some people are 'thick-skinned', others are 'thin-skinned'; some people get 'under our skin.' When we speak of someone either unavailable or who is removed from reality, we say that he is 'out of touch' or 'lost his grip, and someone who isn't quite 'all there' is 'a little bit touched.' Things are either 'tangible' or 'intangible'. The 'feel' of a thing is in many ways important to us. A deeply felt experience is 'touching'

Can you feel what I'm saying?

Some cultures experience and relate to the sense of touch differently than others. In 1971, Ashley Montagu, the British-American humanist and anthropologist wrote a landmark book titled: *Touching, the Human Significance of the Skin*. In speaking about Jews -- of all subjects -- Montagu wrote the following:

The Jews, as a tribe, culture or people, are characterized by a high degree of tactility. "The Jewish Mother" has become a byword, for her deep and consuming care for her children. This

meant that until recent times the children were breastfed on demand, that there were a great deal of fondling of children by mother, father, and siblings. Hence, Jews tend to be tactually very demonstrative and it is considered perfectly normal for an adult male to continue to greet his father with a kiss and an embrace and to do so also on parting. In 50 years of close observation I have only once seen an adult American male (in this case in his middle twenties) publicly greet his father with a kiss.

The Vilna Gaon tells us that the sense of touch is centered at the essence of the human being, and that the sense of touch reveals the true identity of an object. One very positive form of touch – the caring touch of true empathy -- is something that every caring human being, and certainly, every Jew, must have.

When Ronald Reagan was first campaigning for the Presidency, he was confronted at one of his appearances by an 80-year-old woman. She stood up in the audience and commented on his speech, then asked, "What about the old folks? Haven't you forgotten us?"

Reagan was already one of the oldest men to ever campaign for, and later win, the Presidency. He simply smiled at her and answered gently, "Forget you? Heavens, how could I ever forget you? I am one of you!"

The Torah requires us to be empathetic, not simply sympathetic. The *mishna* in *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of the Fathers) says that one of the 48 ways with which the Torah is acquired is through being *nosay b'ol chaveiro* -- to carry the burden of your friend. What's the difference between sympathy and empathy?

When you're feeling down, has anyone ever slapped you on the back and said, "C'mon, cheer up – you've got everything to live for!" You probably felt like telling him or her to get lost. Why? Because even though they were trying to help, they didn't feel where you were at. When someone is physically hurt, everyone runs for bandages, CPR, whatever it takes. But when the pain is emotional or spiritual, if someone is depressed and suffering, we don't know what to do. So we either avoid the situation, or just extend platitudes.

It's like the story of the city fellow who came to the fork in the road. An old farmer was standing in a field nearby. "Hey, old-timer," shouted the man, "does it make any difference which road I take?" The old man answered, "Not to me, it don't."

Sympathy and empathy are both acts of feeling, but with sympathy you feel *for* the person; you're sorry for them or pity them, but you don't specifically understand *what* they're feeling. You extend your sympathies. But when it comes to empathy, it takes imagination, work, or possibly a similar experience to get to empathy. Empathy can best be described as feeling *with* the person. Notice the distinction between for and with.

Nosay b'ol chaveiro. Share the burden *with* your friend. We'll naturally help someone who cut their finger. But we have to extend ourselves to share another's pain. Don't go through life like it's an obstacle course, avoiding people who are in pain. Because in truth, a broken heart is

worse than a broken arm. Don't leave a person alone in their struggles, whether they're conscious of them or not: challenges of self-respect, unfulfilled plans, failures, doubts, inadequacies and worried. We've got them, and there's not a person alive who doesn't have them, also.

How can we better empathize with others?

1) Put Yourself in His Place.

Despite the problem, people often cover up their true emotions. Don't always assume that what appears on the outside is a reflection of the inside. Someone may look neat and orderly, yet inside he is in terrible turmoil. The first step in sharing the burden is to see others as real people, not as objects. It's accepted social behavior to greet people with a hearty, "How are you!" – but the last thing we want is for them to actually tell us!

Put yourself in the other guy's shoes. How does it feel to be elderly? Weak? Hard of hearing? Without teeth? To lose a parent? How is he feeling his first day on the job? What's it like moving into a new neighborhood? Ask yourself: If I was him, how would I feel? The clerk in the post office has a tough job. What's he going through?

2) Where is He Coming From?

All of us use powers of perception – instinctive, emotional or intellectual – to size up people. We do this subconsciously. When somebody sits next to us on the plane, we're figuring him out. We can do it consciously, if we decide to.

We all get into arguments with other people, and wonder how they can possibly think that way! That's why we need to see the world from our critic's perspective. Someone walks into the shul for the first time -- where are they coming from? What are they thinking? What are they feeling?

3) Share the Burden

To appreciate the problems encountered by a blind person, try blindfolding yourself for a day. This makes you real with the suffering of others, and you'll be more responsive when others need help. When a person knows you understand what he is feeling, the burden instantly becomes lighter.

This applies to a sick person, too. Your visit can make him feel better – even healthier. The Talmud says that visiting a sick person takes away one-sixtieth of their illness. That doesn't mean that if sixty people visit, he'll be cured -- but if you spend the time and he knows that you feel with him, you've lightened his burden. You may not realize it, but it helps.

Beyond this, don't just empathize. See if there is a way to get directly involved to help ease the burden. For a sick person, that might mean opening the window, a foot rub, or praying with him.

4) Reaching Out to Humanity

Eventually you have to widen your horizons. Become keenly sensitized to all suffering – even those you don't know. When you hear an ambulance go by, feel for whoever might be in distress. Feel how it is to be isolated at home and unable to move around. Feel what it's like to be poor and what that means for one's self-respect. Feel for those who are most vulnerable – widows and orphans. Feel the suffering of people you will never meet – about the plight of strangers halfway around the world.

Otherwise you become callous.

And in particular, feel for our fellow Jews

You can walk around claiming to be a good person, and you can talk about, but unless you feel it inside, you're not dealing with realities.

A human being can spend his life blind and deaf and completely lacking the senses of smell and taste, but can't survive at all without the functions performed by the sense of touch. The experience of Helen Keller, who became deaf and blind in infancy, whose mind was literally created through the stimulation of her skin, shows us that when other senses fail, the sense of touch can to an extraordinary degree compensate for their deficiencies.

We only say half-*Hallel* (Psalms of praise) on the last days of Pesach and Intermediate days, because though we were saved at the Red Sea, the Egyptians drowned. The angels wanted to sing *shira* (a song of rejoicing) but were stopped by Hashem. The Almighty wants us to be empathetic to the suffering of others.

Allow your heart to be touched by Hashem. Work on sharing your friend's burden, and strive to develop a true sense of empathy.

-- adapted in part from Rabbi Noah Weinberg's "Way # 39: Share the Burden"