

THE POWER OF LOVE

[With thanks to Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben for sharing the stories]

Recently I read a story about an eight-year-old girl with severe emotional challenges who went shopping for shoes with her sister. The little girl happened to bump against a shoe rack in the middle of the store and the entire rack came crashing down. The nearby saleswoman was already having a hard day, and when this happened she simply flipped out, and started yelling at the girl to pick up the shoes she knocked over. Of course she didn't notice how frightened, and confused the child was by all of this tumult.

The little girl started shaking her head back and forth and yelling, "NO, no, no, I'm not going to do it, leave me alone!"

Fortunately, her older sister knew exactly what to do. She simply knelt down, smiled at her little sister reassuringly, gave her a hug, and began to pick up the shoes herself. As she continued to smile and speak quietly to her, the eight-year old slowly calmed down and began picking up the shoes as well.

When all the shoes were picked up and they rose to leave, the older sister looked at the flustered clerk and said, "You've just got to love her into doing what's right."

"You've just got to love her into doing what's right." Easy to say, not always so easy to do. For any of us. And oddly enough, it often seems to be the most difficult for us to do with the people we already love. They say "you always hurt the ones you love," and there is a lot of truth in that. Loved ones can hurt us the most. Perhaps it's because we are at our most vulnerable with those who know us best. Perhaps it's because the more connected we are, the more intense all emotions are, positive and negative. Perhaps it's because we crave approval from those we love much more than we do from strangers, and so when they withhold that approval it cuts much more deeply.

I have seen many examples of the pain our loved ones can cause us. No one comes to my office seeking advice on what to do when a stranger hurts their feelings. Many come to pour out their hearts about the hurt they experience with a difficult child, an unfaithful spouse or even a parent who has always been distant or emotionally abusive. Some are struggling with one particular event, and wondering how to get past it. Others are dealing with behavior that has been going on for years, even their entire lifetimes. How does love continue in the face of that?

Tonight I want to share with you a story about that question. I learned it from Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben, who shared it with his congregation several years ago. He knows it very well, because it's the story of his wife, Didi, and her mother, Florence.

Florence was dealt a rotten hand by life. Her mother died giving birth to her. Her father struggled as a single man to take care of her as best he could, but when she was still a small child he fell off a roof and died. Florence was put in an orphanage and then taken in by a family with a sick mother whom they somehow expected Florence to help take care of at the tender age of five.

When that of course did not work out, she was put in the care of a neighboring family, but since she was never officially adopted she always felt like the black sheep who never really belonged anywhere.

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So as you might suspect, she grew up angry, withdrawn, insecure, without the role model of a loving parent. She learned that emotional safety only came from retreating within herself, keeping everyone at arms' length, never allowing yourself to be vulnerable, and finding ways to use your intelligence, knowledge and sharp tongue as a weapon to keep others from getting close enough to hurt you ever again.

Having been deprived of a real family her entire life, when, as a young woman she met Didi's father who was one of eight very close brothers and sisters who were intimately connected and involved daily with their own loving mother and father, she thought at first she had discovered paradise, and eagerly jumped into a marriage she thought looked like the Garden of Eden of family bliss.

Of course, it was too good to be true. Yes, they had an incredibly close, almost pathologically intertwined family, but once Florence got married, she quickly realized it was their family, not hers. And once again she constantly felt like the odd person out, the one who simply didn't belong in this picture. And it broke her heart and made her bitter all over again.

So you might say she came by her abusive behavior honestly. The biting sarcasm, the endless put downs directed toward her own two children to whom she would never allow herself to be vulnerable enough to show love and affection. She had tried that route and all she had gotten was rejection and pain. Perhaps unconsciously, Florence had decided never to be vulnerable again, and as a result, throughout her entire life Didi never heard the words "I love you" from her mother. Instead, Florence hid whatever maternal feelings she had behind cutting remarks, verbal put downs and abusive insults that continued for sixty years.

Florence Davis Cohen, Didi's mom, died a few years ago after a long, slow decline of congestive heart failure and multiple complications. But the end of her life was nothing like the beginning. Because by the time the end had come, Florence had finally discovered the meaning and power of love.

Here is what happened. On Didi's 60th birthday she made a resolution about her mom. She told her husband, "I have decided to love her into doing what's right. I've decided not to let my mom determine the kind of relationship we have. When my mom comes to the end of her life, I want to know that I have been the daughter I wanted to be, regardless of the mother that she chooses to be."

So Didi simply chose love. "My mom has never really experienced unconditional love in her entire life," she said. "She doesn't know what it looks like, she doesn't know what it feels like. I've been afraid of her, terrorized by her really my entire life. But I'm 60 years old and I can choose a different path. I am going to show my mother what love is, how to love, and before she comes to the end of her life, she is going to know what love feels like and she is going to tell me that she loves me."

So every week she would visit her mom in the nursing home, and every day when she would call and speak to her mom, no matter how abusive she might be, no matter how many times her mom would tell her she was fat, or comment on how ugly her hair looked, or that she was ugly, Didi would reply "I love you mom, thanks for all you did for me and taught me as a child."

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And when it was time for Didi to leave after one of her visits, she would walk over to her mom, kiss her on her cheek, and then turn and literally place her own cheek on her mother's mouth in order to simulate a kiss coming back from mother to daughter.

Didi went on a campaign to single-handedly create a loving relationship with her mother. Every time they spoke, every time she visited, no matter what her mother would say, no matter how degrading or abusive, Didi responded with love, patience, and more love. Over and over and over again, she chose love.

Rabbi Reuben is a little ashamed to say that he wasn't very supportive of what she was doing. It was very difficult to be on the sideline and watch, doing nothing, while his wife continued to take the verbal abuse from her mother that she had endured her entire life. But Didi had a plan, and she chose love anyway, time and again, and in the end, it changed not only the life of her mother, but her life as well.

Every time she would leave her mom, she would kiss her mom on the cheek then turn and literally place her own cheek on her mother's lips, and get nothing in return – no movement at all. But without judgment or comment, she'd turn and smile at Florence and say, "I love you mom, see you next Thursday," and then walk away once again.

Visit after visit, week after week, month after month, the same ritual: Didi is about to leave, she kisses her mom on the cheek, then turns and places her own cheek on her mom's lips for a moment – and nothing happens. She turns back to Florence with a smile and simply says, "I love you mom, see you next Thursday," and leaves again.

Now imagine if you can that one, life-transforming moment, when Didi kissed her mom on the cheek, turned and placed her cheek on her mom's lips as she had done so many times before, and suddenly felt this: (kiss).

She was so overwhelmed by that small kiss that she almost cried. She turned, practically holding her breath, and said to Florence as always, "I love you mom," and sure enough, her mother looked at her and for the very first time she could ever remember in her entire life, quietly said, "I love you too, Didi." And with that everything changed.

Florence had always been resentful and jealous that Didi had a closer relationship with her dad than with her. You know fathers and daughters. Plus they had been divorced nearly 40 years and Florence never got remarried, but rather carried the resentment of that divorce and rejection like an open wound.

So imagine what a shock it was when one of the very last things Florence ever said to Didi was, "I forgive you." "You forgive me?" Didi said. "What do you forgive me for mom?" "For loving your father more than me."

Did had given her mother a priceless gift. What price can you put on love? And when Didi said to her mom, "When you die I will miss you every single day," it was almost more than Florence could bear to hear, because it was the most love she had experienced in all the 88 years of her life. How tragic, how heartbreaking, and what a powerful lesson for all of us.

After Florence died, Didi said, "It hurt me so much to see how instead of counting her many blessings of life she discounted them every day. I couldn't let her die without recognizing those blessings. If you don't recognize them it's the same as not having them at all, and I just couldn't

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let that happen. I decided I would make it my job to give her the opportunity to see the blessings that she had.

After all, most of my life I was so busy being angry with her for all the bitter, hostile, jealous, abusive things she did and said, that it never even occurred to me, that I might have the power to make a difference in both our lives.”

“I realized suddenly that I had the power in me to help her redeem her own life, and there is a sadness that I didn’t figure it out sooner. Perhaps she would have discovered her own capacity to love sooner, as well.”

And this is what Rabbi Reuben had to say. “The power of unconditional love is hard to deny, for the end of Florence’s life was light years better than the beginning. Those last weeks she was surrounded by the love of family - her daughter, her son, her son’s ex-wife, her son’s loving girlfriend, and me. It was actually stunning to see the miracle of Florence that last week of her life hugging her son and telling him for the first time, ever, “Eddie, I love you,” and ending every single phone conversation with Didi and every time they parted with “I love you, too Didi”

This is one of the most powerful lessons I have ever heard about what teshuva really means. It is about repentance, yes, but it is also about forgiveness. It is about how love can bring redemption and transform a life. As he witnessed the end of Florence’s life, Rabbi Reuben was reminded that it is never too late to do the right thing.

There are many of you sitting here tonight thinking the same thing that Didi did for so many years. Sitting with a month or a year or a lifetime of anger and resentment, telling yourself, “It’s up to her to call, it’s up to him to visit, it’s up to her to write, it’s up to him to apologize. After all, I’m the injured party, he has to say something first, she has to come to me,” and on and on we tell ourselves the same story over and over again. On a purely objective level, you might even be correct. But if you continue to live in that place, the “I’m right” place, then one day, usually without warning, you will run out of time. There will be nothing more to wait for and it will no longer be possible for anyone to do anything. You will simply run out of time, run out of opportunities to make it right, to break through the anger and resentment and fix a relationship that once was and still is important to you.

Whether the breach has lasted a month, or a year or sixty years, while you both are alive, it is never too late to do the right thing. Didi lived love, and that made all the difference - to touch a soul, to change a life, to repair a relationship. What could be a greater gift than that in this New Year?