



Inight-Shabbaton Reflections

By Mrs. Chana Leah Rapoport

As we were saying goodbye, my cousin-one of the coordinators of the Shabbaton-said, “You can write your impressions. You may even win the raffle prize.” And then she added, “Actually, you don’t need any of the prizes. They are for the visually impaired people.” I felt that same pang, the emotion that had been accompanying me since stepping into the magical zone called *Insight Beyond Eyesight*. It’s a mixture of awe, gratitude, and respect, which I felt as I was immersed in a world that I had never experienced and knew very little about.

My nametag said CHANA RAPOPORT, GUEST LECTURER. “Are you here to inspire us?” asked one of the guests. I was brought in to inspire them, but of course, that’s not what happened, not at all. One of the first things that I observed on Friday afternoon was an active ball game that visually impaired children and their siblings were playing. By following the sound that the ball made, the children were able to catch, roll, and direct the ball. The seeing siblings were wearing blindfolds. When they had difficulty, they simply took off their blindfolds and chased the ball. Of course, the blind children did not have this luxury. Their blindfolds are on, permanently on. For me, this became the metaphor of Shabbos. I felt like my blindfold came off. I CAN TAKE MY BLINDFOLD OFF. That was my first thought. I don’t have a blindfold. I can see. Boruch Hashem. I can see. And then, if I can see- I MUST see. There are things that I have to learn, and I have to see. By the time Shabbos was over, I felt like my blindfold had come off. Indeed, I learned so much from the people I met.

I learned from the mothers of the visually impaired children, the ones who are just starting the journey, who have infants and babies whose eyes are unfocused but whose curiosity and intelligence are very much intact. “I don’t actually know what she sees,” said one mother. I watched as her two-year-old reached out for a toy truck in front of her and pushed it back and forth, though her eyes were not following. “Her older sister, who is also visually impaired, didn’t realize that she was different from others until she was around four or five years old.” I sat with the older sister, now a beautiful pre-teen girl, for a few minutes. She was practicing on her Braille machine and quickly wrote her name and a brief sentence on a small piece of paper for me, a paper I plan to keep to show my students. I also learned from the mothers of the adults who are visually impaired. I sat with one whose daughter

was already married and a mother of a large family herself. “You need to let them go,” she said. “You need to give them independence. You need to let them bang into walls and fall and get hurt so that they will get up again and so that they can learn to be strong.” Her words are so prescient and apply to every mother and every child. Seeing our children falter is hard, and we want to help them as much as possible. Sometimes, we are fostering unhealthy dependencies and quashing resilience. We need to give them wings and let them fly.

I learned from the Talmid Chochom, who lost his vision in his thirties. He is a yungeman in a kollel in Yerushalayim and continues his learning regime as before; only his Gemaras are printed in Braille. He published a Sefer about the Halachos for the Blind. When he spoke to us on Shabbos morning, he quoted חזל, saying that when משיח comes and everyone will be cured of their illnesses, the blind will be cured first. “That’s because we are carrying the most difficult burden,” he explained, as he described a typical bus ride that he does daily to get to Kollel. In a humorous way, he spoke about how frustrating it is when *helpful* people try to guide him to his seat. “They say – sit there, but where is there? I can’t see there, or here or anywhere.” A young Bar Mitzva aged boy connected himself to this guest and stayed close throughout Shabbos. What tremendous Chizuk he got from recognizing that his disability did not have to be an obstacle to reaching his goal of being an authentic בן תורה. And from his story, I learned to be clear in my instructions. I learned to say, “Your fork is right under your hand on your left side,” and “There is a piece of chicken on your plate, with some kugel in the upper right-hand corner.” I also learned to introduce myself whenever I approached a visually impaired person, even if they had some sight.

I learned from the teenagers full of confidence, happiness, and accomplishments. The girl at the top of her class in high school is looking forward to her senior year. I spoke to a girl who was, for the first time, dropped off in front of her house alone and was meant to be able to find her way to her front door on her own. Except it wasn’t her house, because the teacher who took her there made a mistake and she was dropped off a block away. She giggled as she proudly recounted the tale and said that, of course, she would try again; she knew she could do it. I learned from the children who use their canes as their eyes, swinging them around confidently. I also learned from the adults who absolutely did not want to use a cane and resisted for years. Now, they are slowly coming to terms with it because they realize that it is helpful and not a sign of weakness but strength. Using them this Shabbos was a helpful way to break the stigma.

“We are not handicapped”, one said Friday night, at the meet n greet. “We are capable of doing absolutely everything that anyone else can, and we should never forget it.” One woman is a beloved high school teacher who is also an accomplished singer who leads kumzitzes in camps and schools.

I learned from the incredible people of CSB Care who have invested so much to create the technology to make things accessible for the visually impaired population. The achievements are mind-boggling. Everything can be printed in Braille today, and it is. Braille is not easy to learn, and there were many heated discussions about whether Hebrew or English Braille is easier. In Hebrew, the נקודות are written after every letter, meaning that words become very long. Audiobooks and large print ספרים have opened up worlds for this population. How many people use it? To give me an idea, they said there are 150 Mishpacha magazines printed EVERY WEEK – 90 in Braille and 60 in large print. The Pesach edition was 25 volumes long (!), and that's without advertisements, which are not included (a small perk). They also print Circle magazines for the children who crave reading material.

About the advertisements... One of the mothers ran a group for family members of the visually impaired, while her daughter ran the group for those who are visually impaired. The mother told us that those who cannot see have a level of purity that is hard for us to understand and impossible for us to access. חיצוניות doesn't mean anything to them. They don't see the designer labels, don't judge by appearances and buy shoes because they are comfortable, not because it's what everyone else is wearing. They look beyond exteriors and value others because of their מידות, their warmth and sincerity. Maybe that's what made this Shabbos work so well. It was a hodgepodge of people, chassidish, Litvish, different types, different worlds. Yet no one seemed to mind. No one even seemed to notice. It made no difference. The joy was in being together, in recognizing that there is a common shared goal and that what connects us is so much more profound than what divides us.

My cousin, her many relatives who were at this Shabbos, and, of course, her indefatigable husband, who flew around the hotel in his wheelchair, are a living example of אין דבר העומד בפני הרצון. We came to the Shabbos not knowing what to expect and left with our blindfolds off, enriched, inspired, and invigorated. We learned what a person is capable of doing in the most difficult circumstances. For me, I feel a real התחייבות to remember what it is like for a person to push beyond their comfort zone while being cognizant of the many חסדים that ה' has granted me, חסדים that I am now a whole lot more aware of.