Book Review: The Art of Jewish Pastoral Counseling

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Review of

The Art of Jewish Pastoral Counseling:

A Guide for All Faiths

Michelle Friedman and Rachel Yehuda

Routledge, 2016, 208 pp.

(Reviewed by Dr. Seth Aronson, Director of Training, Training and Supervising Analyst at William Alanson White Institute)

In a remarkable midrashic passage on the power of empathic listening, illuminating the words in **Shemot** 2,11, *Vayar besivlotam*, Moshe understands and feels the suffering of the children of Israel as they struggle with the impossible work conditions imposed upon them by the Egyptians. In observing Moshe's empathy, God decides that just as Moshe left his royal abode to go and be with the suffering people of Israel, God will take leave of the heavenly realm and descend to reveal Himself to Moshe from a lowly burning bush in the arid desert, setting in place the events leading to redemption and exodus. God's act not only reveals empathy (the midrash teaches us in choosing a lowly bush rather than a lofty tree, for example, God lowers Himself, as it were, to be with the people in their suffering), but even more remarkably, the Divine learns empathy from Moshe's human act of compassion.

Michelle Friedman and Rachel Yehuda's comprehensive book demonstrates the power and significance of empathic listening for clergy of all faiths as these spiritual leaders engage in the divinely inspired work of pastoral counseling.

To truly *be with* the individuals they serve—and being with involves listening and being attuned to-- pastoral counselors must learn and develop key elements of the process, elements illuminated in careful detail in this book.

Some of the important topics covered in the book include discerning between a value neutral and religiously informed approach. Mental health professionals are trained to relieve suffering, while the[rabbi] " may underscore traditional values above and beyond personal joy…..a pastoral approach assumes desire on the part of the congregant to remain connected to religious tradition" (p.24-25). No easy task, especially when the pastoral counselor is him/herself caught in a personal conflict over the very same issue.

The authors also caution counselors to know how and when to recognize true psychiatric conditions and when there is a need to refer to trained mental health professionals. Knowing one's limitations is just as important as being comfortable in the role of attuned, sensitive and compassionate listener.

Questions to help structure the pastoral interview are described and include: Where should the meeting occur? How long should the meeting be? Should the pastoral counselor be compensated?

The authors also frame the listening process and the counselor's (and congregant's) response in a model that draws upon transference and countertransference. The counselor is often viewed to be in a position of power, authority and expertise, and the congregant's feelings about someone in such a position come into play. The counselor will, of course, have her own set of feelings/responses to each congregant and situation, based on her own life history and experiences. To be a sensitive pastoral listener is to know one's self as well as one can, e.g. how one feels to be elevated to such a position of spiritual authority, so one's personal issues can have as minimal impact as is possible in the interaction.

"Pastoral boundaries are difficult to establish, confusing to negotiate and easy to transgress"(p.53). For this reason, the need for clear boundaries and confidentiality is emphasized throughout the book. "The very nature of pastoral counseling lends itself to boundary blurring. Disclosure of personal information may lead to a transient but powerful sense of closeness that [in some cases could

easily] slide into physical intimacy" (p.153). The counselor must be keenly aware of the powerful emotional role she/he plays in the individual's life by dint of the pastoral responsibility.

Throughout the book, to illustrate their points, the authors provide thoughtful and detailed case examples that are clearly drawn from Dr. Friedman's experience in training rabbis in pastoral care for nearly twenty years. In these down to earth and easily relatable case examples, readers will find so many of the issues that arise in the day to day life of the pastoral counselor. To name just a few: socializing with congregants, whether or not to personally disclose, dealing with a mentally ill congregant, a halakhic question in the context of a traumatic life event, and conflicts between halakhic and personal feelings.

If there is one topic missing from this important addition to the field of pastoral counseling, it is framing the issue of pastoral care in a distinctly Jewish voice. There are many sources underscoring the importance of sensitive listening (such as the midrash noted above) as well as the imperative to heal. But perhaps this may be left for their second volume!

In his "Daily Prayer of a Physician", Maimonides wrote:

"In the sufferer let me see only the human being. Illumine my mind that it recognize what presents itself and that it may comprehend what is absent or hidden"(Rosner, 1967).

In their comprehensive work, Drs. Friedman and Yehuda have helped counselors of all faiths recognize what might present itself and learn to discover what may be hidden, so they can better help those in their spiritual care.

References

Rosner, F. (1967). The physician's daily prayer attributed to Moses Maimonides. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 41, 5, 440-446.