

Friday Evening Message – 26 June 2020

Shabbat Shalom (Shabbat Shalom to all my American friends)

Letter from America Woodton



Horror in Stamford Hill

I was about 15 when a rather brash businessman from Stamford Hill, a friend of my parents, was visiting our house. He said to my father that he had been to the barber the previous day and very much disliked having to sit in a chair just vacated by a West Indian man. And this said by a Jew! I was appalled. Prejudice everywhere, including in our midst.

Prejudice - and Pride

Many years later I was asked to carry out a medical examination for an applicant for the Attendance Allowance in Lowestoft. The man was in a wheelchair. He was one of the few West Indians in the town in those days. He was sullen and reluctant to answer the questions I was obliged to ask. I put down my pen and asked him what the problem was. I was stung by his reply. "You are white and you are not going to grant the Attendance Allowance to a black man." I told him that I merely gathered the information and submitted it to the DHSS for their decision. I added that my father would have knocked my head off if there had been a racist thought within it. I told him that I would not lie on the form, but that I would slant it as much as I could in his favour. He smiled, I was offered tea and told that his wife's maiden surname was the same as mine; and then the questions were answered.

Great Expectations - dashed and revived

Years later I arrived at Cork airport at 8am and needed to take a taxi to Noni's home. The taxi driver was an extremely smartly dressed and well-spoken man from Nigeria. I

quickly found out that he had a degree in chemistry, but was unable to get any other work. I asked if he'd experienced any prejudice in Ireland, fully expecting him to say that he hadn't. However, he looked very sad and told me that he had. I reassured him that there are some civilised white people devoid of such terrible attitudes. He too smiled and we had a very warm discussion. As I left the taxi I put a hand on his shoulder for a moment and gave him a much larger tip than the journey warranted.

Hard Times

I was a junior doctor in Bedford. Every single consultant physician had gone to London for a conference. A girl of 15 was admitted severely ill with pneumonia. She needed a ventilator and this was set up by an anaesthetist who promptly vanished for the rest of the day. The patient had the face of a beauty in a classical painting. Six times she had a cardiac arrest and six times I was able to restart her heart. Hours later my boss returned and took over. The next morning he told me that she had died. I had to speak to her parents several times: a terrible ordeal for them and me. They have had to live with this memory and so have I.

A Tale of Two Kiddies

The one story of pure joy: the birth of my two children. The sudden emergence, the immediate sense of a lifetime of responsibility for the tiny bundles, marvelling at their milestones. Summed up by one word – nachas.

Bleak House

In 2015 I had two very painful medical problems which required needles and scalpels to sort out. They remained painful for several weeks. I didn't realise how badly these were affecting me mentally until one morning I woke and felt that I didn't want to get out of bed, ever again. I was eventually persuaded to come downstairs. I sat in the chair staring straight ahead for days on end. Until then I did not understand what severe depression really was. I took pills for three months; they made me nauseated the whole time, I couldn't eat and lost over a stone in weight. One of our shul members visited me and brought a pot plant. You might think that was a small gesture. From my depths of despair it was the most marvellous gesture. Someone cared about me. It contributed greatly to my recovery. I will never forget that kindness.

I hope these stories and their bizarre headlines have caught your attention. But has he finally flipped? What's he on about? There is terrible injustice, cruelty, prejudice, poverty and pain in the world, but there is also enormous joy to be found. Kindness, charity, showing concern and reaching out are badly needed. Go and look for them and you can marvel at some of the wonderful and kind souls around you. Better still you should hold the hand, literally or figuratively, of those in need, those who have been subjected to prejudice, those who have been mistreated, those in despair, those who are sick. Show them that you are different. Show them that you care. Show some kindness. Show some charity. It's even better than watching those beautiful souls. Be one yourself. Make people feel good. It is the Jewish thing to do. As I've said before: I'm watching you and I'm sure She is too.

Chaim (Philip)

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