A BRIBE, "LIVING-BREAD," AND A WHITE TABLECLOTH

Rachel Mandula

ABSTRACT: This article describes marital therapy with a Holocaust survival couple in which the wife's demands for "living bread" plays a highly symbolic role in the marital dynamics. The author draws interesting parallels between the experience of the couple and the meaning of the therapy experience for herself.

KEY WORDS: marital therapy; Holocaust survivors; Israel.

Through this article I wish to share with my readers the therapy process of an elderly couple of Holocaust survivors. This therapy was a long and painful voyage, experienced by the couple and myself, during which they brought up memories from three levels in their past: the distant past before they were taken to the camps, the past of the life in the camps, and the past following the camps. Together we looked into the effect of those events on their lives and on their functioning as a couple. This elderly couple was struggling for a better time in their future with courage and liveliness.

This article describes the process chronologically. Intertwined in the description are questions which came up and were confronted during the therapy, and which continue to accompany the therapist even years after the therapy was concluded.

Sarah, a good-looking and well-dressed religious woman, whose face still attest to her former beauty, had turned to therapy in her 59th year because of being in a state of depression which was expressed by suicidal thoughts. According to Sarah, the roots of her de-
pression were stemming from 40 years of shaky marital relations, but lately she feels that her powers are waning and that she can no longer stand it. She is reminded of the depression she felt following the Holocaust, and describes her wish to marry a man who would protect her, support her, and be a father substitute for her.

That was how she picked Abraham, who was older than she by some 18 years. But Abraham let her down, and not only did he not support her, but he was in fact dependent on her, and turned out to be a closefisted and cruel man who made her work very hard. The word by which Sarah describes her husband is "evil," and she repeats it three times with great stress. Sarah does not believe that Abraham will be willing to cooperate in the therapy.

On the second meeting Sarah is feeling better and says that she is relieved by the fact that she has someone to turn to and that she is being understood. This time Abraham is accompanying Sarah but she does not let him into the room. He asks to be accepted also, and is willing to cooperate in couples therapy. Basic conflicts come up in this conversation.

Abraham says that he is a survivor of the camps. He saw his mother being taken and wanted to accompany her. She warned him not to come near her. His mother had saved him. He is happy because he never dreamed that he will have a wife, children, grandchildren, a family. What else do you need? Sarah says: "He's been happy all his life but I want more than that. For example, 'living bread'." She is using the Hebrew term for whole-wheat bread. Abraham argues that he buys all that is needed.

When the hour is over, as they stand by the door, Abraham brings out an envelope full of money and hands it over to me. I am shocked, and naturally refuse to take it, but he insists, saying, "No one is seeing, you can take it confidently."

Thus begins the therapy of an elderly couple, survivors of the Holocaust, married for 40 years; he is nearing 80 and she 60, parents to adult children (three sons and a daughter) and grandparents to several grandchildren. The therapy continues for four years, with varied frequency of appointments.

Abraham was the youngest son in a large family. His father died when he was three years old. According to Sarah, he was spoiled by his mother. His mother and the rest of the family perished in the Holocaust, and only one brother, who immigrated before the war, was saved. Abraham is a stout, simple, introverted man. His world consists of the synagogue and daily errands.