

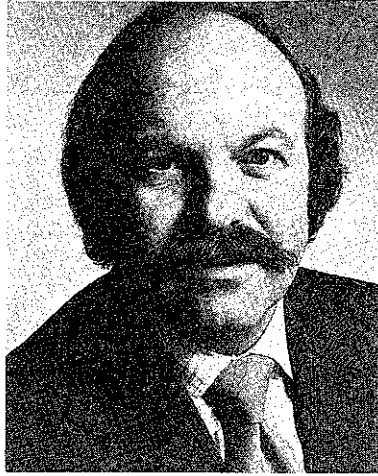
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Do You Love Me, Yafah Booltiyanski?

By REUVEN BAR-LEVAV

I am a Man, a friend, a father, a psychiatrist, in that order. It took me longest to become a Man, and I am saddest at seeing how lonely, and yet how wonderful, it is to no longer be a boy in this crazy world. Every day anew, I am kept busy discovering that very day, as I am also occupied in giving birth to myself. Being so busy, I must often disappoint those who hope and wish me to give life to them, as if I could.—823 Fisher Build-

ing, Detroit, Michigan 48202.

She was a cute little girl, perhaps ten years old or so, living in Tel Aviv many years ago, and I had a crush on her. I hardly remember now how she looked, but her eyes had a twinkle that contained both joy and naughtiness. The scout movement in Israel, then Palestine, had both boys and girls enrolled in it, and we used to meet on Saturday nights for programs that usually ended in folk dancing. Yafah Booltiyanski always danced with an ease and a charm that came so naturally, and my eyes used to follow her longingly.

We talked from time to time, took long walks, always with our peers, but I had never told her how truly I loved her. I used to dream of the time when I would, and in my mind I had laid out elaborate plans of how to tell her. When finally we had a walk alone in an orchard overflowing with orange blossoms, a strange thing had happened. Instead of telling her, "I love you, Yafah," as I had so elaborately planned, my mouth uttered an entirely different sentence: "Do you love me, Yafah Booltiyanski?"

My urgent need for reassurance about my loveability apparently took precedence over my ability to take the risk of telling her how I felt. My manifest behavior would never have given off any hints of such self doubts, way inside. Yet, they must have been there, much to my own surprise.

The details of this story, and even Yafah's very name, had not occurred to me in over thirty years. And yet here I was, a generation later, standing in a shower hot, scalding water to relieve a generalized eruption of itching boils, wondering about the nature of my strange medical condition, when out of nowhere her name popped into my mind. A few years before I wondered one day as to what had happened to this girl, but for the life of me I could not then even remember her name. Yet here it was, all of a sudden, jumping out of some remote recess of my mind, as if for no reason at all.

The skin condition was indeed a very strange one. Being a psychiatrist, I have friends in the medical profession of my town and I had consulted at least three who specialize in dermatology, all with sterling silver reputations and teaching responsibilities in medical schools. And yet they were all unable to diagnose or treat my illness. Four biopsies turned out to be unhelpful. It was a condition with which I could live but which caused me a great deal of discomfort and pain, and which slowed me down and tired me considerably. Con-

fined to my legs and scalp at the beginning, it soon became generalized and the itching was relieved only by very hot showers. The counter-irritation of scalding water brought temporary relief, with sensations of both exquisite pleasure and exquisite pain. The stream of the scalding water was a real torture and yet the almost orgasmic pleasure of sudden relief from what felt like thousands of ants crawling all over me made it most difficult to get out of the shower. The best alternative was scratching myself to the point of bleeding; medications that brought partial and temporary relief had the side effect of putting me to sleep. Hours were spent in the shower, sometimes several times each day, and limiting all other activities in my life.

Before my skin troubles started, I was usually comfortable in the nude, but now I became increasingly more self-conscious and uncomfortable as my bumpy, strawberry-red, thumb-sized lesions stood out against the white background of the rest of the skin. I dreaded the spreading of these lesions to my face and to other exposed parts of my body, for I felt I would not dare "face" my patients and my friends in that condition. As I passed my hands back and forth over my exposed skin, both to feel its bumpiness and to relieve the itching, I experienced myself more an armadillo than a man.

All this occurred at a period of my life during which I had reached professional maturity, had begun to write more, and my own innovative approach to psychotherapy, which I named Crisis Mobilization Therapy, had crystallized and become well-defined. I was finally ready to come out to the world with my new findings. And yet the book that I was about to write on this subject was not getting written. Friends urged me on and I promised to get to it on numerous occasions, but the writing somehow got delayed repeatedly. Then came this illness and my preoccupation with my symptoms caused further delays. It slowly began to dawn on me that perhaps all these apparently happenstance occurrences were somehow interrelated.

On several previous occasions when I had demonstrated my work or described it, I received praise and approval but not universally and not immediately. On occasion, I was criticized and questioned. I was consciously aware of the obvious fact that as I present my work to others, I lay myself open and expose myself both to receiving love and to being criticized and rebuked. But I must not have been fully aware of the new dimensions of my exposure, markedly greater than ever before. It was to be, perhaps, the ultimate test of my loveability.

All this was unbelievably strange for I had believed that I had resolved this question long before. I had good reasons to believe by then that my self worth was well established in my being, and that I had finally succeeded in building a reliable yardstick of my worthwhileness within me. I had assumed that no longer did I depend on outside sources for re-affirmation of my value as a person. Yet my embarrassment in the nude was very real and I was consciously wondering whether a woman in bed would be repulsed by my indurated, patchy skin, and whether anyone would ever want to touch me in this repugnant condition. This seemed more and more to be the ultimate test indeed.

Two physician-friends who have seen my skin have commented, somewhat in jest, about its resemblance to Job's. I went back to the Bible and reread the book. Was I too, like him, being put to the test about the steadfastness and resolve of my convictions? I have been convinced for many years

that all illnesses, including cancer and heart disease, are expressions of an individual's unconscious need for restoring homeostatic balance. Illness replaces allness and symptoms are self-helpful measures that arise when an individual cannot call all of his living his own. Psychosis serves similar purposes. I have lived and practiced by these principles. Could I now deny their applicability to myself?

Even when the physical mechanisms and the pathogenesis of my skin condition are eventually traced fully, my vulnerability to it will still have to be explained. The fact that the diagnosis was eluding very experienced and very learned physicians for quite a long time only emphasized the probability of its having true significance in terms of its symbolic meaning. Job's faith in his God was tested first by loss of material goods and then by loss of members of his family. But his supreme test came when he was physically afflicted.

"And Satan answered the Lord, and said, Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life.

But put forth thy hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face.

And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, he is in thy hand; but save his life.

So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown.

And he took him a potsherd to scratch himself wherewith; and he sat down among the ashes.

Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thy integrity? curse God, and die.

But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips."

Job II (4-10)

My prolonged illness forced me to become more humble, an attribute I was not overly blessed with. It was strange for me to feel a wish to hide myself and it proved to be most painful and most difficult. Not only was my skin apparently becoming less tender and more hardened as a result of the repeated exposures to the scalding hot showers, but my brazenness also was being seriously challenged. My boils and the associated malaise impressed upon me a painful lesson with inescapable force: I was truly limited, vulnerable, fallible and even expendable! I wondered whether this was not all a symbolic rite of initiation, a preparation for my "going out" there, into the cold, where I and my theories would surely receive mixed reactions, not always acclaim. In addition to being tested, was I also preparing myself, without consciously even having an inkling of it, to be better able to "take the heat" that I would surely encounter?

My suffering was very real and I was truly frightened. The possibility of dying was one that I felt myself forced to consider almost daily. During many waking hours I was able to concentrate and read only with much difficulty and I found it almost impossible to continue my writing. I became disinterested in food and truly began to comprehend that if my demise came at that moment, the world would go on without me and without my theories and would not even know of its loss. I was then not even frightened by the realization that I hardly cared. I was anxious and depressed. The situation was a strong antidote to my grandiosity and for the first time ever I sensed the real meaning of humility. If I made it, I could never again present myself or my theories to others with the same certitude that was mine before. Regardless of the true importance of any of my innovations, the

world could well survive without them and without me. That I suddenly knew for sure.

Yafah Booltiyanski's name then popped into my head one day during a shower, as I was pondering such thoughts and experiencing such feelings over and over again. The incident seemed at first disconnected and meaningless, if strange, but since the ways of the unconscious are miraculous indeed, I held on to it as an enigmatic clue in an unfolding drama.

I was amazed at these developments for I had believed that I was beyond such need for working through unresolved remnants of my self-doubt. I had thought that surely after two analyses and after Lara, I was as close to living consciously as one could possibly get. This was obviously not enough.

My first analysis lasted between three and four years. My analyst was a kind and well-meaning man, and we spent four or five times a week together in a therapeutic experience that was conducted along standard, proper and accepted psychoanalytic principles and techniques. It was somewhat helpful. It helped me understand dynamic concepts that up to that time were no more than intellectual but it did not basically change me nor did it cure many of my hangups. It failed totally, for instance, to deal with my strong dependency needs, my need to be loved, to be accepted unconditionally. I continued to feel ill-at-ease with my warmth and my tenderness, for these were attributes of my father which I had then unknowingly rejected as weaknesses. Such all-important matters were never worked through in this first analysis and, in fact, were barely touched upon. When we terminated my analysis, I was smarter but not healthier.

My second analysis was with the senior psychoanalyst in town, a man with a world-wide reputation for having made significant and true contributions to psychoanalytic theory. He was a kindly old man with a Viennese accent, lovable and sweet, but ineffective. As a result of my experience with him, I became a lover of Viennese pastries, oriental rugs and many other very fine things with which I had had only a very partial acquaintance before. But he, too, could not tap the enormous dependency needs which I had so successfully denied throughout my life. I believed then that I was self-sufficient, strong, able to deal with any and all life situations; self-assured, perhaps somewhat arrogant and on rare occasions a little obnoxious. Then came Lara, and with her my third and most real confrontation with myself.

She was different from any other woman I had known before, including the woman I was married to for many years, the mother of my children. I was blind to Lara's callous hunger, her fragility that made it impossible for her to be sensitive or kind when hurt or afraid. I did not then know that she could be cold and cruel, and instead she appeared as wonderfully soft, accepting and kind. She was beautiful, more beautiful than any other woman I had ever met, overflowing and most desirable sexually, able and willing to really give of herself, at least when she wished to win me over. She seemed so warm, soft-spoken, mild and very much in love with me. She was an innocent child and a very ripe and ready woman all in one. I knew even then that she was frightened, but I did not know how deep that fear was and how it would eventually lead her to make impossible demands upon me. This was no crush and Lara was no Yafah Booltiyanski. I was a fully grown man, a father of three children in a lonely marriage, and she seemed like the beautifully ideal answer to my needs. Lara had a unique style of her own and when she

entered a room many eyes would follow her with desire. I was unable to see any of her shortcomings and was totally charmed by her unusual loveliness. She generally evoked very strong feelings, and she wanted *me*.

When things were good between us, they were very good indeed. The angels never sang more beautifully. Life became much more intense. Every day was filled with a heightened sense of excitement. When I first sent her flowers, I signed, "With warm regards." Saying openly that I loved her was still too frightening, just as it used to be with Yafah Booltiyanski so long ago. Lara was hurt by my lukewarm salutation and when she was hurt she was always deeply hurt. She seemed so fragile, so pure, so child-like. I felt deeply ashamed and even somewhat guilty, something I did not often experience. My desire not to hurt her further was greater than my reluctance not to expose myself. She seemed so needy, so helpless in her pain which she attempted to hide from me. Gradually, but steadily, I became more deeply involved with her, taking risks and opening up aspects of myself that I had never opened before. When she lovingly mothered me, I was as content as a well-fed child, neither hungry nor anxious. To maintain and repeat such a state of complete bliss as I had never experienced before, except perhaps in utero or in forgotten infancy, became an all important and central concern of mine. I wanted to please her, to really please her, so I might never lose her. Fear was creeping into my idyllic existence, the fear of losing my Lara and what she stood for. She was a child-woman, exciting like a jungle cat, beautiful and welcoming and soft; the ideal mother I had always been yearning for without ever allowing myself to know it.

With her, once again, as perhaps only briefly in earliest childhood, I was able to be not only strong but also needy, not only competent but also fearful. The sensitivity and the tenderness within me that were so tightly locked and so carefully hidden, as if they were things I had to be ashamed of, as well as my need and an occasional fear, slowly began to assume the legitimate positions they deserved. I began owning up to those qualities of my father within me that in the past I was neither able nor willing to call my own. His warmth no longer seemed a weakness, his sensitivity no longer a shame. I was changing, opening, trusting; cautiously at first, more confidently later. I also became a much better therapist, no less smart, but much more sensitive. I liked these changes, and I liked myself.

For a while Lara was very happy and secure with me. Eventually her basic insecurity increased into panic proportions, even more so when she realized that I, too, needed her. As her anxiety increased she found solace elsewhere and our relationship began to crumble. My pain was almost unbearable. My panic at losing her was an almost constant companion for many months and a frequent companion for several years. My fingers used to dial her number repeatedly, again; time after time, in a compulsive and driven manner, hoping to find her. I fantasied her with other men, wishing beyond any wish that magically she would be mine, again, and mine alone. Fear robbed me of my self-respect and added to my voice the degrading quality of pleading. Her voice, her hair, her touch, her smile, the many quiet hours we had spent together at her candle-lit home—were memories that filled most waking hours and many, many horrible dreams at night. Weekends became endless repetitions of torture, and evening hours had an elasticity that allowed them to stretch almost beyond endurance.

I was somehow able to continue working and this, in fact, often provided the only lifesaving hold on reality. Other women were inadequate substitutes at

best, food was tasteless. Activities had one purpose: to distract, to anesthetize, to forget, to minimize the pain to bearable proportions. Living out of my mind became the norm, for being in my mind was too painful.

Mourning was an almost full time job, lasting a couple of years or so. How does one make peace with the frightening realization that there is no ideal mother left in the world? I was giving birth to a mother within myself, a mother of my own, and this was more painful and more prolonged a pregnancy and a delivery than most. Individuation-separation was finally acquiring momentum. Hesitatingly at first, more confidently later, the boy began to give way, and slowly I began to become a Man.

Lifelong styles of being are not easily altered. Personality change is painfully difficult, as it goes against the grain of one's entire past. I have changed importantly not so much within a formal psychotherapeutic setting but as a result of life situations that I had the strength to endure and the capacity to integrate. Had I lacked either of these two, such changes could not have happened. The dynamic components of the terrible pain that almost annihilated me were comprehensible. But even more crucial were those attributes of my personality that allowed me to endure the persistent, prolonged and profound pain without often succumbing to the enticements and seductions of pain relieving, if self-destructive, measures. I did not use alcohol or drugs except occasionally; neither did other possible distractions become too prominent in my life.

My two analysts did not succeed in cementing our relationships with enough strength to enable me to move from life positions in which I was stuck, but in which I also felt most safe and more comfortable than elsewhere. Our psychotherapeutic relationships were tenuous in spite of the great frequency of contacts. Their personalities surely had something to do with it but it was anything but coincidence that individuals with such personalities were analysts. Strict adherence to classical psychoanalytic writings that are treated almost as scripture and a need over years to be approved by one's supervisors breed conformity and act as a natural selection process. Moreover, language is the basic tool of the psychoanalytic process and understanding is the means by which free association is supposed to become curative. Yet my basic difficulties seemed to relate to earliest pre-verbal experiences. Psychoanalysis proved to have been insufficient for me and its failure here probably points to the basic and irreparable faults of the system that are responsible for many similar failures.

People, including myself, wish to feel well rather than to get well, and it takes *force*, derived from unavoidable, conflictual, life situations or from the interventions of the therapist or of the group, to bring a halt to the repetition-compulsion that amounts to what may simply be called "cure." The mysterious messages in my skin suggest how many curtains we must pass through to reach such a point.

For psychotherapy to be successful it must involve the patient with enough intensity so that the relationship with the therapist can endure a seemingly endless series of crises of no lesser magnitude than those that were my lot outside of therapy. Some significant changes in the areas of trust and love did indeed occur when the relationship between Lara and me was good, since she was capable and willing to offer me much love and solace. Her giving of herself served to sensitize and open me to deeply hidden needs within me, so well covered-up before that I had always denied their very existence. Yet separation and individuation occurred only when,

for her own reasons and without consideration of dosage or timing, she withdrew herself and her love from me, and not before.

To the extent that I was driven crazy in my childhood by my accepting my mother's efficiency and superior executive ability as my own while rejecting my father's sensitivity and tenderness, I also had to be "driven sane" in my adulthood. It was too painful to go there by myself. As my experience with Lara demonstrated, I would have avoided the pain, if only I could. The principle that a patient must be "driven sane" is central to my Crisis Mobilization Therapy. I have come to see that good psychotherapy must duplicate such life crises, though with greater kindness and with exquisite sensitivity to the limit of the patient's tolerance. Bettelheim wisely observed that "Love is not enough," and certain Indian tribes paint the nipples of mothers with bitter and foul-tasting substances after a child reaches a certain age. This almost self-evident lesson is all too frequently overlooked.

Crisis Mobilization Therapy, C.M.T., cannot be discussed here in detail. It aims at mobilizing within the therapeutic setting crises of affect to the point of maximum tolerable anxiety again and again, until they lose the hold they have on the patient, who survives them repeatedly. It is all part of the mourning process for cherished childhood fantasies that are carried into adulthood and held on to with a tenacious hope to have them, finally, fulfilled. In C.M.T. we aim to reproduce feeling situations similar to those that are limiting and hampering patients' freedom of choice, feelings from which individuals universally wish to escape, but which they must face repeatedly with full impact in order to change and mature.

The therapeutic alliance between patients and therapists is the cornerstone of C. M. T., and is being tested all the time. This alliance is designed to make it most difficult for patients to escape from therapy, even though objectively they are obviously able to do so at any moment. I have had no truer wish sometimes than to escape my itchy skin or my pain at losing Lara, but I have had no choice, if alive, but to endure. This alliance is structured so that it is strong enough to withstand the many severe tests to which repeated crises of pain, hurt, disappointment and true love will subject it, and must hold firm until the issues are finally settled, the personality changed, and the pain basically gone. The therapeutic alliance in C. M. T. is under tremendous strain, repeatedly and almost constantly. Only the therapist who is able and willing to involve himself with enough commitment to his patient can hope to go the whole distance with him or her.

Upon leaving, after six years of therapy, a patient who by then had almost become a friend, told me that he wished to thank me for my troubles. With a quivering voice and tears in his eyes, and in mine, he then added thoughtfully that it was not really necessary for him to do so. No creative artist, said he, now or at any time in the past, could possibly have gotten deeper satisfaction than that obtained by me. "Many opportunities for self-love exist in this type of work," said my patient, ex-patient-to-be, "and this should be enough in itself."

It is.

Or, as the mystery still locked within my skin suggests, it almost is.