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Patient Reflection
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The hardest lesson to learn in pastoral care might be that often the best answer may be no answer at all. I sat with Shoshana in the middle of the group room on the floor designated for residents deep in the throes of Alzheimer's and Dementia. It was the Friday afternoon Kabbalat Shabbat service for the unit, which consisted of familiar songs and the Friday night blessings. We held hands as she gazed ahead with a brilliant smile on her face. The music swirled around us and Shoshana continued to simply stare straight ahead. She never quite looked at me and rarely spoke to me (when she did it was in Hebrew) but seemed content to hold my hand and listen with me as the staff on the floor welcomed Shabbat.

I was never sure if Shoshana understood what was going on around her. She always seemed happy to see me and wanted me to sit next to her when I visited the floor. The silence bothered me during my early visits with Shoshana as well as many of the other residents on the floor. I noticed that I was always searching in my head for something to say that would ease the discomfort, which I quickly realized was often my discomfort. Sometimes I brought books, stories that I was reading with me when I visited these units. I needed to say something and I assumed that the residents needed me to say something as well. As time passed, I began to notice my discomfort and my need for words slowly dissipating. I learned to appreciate the silence.

The pastoral role so often feels so word-centric. We offer others spiritual or emotional healing with prayers, blessings, songs – our words. Shoshana taught me that there are some things my words cannot fix. Simply showing up, being present, was enough for Shoshana.