



‘Midrash and medicine’: Conference offers ‘spiritual nourishment’ for healers

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When Dr. Mary De May attends medical conferences, she usually goes to “lecture after lecture after lecture after lecture.”

But at the first Midrash and Medicine conference May 11-13 in Monterey, De May made art. She listened to folk singer Debbie Friedman. She met therapists, pediatricians, nurses, rabbis and cantors. She studied Torah.

Midrash and Medicine: Imagining Wholeness was co-coordinated by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center and the Hebrew Union College Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health. It was the first conference of its kind, according to the agencies’ staff.

The conference took an interdisciplinary approach to health care and healing, exploring the challenges and innovations in healthcare and healing through classic and contemporary Jewish text study and expressive arts.

“Every time I have the opportunity to study Torah it reinforces my Jewish identity as a person and as a physician,” De May said.



De May, who lives in Mill Valley, is a geriatric psychiatrist and neurodegenerative neurologist at the UCSF Memory and Aging Center.

Every day she must deliver to her patients sad news of their imminent intellectual decline. Diagnosing and treating degenerative illnesses makes her day-to-day work fairly grim, she said.

“The work wears on you, so there’s a need to get some intellectual, religious or spiritual nourishment,” De May said. “When I feel enriched as a Jew, that clearly makes me more enriched as a person ... which helps me gain perspective, endurance and empathy, all of which physicians really need.”

About 150 people — including mental health professionals, physicians, nurses, artists, educators, chaplains and lay leaders — came to Asilomar Conference Center from 16 states, Israel and Canada.

It was a rare gathering of professionals, said Rabbi Eric Weiss, director of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center.

“I think that’s why this word ‘yearning’ kept coming up in conversation,” Weiss said. “People are yearning for this kind of holistic conversation. But that doesn’t yet match what’s available in the field.

“I think we’re on the cutting edge of meeting this yearning swelling up in people.”

Dr. Julie Kohl, a pediatrician at Kaiser in Mountain View, said the workshops helped her gain new insight and perspective about how her work as a doctor is related to her practice of Judaism.

For instance, one presenter talked about her search for a connection between Judaism and medicine, which seemed so separate to her. The doctor eventually found hand washing — a regular ritual in the scientific and spiritual realms — to be an opportunity to be more mindful in the exam room. Washing her hands gave her a moment to say a blessing to herself, which helped her be more present with her patients.

Kohl returned to work feeling rejuvenated.

“It helped me as a physician reconnect with the reasons you go to medical school in the first place, which you lose in the day-to-day craziness of practicing medicine,” Kohl said. “It was amazingly regenerative in that way. It reminded me of what a privilege it is to do the work I do.”