Conference Explores Healing Potential of Biblical Texts

Elizabeth Feldman attended her first conference on spirituality and medicine about a decade ago. A family physician and teacher at a family medicine residency program in Chicago, Feldman realized she wanted a way to merge Jewish teachings with her medical practice.

“I hadn’t integrated the Jewish, spiritual, davening part of me with the part that was a health care provider,” she said.

While attending the conference, Feldman met Rabbi William Cutter, who at the time was forming the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health, a program at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) Los Angeles campus that focuses on exploring healthcare, healing and spirituality in a Jewish context.

Feldman now devotes time to helping her colleagues integrate their professional and spiritual sides as part of the Kalsman Institute’s Physician’s Initiative, and next week she will be among the presenters at the May 11-13 Midrash and Medicine: Imagining Wholeness, a conference sponsored by the Kalsman Institute along with the San Francisco-based Bay Area Jewish Healing Center. The event at the Asilomar Conference Center near Monterey is expected to draw more than 100 participants engaged in some form of healing, including physicians, nurses, therapists, rabbis, cantors, chaplains, artists and educators.

Rabbi Eric Weiss, executive director of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, says the conference is designed to nourish the spiritual needs of the participants, and, ultimately, of the people they work with.

“Our hope is that all the people they interact with will garner the benefit of these providers taking the time to nourish themselves,” he said.

As the title suggests, the conference will focus on midrash, “the rabbinic process of finding contemporary meaning in biblical text,” according to keynote speaker Rabbi Norman Cohen, a professor of midrash at HUC-JIR in New York.

Midrash “uses the text to respond to the challenges we face either personally or communally as a Jewish community,” he said. “Through a process of reflection we come
to a better understanding of who we are, both as individuals and in relationships, and who we can become.”

Cohen will discuss the interaction of Joseph and his brother Judah to explore the notion that people are capable of change. “Midrash cannot overcome disease, but it can ... help us repair relationships with others and gain a sense of what’s important in life,” he said.

The conference broadens the definition of midrash to encompass creative techniques for engaging with text, including visual arts, song and dance. Presenters include composer and singer Debbie Friedman, Moving Torah Workshops founder Andrea Hodos and multimedia artist Elizheva Hurwich.

Rabbi Lewis Barth, a midrash professor and former dean of HUC-JIR Los Angeles, said that including the arts in the definition of midrash can be surprising to some because of Judaism’s strong textual focus. “By opening these other dimensions, it helps people absorb, reconceptualize and integrate the teachings ... of Jewish life and tradition,” he said.

Barth will present midrash dealing with images of God as a creator of peace or wholeness. “Shalom has a wide range of meaning,” he said. “The root — shalem — means wholeness.... The notion that when we wish someone a healthy recovery, the term is refuah shlame, which means a whole recovery, or a healing that is complete. It encompasses both our spiritual and physical wellbeing.”

For Feldman, such concepts have enhanced her approach to medicine.

“I have more of a consciousness of myself as a Jewish physician and a little better understanding of what that means,” she said.

Feldman adds that Jewish texts can inform how she thinks about patient care, being sensitive to the needs of a patient’s family and the integration of medicine and spirituality.

“Now I would think to look at what Jewish texts have to say about ethical decisions, which isn’t something I would have done before,” she said.

For more information about the Midrash and Medicine conference, call (213) 765-2666, e-mail midrashandmedicine@huc.edu or visit http://www.huc.edu/kalsman/Midrash-and-Medicine/.

— Nancy Sokoler Steiner, Contributing Writer