

As American Jewish identity has become, less ethnic, the repair of souls — often underemphasized in the past—has been revitalized within the community.

Healing the Spirit: A Jewish Approach

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Five years ago we would not have found discussions about Jewish healing on the Internet. We would not, for that matter, have found discussions of Jewish healing in synagogues, General Assemblies of the Jewish Community Federation, or within the major rabbinical assemblies. But today we find talk about Jewish healing in all those places and more.

By "Jewish healing," I do not mean to suggest practices of treating the body based on the Talmud, or mystical practices intended to have a physical effect on a person's health. I refer to the spiritual, not the physical dimension of healing. By "Jewish healing," I mean to suggest the use of Jewish tradition and community to achieve a sense of spiritual wholeness, comfort, or perspective in the face of illness, pain, or loss. I refer to what the Jewish tradition calls *refuat hanefesh*; the healing of the soul.

Early Jewish liturgy acknowledged that the ill person seeks healing on various levels. In the central prayer for healing, the *Misheberach* for healing, Jews pray for a complete healing: *refuah shleyma*. The prayer then specifies what it means by a complete healing: *refuat haguf*, the healing of the body, or what we sometimes refer to as "cure," and *refuat hanefesh*, the healing of the spirit, the soul, the self.

Modern Western medicine mainly addresses our need for physical. However, while we seek physical health, we also seek spiritual healing in response to the many assaults not to our body, but to our person: emotional upheaval, social dislocation, and spiritual confusion. According to the *Misheberach* for healing, physical cure without spiritual wholeness would not be a complete healing, nor would a sense of spiritual well-being without physical well-being be complete. Although a complete healing cannot always be achieved, the *Misheberach* for healing expresses our yearning for wholeness in every realm.

Healing and Spirituality in Judaism

Over the past several years, the American Jewish community has shown a growing interest in healing of the spirit by using the tools of Jewish tradition and community. A focus on healing is allowing Jews to explore the life of the spirit in a new way. This is because healing and spirituality are linked; indeed, healing implies spirituality. Spirituality is our sense of God's presence in our lives. There are many ways that presence may be felt: through connected human relationship, through prayer or meditation, through study and reflection. When we bring any of these resources which enhance our spirituality to the places of pain in our lives, then we call that healing.

As we go about our complex lives, it is hard to find an entry point for general spiritual exploration. But at a time of illness, pain, or loss, our yearning for God's presence is often more acute than usual. Indeed, in the midst of tragedy many of us Jews find ourselves suddenly needing to explore or reexplore our Judaism. When great adversity rips us open and lays us bare, as life's trappings fall away and we set about the task of reconstructing our lives, we search our religious tradition for insight, comfort, guidance, and perspective. My work over the past five years with Jews who are ill has taught me how illness often serves as a springboard for profound spiritual exploration.

I think of one woman in particular. When we first met she said, "I've been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. As a child, my brothers both got Jewish educations and fancy *bar mitzvahs*, but, as a girl, I got nothing. I've been a secular Jew all my life; I rejected the tradition because it rejected me. But now I'm very sick and I want to know what I'm rejecting; maybe Judaism has something to offer me." Over the course of the following three years, this bright, passionate attorney joined a women's Torah study group, began attending healing services, and even joined a synagogue, much to her surprise. Six months before her death, she and her grown daughter celebrated their joint *bat mitzvah* by being called up to the Torah. For this woman, prayer, study, ritual, and holy relationship became the focus of her life; she could finally develop her spirituality at a time when it was clear her body would not be healed.

I think, too, of the man with prostate cancer who came back to ' Judaism after his diagnosis, searching the tradition for strength to deal with surgery, treatment, and loss. Through daily prayer, study, and deeds of loving kindness, he cultivated a profound sense of his own life's blessings. Although many people, understandably, would not share his feelings, he would not have traded his cancer for anything; it had provided him an opportunity to change his life in profoundly positive ways.

Exploration of the Jewish tradition's healing resources has become an acceptable, accessible way for those who are ill — and even for those who are not — to consider or reconsider the spiritual resources of Judaism. There are two reasons why such exploration has grown in recent years. First of all, we live in an age of post ethnic Judaism; it is not enough simply to belong to the tribe.¹ The death and rebirth mythology of the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel, so powerful for the years after the war and into the seventies, no longer holds for American Jews; we cannot base our everyday Jewish lives on the *Shoah* and the events that take place in the Holy Land. Profoundly important as they are, they are not the stuff of daily religious living. Secondly, as the drive for communal survival is less pressing, Jews are freer to contemplate their individual lives as meaningful. To contrast to a pre-modern tradition which produced a liturgy written in the first person; plural, American Jews find themselves in the midst of a postmodern • culture which prizes autonomy and the experience of the individual. For both these reasons, many American Jews yearn for a specifically religious Jewish identification which values the inner life of the individual. American Jewry finds itself needing to create a new Jewish identity, religiously and not ethnically based. We are looking for new pivots, anchors, symbols, and meanings. Progressive American Jews are in need of a defining religious mythology.

One mythic structure that has caught the progressive Jewish imagination is that of Lurianic Kabbalah, that is, of Jewish mysticism: the idea that when the world was created, there was a fissure which allowed for evil, that at this time of great cosmic breakdown when sparks of holiness spilled out among the shards of existence, it became the task of humanity to redeem those sparks through deeds, to do acts of repair (*tikun*). Reform Jews in particular have adopted that view and vocabulary in our understanding of *tikun olam*, the repair of the world, doing acts of social justice that make our world more perfect, more redeemed. But there is another kind of *tikun*, one equally as important, and that is *tikun hanefesh*, the repair of the individual soul, the healing and perfecting of the person.

This framework of brokenness and repair is powerful. Within this framework, Jews understand that our work is *both* to do social justice, *and* to create healing and wholeness within. When Jews come to synagogue, it has always been clear that we come as part of a community, but now we also want to come as individuals, with particular gifts and particular needs. We want to matter. And we want to feel that each of us is welcome in our entirety: not only what is pleasant in our lives, but also what is difficult and painful. If "real life" is to happen in the synagogue, then we

need to bring our "real selves." If true community is to take place in the synagogue, then we need to bring our true natures. Only then can our yearning for a sense of wholeness and for integration be achieved as Jews. This means that both the joys of *b'nai mitzvah* and the pains of divorce and addiction belong in the synagogue. This means that both the joys of marriage and the pains of illness, disability, and loneliness belong in the synagogue. Although most people are ashamed of being vulnerable, fallible, weak, and dependent, these are ineluctable features of our lives.

Dependence is something with which we all struggle. David Hartman, an Israeli rabbi and philosopher, wrote a brilliant article some twenty years ago where he noted that the Jewish ideal for being human — unlike the Greek — is, in fact, not independence, but interdependence.² Historically, we have constructed Jewish communities to be able to take care of one another in times of need and vulnerability. The Jewish system of *tzedakah*, taking care of the poor, provides an excellent example. All Jews are commanded to give *tzedakah*, no matter how poor they are; such giving is part of the law, not something to be done "out of the goodness of one's heart." Maimonides (among others) developed a hierarchy of ways in which it is best to give *tzedakah*.³ The best option is to lend someone enough money so that she may start her own business; such a relationship of dependence would lend the most dignity. However, if one cannot do that, then one should give anonymously to someone whom one does not know personally (so that neither party feels the debt). These rules are intended to protect the dignity of one who is vulnerable. It is recorded in the Talmud that in the days when the Temple stood, there was an unlit chamber on the Temple Mount where people of means would come in and leave money, and people in need would enter and take money. Somehow, miraculously, the system worked. In medieval times *hevrot* were set up not only to visit the sick, but also to console the bereaved, to make sure that all the Jews of the town would have the means to have a wedding, etc. This is healthy interdependence. But today, in our society which not only values the experience of the individual but overvalues his or her ability to be independent, interdependence is scorned.

In relationships of interdependence, God's presence (the *Shechina*) can be found. There are many stories in the Talmud about Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, famed for his power to heal. When he heard of another rabbi who was sick, he would visit and speak with him about his suffering. After speaking, Rabbi Yohanan would hold out his hand, and the other rabbi would rise. One day, Yohanan ben Zakkai fell ill. He was visited by Rabbi Hanina who, after speaking with him, held out his hand. Rabbi Yohanan stood up. "But why [if he was such a great healer] couldn't Yohanan ben Zakkai raise himself?" asks the Talmud. "Because the prisoner cannot free himself from prison," says the text.⁴ We learn that even one of the greatest of sages and healers needed someone else to help free him from his prison of isolation, fear and hopelessness. Human beings are designed to need one another.

The Tools of Jewish Healing

For those who are physically ill, Judaism offers a number of resources for healing the spirit. Among the most important are *bikur hulim* (visiting the ill), prayer and meditation, and theological reflection. We turn our attention now to explore these resources in greater depth. The roots of contemporary Jewish interest in healing the spirit at times of illness lie in the traditional *mitzvah* of *bikur holim*, visiting the ill. The rabbis understood God's visit to Abraham after his circumcision as providing the biblical model for *bikur holim*. As human beings are instructed to follow in God's ways, this *mitzvah* of loving-kindness provides a key way of emulating God's compassion:

Rav Hama said in the name of R. Hanina: What does it mean, 'You shall walk after the Lord your God?' (Deuteronomy 13:5). Is it possible for a person to walk and follow God's presence? Does not [the Torah] also say, 'For the

*Lord your God is a consuming fire'? (Deuteronomy 4:24). But it means to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be God. Just as God clothed the naked, so you too must clothe the naked, as it says, 'And the Lord made the man and his wife leather coverings and clothed them.' (Genesis 3:21). The Holy One, Blessed be God, visits the ill, as it says, 'And God visited him [Abraham] in EloneiMamreh' (Genesis 18:1); so you too shall visit the HI The Holy One, Blessed be God, comforts the bereaved, as it says, 'And it was after Abraham died and that God blessed his son Isaac....' (Genesis 25:11). so too shall you comfort the bereaved. The Holy One, Blessed be God, buries the dead, as it says, 'And God buried him [Moses] in the valley' (Deuteronomy 34:6), so too shall you bury the dead.'*⁵

By the middle ages, Jews organized benevolent societies (*hevrot*) whose members visited the ill in their homes; only the most pious and well respected members of a community would be fit to belong to the *hevrat bikur holim*.⁶ The visitor might clean the ill person's room, offer some food, or take care of financial concerns. Importantly, the legal literature indicates that a *bikur holim* visit was not complete unless the visitor prayed on behalf of the one who was ailing; physical and spiritual care were equally important.⁷

Contemporary Jewish healing practices begin with the *mitzvah* of *bikur holim*. By understanding the therapeutic power of deep, empathic listening, we who engage in this practice know that a key component of our visit is to listen. We train ourselves to listen with compassion, "with our minds in our hearts."⁹ Whether we are clergy or laypersons, we offer the gift of ourselves to the one whom we are visiting. To use the language of pastoral care, we engage in "the ministry of presence." Our attentive and prayerful presence communicates our own care of the individual at the same time that it symbolically communicates the care of the larger Jewish community and of God, *Ha Rahaman* (the Compassionate One). Remembering the dictum that a visit is not complete without prayer, we remind ourselves of the importance of addressing the spiritual dimension of the person before us: thorough prayer, conversation, tone, touch, and/or body language. The *mitzvah* of *bikur holim* is incumbent upon all Jews; it is not the sole responsibility of clergy, for whom it would be too heavy a burden to bear alone. In addition, when all members of a community perform this *mitzvah*, the very texture of the community is changed. As members make themselves vulnerable and caring in offering their presence to the ill, the community is softened, deepened, and inspired.

Historically, in addition to the *mitzvah* of *bikur holim*, the main spiritual practices for the ill would focus on prayers said on one's behalf, the recitation of psalms, and in dire circumstances, the changing of one's name (so as not to be recognized by the *Malach Hamavet*, the angel of death). Contemporary practice deepens the spiritual experience of the one who is suffering through such tools as the *niggun* (wordless tune), meditation (upon the breath, upon God's name, or upon a verse from the Bible or prayerbook), mindful use of blessings, and both communal and individual prayer. When we are beset by serious illness, we often live in the past and the future. We wonder if we will ever recover a lost part of ourselves, when we will feel better, what it will be like if the pain worsens, when we will die. One of the gifts of meditation for the ill is that it helps us to slow down, calm the mind, and open ourselves to the present moment.

Not unrelated, the creative use of blessings can help us lift out what is sacred in the moment. For one who is ill, the normative blessings offered daily upon waking, opening the eyes, or using the bathroom can heighten our sense of gratitude for the mundane miracles of daily life. One might also expand the use of traditional blessings and apply them nontraditionally. One might offer the blessing which acknowledges that God makes the world anew each day before beginning

artificial insemination; or the blessing which acknowledges God as wondrous in healing power before beginning chemotherapy or radiation. The point of using the blessing formula is to link our mundane experience with a consciousness of God's reality. As Joel Grishaver has written,

The brakhah formula defines a process of interacting with the universe. The path it defines is the basic path of all Jewish worship. Before we utter a word, an opportunity presents itself. It could be an experience we have just had. It could be an experience we are about to have. It could be because we have seen something, or smelled something, or heard something. It could be because the calendar, the dock, and our Jewish awareness have defined a moment as exceptional. It could be because our tradition has required a given action, an action we do regularly, to be more than just a mundane act. Regardless of the stimulus, our Jewish upbringing has conditioned us that the brakhah is the correct response. We have been signaled to pay attention because an encounter with the holy, with the blessing of The-Source-of-All-Blessings, is now possible. Even though it is always possible, this particular moment offers an opportunity we know how to actualize. That actualization will come through a brakhah.⁹

Prayer in general is another spiritual tool for healing the spirit for one who is ill. One might utilize traditional forms such as the standard Jewish morning, afternoon, or evening prayer service, or the *Misheberakh* for healing. In addition, contemporary Jews might participate in a Service of Healing, a special liturgy designed for those whose lives are touched by illness, pain, and loss. Over the past decade, such services have sprung up all around North America.¹⁰

While Jews have historically prayed communally with a fixed liturgy, there have always been those who advocated spontaneous, individual prayer as well (even, to a very limited extent, within the standard prayer services). Spontaneous outpouring of the heart, whether by oneself or together with a rabbi, chaplain, or fellow human being, offers another spiritual avenue for healing of the soul. Finally, in addition to the social or relational resource of *bikur holim* and the spiritual resource of prayer and meditation, we recognize the cognitive resource of theological reflection which forms part of a modern approach to Jewish healing.

The reason why theological reflection is so important is perhaps best explained by analogy. It is well known that experiencing physical pain without knowing the cause often magnifies the experience of pain itself; once we get a diagnosis, it often happens that the physical sensations are themselves more bearable. We need a diagnosis, a reason, an explanation. It is similar with emotional and spiritual suffering. If we can find or develop a framework within which to understand our suffering, then sometimes the suffering itself becomes more bearable. It is not a matter of finding the right answer or correct framework, but rather of creating some kind of theological framework within which we can articulate our own truths. When issues of meaning and theology surface in conversation with someone who is ill, it is usually best for the visitor to find ways of supporting the ill person's sense of God's relationship to his or her suffering. In the case that someone's personal theology is seen to be pathological (as in the case of excessive guilt), such a view might well be gently challenged.

Throughout history, Jews have struggled for ways with which to understand God's relationship to suffering. In early Torah thought, our ancestors believed that the ill one suffered was a direct result of the sins one committed. Good would be rewarded with good, and bad punished with bad. Good behavior meant following God's commandments and bad behavior straying from them. The classic formulation of this is found in the second paragraph of the *Shema* which tells us that if we obey God's commandments, we shall have rain in its due season, our harvests will be great, and

our cattle will grow fat; but if we stray from God's commandments, there will be no rains, no harvest, and no good days upon the land."

The problem with this early biblical worldview, however, is that when we look around at what happens to ourselves and to our neighbors, it does not in fact, seem that good is rewarded with good, or bad with bad. Our wisdom literature poses the question: Why is it that a good man reaps sorrow and an evil man a life of ease? The response is that God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts not our thoughts. Essentially, it is all *a* mystery; our job is to accept the mystery in faith. And some of the time, accepting the inscrutable mystery, as Job did, may indeed provide a workable framework.

The early rabbis came up with yet other formulations. One possibility is that God does indeed reward good with good and bad with bad; however, the final rewards come not in this life, but in the next. Therefore, in order to retain the view that God acts justly, we must simply take the long view. Another possibility the rabbis considered is that suffering may come to us sometimes as "loving afflictions" (*yisurin shel ahavah*). In this view, God sends us suffering as a kind of wake-up call, as a sign to allow us the opportunity to do *teshuvah* (repentance) and turn our lives around toward God. Both these answers may resonate with some of us some of the time.

There are modern Jewish formulations as well, such as Harold Kushner's idea that God has nothing to do with evil but is rather the source of our comfort and strength to deal with suffering.¹² Some of us even derive comfort from the idea that disease may hit us randomly, that we are susceptible to physical injury, assault and decay by the very nature of our embodiedness, and that this is part of God's holy design. Being able to articulate at any one time how we understand our suffering is indeed a resource for healing the spirit, providing perspective and ultimately, providing comfort.

American Jewry's recent interest in spiritual healing is a fascinating, hopeful, and complex development. It is my understanding that Jewish healing has begun to surface in American Jewish life because it recognizes and accepts human weakness and vulnerability. It has begun to surface because it helps Jews focus upon and nourish our spiritual sensibilities. As an overarching religious sense of brokenness and repair frames many contemporary Jews' experience of the holy, the Jewish healing resources of human relationship, spiritual development, and theological reflection help balm the wounded soul. Jewish healing focuses attention on God's relationship to our personal experience. For many American Jews yearning for a deepened spiritual life, the language, practice and community of Jewish healing marks the beginning of a deeply personal religious renewal.

1. Rabbi Lawrence Huffman and Rabbi Eugene Borowitz of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York have both taught and written on this idea.
2. David Hartaian, "Moral Uncertainties in the Practice of Medicine: The Dynamics of Interdependency from a Halakhic Perspective," *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (1979).
3. Maimonides, *Mishnah Torah, Hilko Matnoi Aniyim* 10:7-14.
4. *Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot* 5b.
5. *Babylonian Talmud, Sotah* I4a.
6. Israel Abrams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1958.
7. *Shulchan Aruch*; 335:4.
8. Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1992).

9. Joel Lurie Grishaver, *And You Shall Be a Blessing* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1993).
10. The National Center for Jewish Healing has information about Services of Healing taking place throughout the country; they may be contacted at 9 East 69th Street, New York, NY 10021; 212/772-6601.
11. Deuteronomy 11:13-21
12. Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York. Avon Books, 1983).

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