

The Jewish Way of Healing

In times of illness, Judaism offers potent remedies to help strengthen the body and spirit.

Nancy Flam

When Eve W. was diagnosed with lymphoma, she sought the finest medical treatment available. But she wanted more than high-tech medicine could offer. Like millions of Americans, she supplemented her medical treatment with complementary therapy. Eve began to practice Buddhist meditation, Hindu yoga, and natural diet. Deeply committed to her Judaism, Eve was nonetheless unaware of Jewish practices for strengthening the body and spirit at times of illness.

In response to his AIDS diagnosis, David M. began seeing one specialist after another. In addition, he tried to meet his emotional challenges by working with a therapist, taking part in a 12-step group, and staying in contact with close friends. Then, one day he saw an advertisement for a "Spiritual Support Group for HIV+ Jews." With no clear sense of what he might gain, he called the number and registered for the group.

Shoshanna A. had never been religious or Jewishly affiliated. But when she was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, she called the Jewish Healing Center. "I rebelled against Judaism all my life. I couldn't deal with the sexism of my brothers getting Jewish educations and fancy bar mitzvahs while I got nothing. So social activism became my religion. But now I'm sick and I'm not sure how to cope, and I wonder what I've been rejecting all these years. Maybe Judaism has something to offer me?"

Eve, David, and Shoshanna's cases are typical. In times of sickness, pain, and trouble, many Jews seek spiritual comfort and healing through non-Jewish means, such as twelve-step recovery programs, new-age communities, and mind-body institutions. For some, however, there may come a point when one turns toward the Jewish tradition and community to see what it has to offer. Such seekers can find abundant resources in Judaism, which has addressed questions of health and recovery for millennia.

Body and Spirit

Jewish tradition has long recognized that there are two



components of health: the body and the spirit. The *Mi Sheberach* prayer, traditionally recited for someone who is ill, asks God for *refuah shleima*, a complete healing, and then specifies two aspects: *refuat hanefesh*, healing of the soul/spirit/whole person, and *refuat haguf*, cure of the body. To cure the body means to wipe out the tumor, clear up the infection, or regain mobility. To heal the spirit involves creating a pathway to sensing wholeness, depth, mystery, purpose, and peace. Cure may occur without healing, and healing without cure. Pastoral caregivers and family members of seriously ill people know that sometimes lives and relationships are healed even when there is no possibility of physical cure; in fact, serious illness often motivates people to seek healing of the spirit.

Recent research in the mind-body field suggests that the disease process itself may be affected by psychosocial healing; mind and spirit may not be as separate from the biochemistry of physical illness as we once thought. For instance, Dr. David Spiegel of Stanford University found that women with metastatic breast cancer who participated in a one-year support group lived significantly longer than women who received similar medical treatment without a support group (*Healing and the Mind*, Doubleday). Being part of a meaningful community that encourages self-expression can affect the course of an illness.

At the point when Shoshanna turned toward the Jewish community, she was not expecting to find a physical cure, but she desperately hoped for healing of the spirit. Shoshanna needed to overcome her negative association with Judaism in order to benefit from its religious wisdom. With great hunger for spiritual nourishment, she enrolled in a seminar about Jewish views of health and illness, took part in a study group exploring Judaism and feminism, **and** began attending regular "Services of Healing," where **Jews** dealing with illness and grief pray together for strength and comfort. At 50 years of age, she began her own journey of Jewish learning and spiritual development.

Night Prayer

*May it be Your will that I lie down in peace
and rise up in peace. Let not my thoughts,
my dreams, or my daydreams disturb me. Watch
over my family and those I love.*

*O Guardian of Israel, who neither slumbers nor
sleeps, I entrust my spirit to You. Thus as I
go to sleep, I put myself into Your safekeeping.*

*Grant me a night of rest. Let the healing
processes that You have placed in my body go
about their work. May I awaken in the morning,
refreshed and renewed to face a new tomorrow.*

*We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the
- Universe, who closes our eyes in renewing sleep.*

Gates of Healing
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Spiritual Healing: Bikur Cholim

A fundamental feature of Jewish spiritual healing is *bikur cholim* (visiting the sick), which responds to two of the greatest burdens of contemporary life: isolation and lack of community. At a time of illness, *bikur cholim* offers us the comfort of human connection and interdependence, a sense of community we so desperately need. The mitzvah of *bikur cholim* helps fulfill the obligation to "love our neighbor as ourself," and it is required of every Jew (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah: Laws of Mourning, ch. 14). Like comforting mourners and performing other acts of kindness, *bikur cholim* brings goodness to the world (Avot de Rabbi Nataai 39:1).

By participating in the spiritual support group for HIV+ Jews, David had his first positive adult experience of Jewish community. Having been rejected by the Jewish community during his adolescence because of being gay, David had, in turn, rejected Judaism. It was only later, in his mid-40s, emboldened by a sense that he now had "nothing to lose," that David met with other Jews for support and comfort. His experience in the spiritual support group radically changed his attitude toward Judaism, as he grew to see that in fact there was a place for him. Having looked to eastern religions for a spiritual home in his young adulthood, David was relieved *to* find that he "no longer had to knock on any doors; the door to tradition was open." When the group came to a close, David and two other participants joined a local Reform synagogue. The ensuing *bikur cholim* visits provided by synagogue members and Jewish professionals bolstered him tremendously during the difficult days of illness that lay ahead.

A visitor's attentive presence breaks the isolation and sense of abandonment, the existential aloneness often felt by one who is sick, reaffirming the person's essential humanness and wholeness. In addition, the visitor provides a link to community, reaffirming a sense of connection and purpose. Torah teaches that one who practices *bikur cholim* imitates God, whose presence visited Abraham after his circumcision (Genesis Rabbah, 8:13). The sources teach that each of us is visited by God's presence when we are ill, which we may interpret as feeling a sense of hope, care, and protection. This is exactly what a loving visitor can inspire. The Codes teach that God's presence rests upon the head of the bed of anyone who is sick, and that we must not sit there for fear of blocking it (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah: Laws of Mourning, ch. 14). This suggests that the visitor must reflect and not obscure God's presence when attending to the person who is ill.

Bikur cholim demonstrates the healing power of relationship. 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, Yohanan ben Zakkai 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 to the stricken sage, held out his hand, and Yohanan ben Zakkai

stood up. "Why couldn't Yohanan ben Zakkai raise himself?" the disciples asked, as he was known to be a great healer. The answer: "Because the prisoner cannot free himself from prison." (Berachot 5b) Here we learn that even the greatest of Jewish healers needed another person to help free himself from the prison of fear, hopelessness, and isolation.

Spiritual Healing: Prayer

In addition to *bikur cholim*, Jewish tradition teaches that we should pray for ourselves and others during a time of illness. Many modern Jews are resistant to praying in general, and especially skeptical about praying for something specific, such as good health or a cure.

One reason such prayer can be difficult is that we may not envision God in a classically Jewish way, as One who hears prayers and answers or fails to answer them. Another reason is that we often feel unjustly afflicted; when we have led ethical lives but nonetheless find ourselves struggling with disease, we may feel that God has been unfair. Instead of rejecting God, however, we might instead reject some aspects of classical Jewish theology (such as the idea that God rewards good with good), and search for a more satisfying way to think about God's ways.

Prayer allows us quiet time for reflection. Like meditation, it can be calming and relaxing, thereby allowing us access to regions of our inner selves. It can help us get in touch with our strength and faith. Prayer can also provide release and relief from anxious thoughts that exacerbate both physical and psychic pain. The mental relaxation of prayer can bring us comfort when we take the perspective that our lives are ultimately in God's hands.

In addition, when we pray in community and use traditional Jewish liturgy, we not only benefit from the company of other Jews, we find comfort in knowing that the words of the psalms and blessings have been spoken by millions of Jews past and present who, like us, yearn for healing.

Before Eve went into the hospital for surgery, she called me for counseling and support. Because she lived faraway, I provided support by phone. At the end of our conversation, I asked her if she wanted to pray together. "That would be wonderful," she said. After a moment of centering silence, I offered the *Mi Sheberach* prayer for her. When we were done, she told me that both her doctors were Jewish and asked if I would send them a copy of the *Mi Sheberach*. After her surgery, Eve called to tell me that the operation had gone well. Immediately following the surgery, the doctors had buzzed the administrator from the operating room and requested that she bring in a copy of the *Mi Sheberach*. Eve's two doctors then prayed on her behalf. When her husband described this final ritual of the operating room to Eve after she woke from surgery, she was deeply moved and grateful.

Jewish Tools:

The Torah can be a source of healing for the spirit and psyche. Some rabbis "prescribe" sacred verses for use in meditation. For someone who is anxious about her self-worth, a rabbi may recommend she sit quietly, breathe slowly, and for five minutes twice a day repeat this verse: "*Yismach Moshe b'marnat chelko*; Moses was satisfied with his portion." Or for fear, the last lines of "*Adon Olam*," "*B'yada afkid ruchi, b'eitishan, v'aira, v'imruchi geviyati, Adonai tiv'lo ira*; into God's hands I entrust my spirit, when I sleep and when I wake; and with my spirit and my body also, God is with me, I will not fear." Or for insecurity: "*Adonai karov I'chol korav, I'chol asher yikraoohoo ve 'emet*; God is near to all who cry out to God, to all who cry out to God in truth." Or to enhance a sense of gratitude: "*Zeh ha 'yom asah Adonai, nagila v'nismecha vo* This is the day that God has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Rabbi Richard Levy of Los Angeles teaches the wisdom of writing the verse and affixing it where one will see it throughout the day: above one's desk, on the telephone ' key pad, on the dashboard. Meditation upon¹ a verse of Torah, upon the Shema, or upon Hebrew letters can calm the spirit, and bring it into communion with the Divine. The chasidim have historically made great use of the *niggun*, the wordless tune, which has become part of many Reform services. By repeating a wordless tune over and over again, or one with nonsense syllables (like "Yai bai hai"), one can begin to still the mind and open the heart. Nonsense syllables are especially helpful, occupying the linear language-making part of our brains so that it is easier to let go of thoughts as they arise. The nonsense syllables function as a mantra whose message is that our being is greater than our thinking.

The psalms have been our primary devotional literature of healing. The rabbis have prescribed different lists of 10, 18, and 36 psalms to be recited at times of illness. These sacred verses invite the person reading them to identify with the psalmist in his pain and longing. Psalms of healing take the reader through a cycle of bewilderment, anguish, complaint, and renewed hope and faith. Jewish tradition also offers active modes of spiritual healing. When the experience of illness compromises our sense of power, we need to feel that we are contributing to the good of the world by acts of *tzedakah* and *gemilut chassadim* (kindness). For the Jew, *tikun olam* (repair of the world) and *tikun hanefesh* (repair of the soul) are inseparable.

Taking part in Jewish communal life breaks the isolation that often accompanies illness. The mandate "*al tifrosh min hatzibur*, do not separate yourself from the community," is never more important than at a time of illness. Of course, this means that "Jewish institutions must be especially responsive to the particular needs of Jews who are ill.

Finally, any amount of personal observance that contributes to feeling that one lives in a meaningful universe is beneficial. Immersion in Jewish ritual, such as the celebration of Shabbat, holiday observance, or Torah study can help heal the spirit, highlighting community, connection, meaning, and God.

Eve, David, and Shoshanna are testimony to Judaism's richness and

importance in helping bolster the spirit. Eve recovered beautifully, and now volunteers as a lay counselor with others who are struggling with cancer. Prior to David's death earlier this year, he expressed enormous gratitude for the connection and warmth he felt from the Jewish community. Shoshanna continues to participate in healing services, has joined a synagogue, and participates in a women's Torah study group. In preparing for her own passing, she is guided by the wisdom of Jewish tradition. In a recent conversation, Shoshanna expressed her regret for not having actively brought up her children as Jews, adding: "I think it's not such a bad lesson to leave them with, after all, to see that their mother found her own authentic way to Judaism in her 50s. Maybe they'll follow my example and find their own authentic Jewish paths as well." D

Rabbi Nancy Flam is the west coast director of the Jewish Healing Center. The ideas for this article were formulated with Rabbi Amy Eilberg.