



Jewish Prayer for Persisting: Moving Beyond Mischeberach

Rabbi Julie Pelc

Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health

During Rabbinic school, I spent more time in doctor's offices than in seminary classrooms. Whereas it was initially an acute illness (for which the traditional *mischeberach* and prayers in hopes of a "*refuah shleima*" would have been appropriate), the years of recovery and the resulting, permanent disability ensuring thereafter no longer qualified for such a hope or wish.

At a prescribed moment during Jewish prayer services every week in synagogues around the world; the Torah is unrolled and the reader pauses so that prayers for healing might be offered. The *mischeberach* is offered by individuals and by communities: hearts and sanctuaries overflowing with requests for healing of body and healing of spirit. Sometimes people carry long lists of names inside their minds and hearts, looking forward to the *mischeberach* prayer, when their aching list of names becomes public.

Though the ritual itself differs from one community to the next, the need for this ritual remains constant. There is never a dearth of ill people, nor people wishing to pray for their healing. The text of the traditional *mischeberach* requests, "a complete healing -- healing of the soul and healing of the body -- along with all the ill, among the people of Israel -- soon, speedily, without delay..."

I think of my co-worker with diabetes, a friend with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, an aunt struggling with chronic clinical depression, a classmate with lupus and ulcerative colitis and an acquaintance living with HIV. I think of my own incomplete recovery. To pray for "complete healing" for those whose ailments cannot or will not ever be completely "healed" seems audacious and even offensive. My co-workers, colleagues, family, friends, and I will negotiate medications, medical appointments, dietary needs, and fears throughout our lives. We will face unexpected side effects, professional and personal repercussions of our special needs, and stigma from many well-meaning strangers every

day. Our everyday reality is one of incomplete health; yet, we are not entirely “sick”, either.

To pray for the “complete healing of body and spirit” is to misjudge the realities of many people’s lives. To understand or redefine “healing” as “making peace with one’s fate” is to alter the meaning of the prayer and it may also serve to ignore our specific kind of suffering and its ever-changing realities.

I believe we need a new congregational prayer. We need a prayer that acknowledges the reality of chronic illness. We need a prayer that asks God for the strength to persist even in the face of challenges that may seem insurmountable. We need a prayer asking that we be granted the courage to continue in life even as we face the reality of our death; to rage and to praise, to bless and to curse, to accept and to reject diagnoses simultaneously.

I suggest that fragments of this prayer exist already in the wellspring of our liturgical and scriptural inheritance and that the formula of the *Misheberach* can be utilized in this context, too.

Throughout the TaNaKh, we read narratives of individuals, families, and groups of people struggling with obstacles that seem to be insurmountable. We may choose to invoke their names as our spiritual, emotional, and psychological ancestors, in whose name God might bring peace, comfort, strength, and courage to us, in our day.

Praying in the name of: Jacob¹, Jonathan², David³ and Daniel⁴; Tamar⁵, Miriam⁶, and Naomi⁷, here is one possible construct for a new

¹ Jacob struggled with a being in the night, emerging with a limp. He would not cease his wrestling until he also emerged with a blessing from his adversary.

² Jonathan was the rightful inheritor of his father’s throne but desired instead to yield leadership to his beloved friend, David. Because he refused to abandon his deeply held convictions, he fought against his father and died in battle defending his companion and his beliefs.

³ David is perhaps best known for his battle against the giant, Goliath, though the odds were firmly not in his favor.

⁴ Daniel’s enemies threw him into the lion’s den, by order of the king.

⁵ Tamar was twice widowed, childless, and then denied remarriage by her father-in-law because he feared that she would somehow cause the death of a third husband, were she to be allowed to marry again.

⁶ Miriam was struck with a skin disease, *tzarroat*, which forced her to live outside the camp until she was healed.

Misheberach for an individual who is chronically ill, possibly best used in a pastoral setting, quietly, with that person present in the room:

"*Misheberach avotenu v'imotenu, hu yivarech et _____ ben/bat _____.
Chazek et libo/libah ve-tarim et yado/yadah b'birchotam she-natata
Ya'akov, shel Yonatan ve-David, shel Daniel ha-Navi, shel Tamar imo shel
Peretz, shel Miriam ha-Neviyah, ve-shel Naomi. Hu yiten ota/oto hen
vahesed v'rahamim; ahavah, achava, shalom, v'reut. Bimhera, Adonai
Elohenu, sh'ma kolenu, kabel na tefilatenu, u'sh'mor et rucho/ruchah,
nafsho/nafshah, venishmato/nishmatah. Bich'vod gevurat'cha, ve-
chasdechah, ve-rachamechah harabim, hinei anachnu omrim lo/la: chazak
v'ematz. U'fros aleinu sukkat sh'lomecha. Venomar: amen.*"

"May the One who blessed our fathers and our mothers, bless _____
son/daughter of _____: strengthen his/her heart and raise up his/her
hand, with the blessings you gave to Yaakov, to Yonatan and David, to
Daniel the Prophet, to Tamar mother of Peretz, to Miriam the Prophetess,
and to Naomi.

May God give to him/her grace, compassion and loving-kindness; love,
harmony, peace, and companionship.

Speedily, Adonai our God, hear our voices, take up our prayers, and
watch over his/her life-force, spirit, and soul. With respect to your
power, your loving-kindness, and your great compassion, behold we say
to him/her: be strong and of good courage⁸. Spread over us all Your
shelter of peace. And let us say: amen."

The prayer can also be adjusted according to the type of illness, or the
particular wishes of that specific person for whom the prayer is being
offered. (Example: May the One who blessed our foremother Miriam,
who was forced to leave the camp in her illness and then was welcomed
in time back to the community, also be with our friend, *Esther, daughter
of Reuven v'Elisheva*, with the blessing of being able to return, soon, to
our community...)

In a non-pastoral setting, or as part of a normative synagogue service,
another option is to alter the prayer slightly to shift this (individual)
prayer to the plural. This means that all of those members of a
community will be therein blessed, without calling undue attention to

⁷ Naomi lost her husband and both her sons in quick succession in a
foreign land. She cried out, "God has embittered my soul", feeling that
she was left completely empty, devoid of blessing or hope.

⁸ As Moses passes the mantle of leadership to the next generation, he
says, "*hazzak v'amatz*", meaning: "May you be strong and courageous"

them as individuals (and to avoid the problem of praying for each individual who is chronically ill for the rest of their lives).

Another liturgical inclusion in a congregational blessing for those struggling with chronic illness might be:

“As we complete one book of the Torah and proceed to the next, it is traditional to stand and to say aloud, in unison, “*hazzak hazzak, v'nithazzek*”, meaning: “Strength! Strength! And we shall all be strengthened.”

These are only a few of the potential sources we might use to create a prayer for those who struggle with illnesses that *cannot* be fully and completely healed. Advances in modern medicine have made it possible to live many weeks, months, and years while still wading through the murky waters of chronic illness and pain. Jewish tradition is ripe with resources of comfort, of supplication, and of hope that might bring light into the world of those who suffer. It is upon us to help to make a renewed tradition.