

Seeking Meaning in the Second Half of Life
Midrash and Medicine Conference--May, 2009/Iyar 5769

Remembering through Midrash:
A Jewish Spiritual Framework for Life Review
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Life Review: A Tool for Jewish Healing

Life review emerges out of our desire to make sense of our lives, to embrace our fragmented stories as a coherent, meaningful narrative. Our commitment to plumbing the sacred stories of our lives is modeled by our commitment to the sacred texts of the Torah. We need to make sense of these stories because they are sacred and because they are ours. Life review is the holy work of Creation--creation of the latest edition of the sacred stories that we each compose and amend over our lifetimes.

Life Review as a Natural Process

- Experienced by all older adults or anyone facing mortality
- Takes various forms
- Is essential to one's ability to face the future

Life Review as "Re-membering"

- Is a purposeful, analytic activity
- Seeks re-integration of parts of self
- Affirms memory as key to identity

Jewish Spiritual Aspects of Life Review

- Resolution of inner or outer conflict (*shelemut*)
- Finding new meaning (*drash*)
- Acceptance of all experiences (*oseh shalom u-vorei et ha-kol*)
- Forgiveness of self and others (*teshuvah, mechilah*)
- Reclaiming of unlived life (*sabeinu, modim, lo alecha*)
- Awareness of God's presence in the experience (*ha-meichin m'tzadei gaver*)
- Creating legacy (*le-dor va-dor*)

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Midrashic Inquiry for Life Review

Midrashic inquiry can be helpful in uncovering meaning in the process of life review. Here are some questions to guide this inquiry. One might focus on a single question, or, over time, on many.

Surface issues (*p'shat*)

- What information or detail is missing from the story?
- Are there uncertainties or discontinuities in the story?

Layers of meaning (*remez*)

- How do the feelings, symbols, or images in the story connect with other stories or experiences in your life?
- How might the story be told by another player?

Larger narrative (*drash*)

- Why is this story important to you?
- Does the story reflect values or beliefs held by your family or community?
- How does the story connect with the larger Jewish narrative?
- Is the larger narrative problematic, or can it provide new meaning?

Mystery (*sod*)

- Who are the unseen players or forces in the story?
- Where is the Divine Presence in the story?
- What aspect of the story cannot be explained?

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Using Midrashic Technique in our Healing Work with Life Review

When we work with elders as healthcare professionals, therapists, social workers, or spiritual caregivers, we can use midrashic inquiry to deepen the process of life review. On hearing a significant memory told with strong or complicated emotion, whether positive or negative, we can facilitate the discovery of deeper meaning by using questions like the following:

- This is something you think about a lot? Can we try to interpret what it means to you?
- Is this experience similar to any other experience in your life?
- Are there symbols or themes here that connect to other important events in your life? (Or, the listener can ask about specific objects, language, or themes that are heard in the story.)
- I wonder about a couple of missing pieces (e.g., Who else was there? What was your father's response? Where were you when this took place? How did you feel at the time?)
- I've heard your version of this story; can you imagine how (e.g.) your father (or any other "player") would tell it?
- Can you imagine how an unseen player, such as God, would describe this event?
- Does the story remind you of any other Jewish stories or texts? (Or, Your story makes me think of a particular Jewish text . . .). I wonder if the Jewish story can help you better understand your own story.

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Presenters

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Resources

Publications

Midrashic Technique/Analysis

Norman J. Cohen, *The Way into Torah*, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004.

Barry Holtz, *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, Simon and Schuster, 1986.

Life Review

Butler, R.N. "The life review. An interpretation of reminiscence in the aged." *Psychiatry*, 26, 65-70. 1963.

Butler, R.N.). "Recall and restrospection." *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 11, 523-529. 1963.

Murry, Donald M. *My Twice-Lived Life*. NY: Bantam. 2001.

Organizations

Duke Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health,
<http://www.spiritualityandhealth.duke.edu/>

Forum on Religion, Spirituality on Aging of the American Society on Aging. www.asaging.org

Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism of RRC. www.hiddur.org.

Hospice Foundation of America www.hospicefoundation.org

National Center for Creative Aging, www.creativeaging.org

National Center for Jewish Healing. www.jewishhealing.org