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PREFACE

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A combination of Rabbinic texts, contemporary storytelling, and interpretive process served as the focal point of the “Midrash & Medicine: Imagining Wholeness” conference held in May 2009. One hundred and fifty people from throughout North America and Israel participated in the conference, cosponsored by the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health and the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center. Norman Cohen, Lewis Barth, and Dayle Friedman keynoted the conference by applying their deft midrashic minds to well-known biblical stories and rendered their sense of “midrash” for the many rabbis, physicians, artists, musicians, therapists, and educators who both studied midrash and ventured to create some of their own. My own appreciation for the creativity inherent in the midrash was greatly enhanced.

In a physical setting of immense beauty, we inhabited the landscape of illness and wholeness with partners from across the country and across the religious spectrum, and we all learned new things about the way in which midrash can be a part of our healing work.

The Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health

The Kalsman Institute is privileged to sponsor this book, whose theme grew from the Monterey conference. Kalsman was founded by William Cutter, editor of this book and one of its authors. I am proud to be the institute’s director. We concentrate on the connections between Judaism and health. We are a catalyst for interaction among spiritual leaders, health-care providers, and Jewish community professionals and members;

we coordinate pastoral education for Hebrew Union College students. We strive to teach our students how to listen, how to ask the right questions, and how simply to be present. We believe these skills are enhanced by midrashic training.

Kalsman conferences and workshops provide opportunities for engagement and education—to teach professionals these same skills of presence and discernment. Our gatherings generate ideas and projects on Jewish spirituality and healing, Jewish medical ethics, illness and wellness, and the health of the health-care system. Kalsman has an international network of two thousand friends and partners, and in union with them, the institute makes positive contributions to Jewish thought and practice through training, collaboration, and dialogue.

We focus on educating and motivating Jewish health-care providers and providing consultation to congregations and health organizations. A critical underpinning of all our work is building a scholarly foundation for our field, through efforts like this book, and now with the support of the John Templeton Foundation, through a research roundtable to identify research priorities for the field, to catalyze applied research and evaluation, and to publish articles and other scholarly products.

Midrash & Medicine: Imagining Wholeness

We convened the “Midrash & Medicine: Imagining Wholeness” conference in May 2009 to foster collaboration through an exchange of learning and best practices among participants—to help them do the work of Jewish healing. Every Kalsman Institute gathering is built on the same model—to educate, exchange, and energize. At the conference, participants stimulated and nourished their personal and professional growth through text study and retreat. With our partners from the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center and the many conference committee members from around the country, we engaged midrash as an interpretive and creative process to accomplish this growth, and we studied the intersection of Judaism and health through the prism of Jewish commentary—adding visual arts, song, poetry, and movement to the customary forms of commentary.

HUC midrash professors teach that midrashic texts are viewed as a rich treasure for contemporary preaching and teaching. As Philip

Cushman states later in this book, the process of midrash emphasizes interpersonal engagement, critical interpretive processes, and playfulness. Cushman suggests that midrashic process takes place within a group—the “antithesis of hyperindividualism.” This engagement came to life at the conference from which this set of essays is derived. Reflection on midrashic interpretation through the arts was a focus of our learning and play. Singer and songwriter Debbie Friedman created a healing song with her students before our very eyes. Andrea Hodos used movement to embody the midrash by helping participants think with their bodies and move with their minds. Elizheva Hurvich borrowed from Jo Milgrom’s torn-paper midrash exercises to help conference attendees fill in the blanks of our texts and visually portray the poetry of the retreat experiences.

In addition to engaging the arts, another facet of “Imagining Wholeness” during the conference was the interdisciplinary nature of our *kahal*—our community. Conference attendees came from across the spectrum of Jewish religious and spiritual life and represented a wide variety of Jewish and medical disciplines.

In preparation for the conference, Natan Fenner, conference faculty and Bay Area Jewish Healing Center staff member, defined interpretive midrash as a creative process for drawing out meaning from a central text or experience using different modes of expression.

The Field of Judaism, Health, and Healing

The Kalsman Institute has sponsored numerous publications and forums since its inception. Articles, position papers, and theses by our colleagues and students chart the territory of health and Judaism, adding to a growing body of literature and scholarship. *Quality of Life in Jewish Bioethics* came out in 2006 through the institute’s partnership with a coalition of Jewish bioethicists. The predecessor to this book was Dr. Cutter’s *Healing and the Jewish Imagination: Spiritual and Practical Perspectives on Judaism and Health* (Jewish Lights). Several of the essays in that book were commissioned as keynote speeches for another international Kalsman conference, “Mining the Jewish Tradition.” Some of the conference scholars noted that the exposure to our contemporary field was the first time they had extracted

nuggets of insights on health and healing through Jewish traditions of prayer, ritual, narrative, and presence. Rabbi Arthur Green, distinguished scholar of theology and Jewish mystical thought, abandoned a lifelong distance from the healing aspect of Kabbalah to ponder the power of prayer and presence.¹ Bible Professor Tamara Eskenazi had always been less resistant and established that “the Bible is a book of hope and a book of healing.” She argued that texts traditionally used to punish or reject were actually balanced by depictions of restoring bodily and spiritual wholeness and integrity. Professor Eskenazi pointed out that the “Bible began as a response to crisis. Its early compilers aimed at restoring hope and providing healing to a people whose world had come undone.”²

The work of the Kalsman Institute, and other groups devoted to the field of Judaism, health, and healing, are a modern version of this response to crisis. Social service agencies, grassroots groups, and synagogues developed health-related services and resources to meet the needs of contemporary Jews. Initial efforts of the Jewish healing movement were spearheaded by professionals and lay leaders who came to realize that, as a consequence of modern life, many Jews no longer had easy or meaningful access to the spiritual and communal supports that had sustained previous generations of Jews through difficult times of illness and loss. As noted by the leadership of the Jewish healing movement, these initiatives draw on wellsprings of Jewish thinking that speak to the religious tradition as a resource for comfort and solace.³ Surely the vision of our generous founders, the Kalsman family, has been realized.

Second Generation

I am one of the Jews who did not have access to the support that could have sustained me in my family’s time of illness and loss. I am the daughter of two Holocaust concentration camp survivors. When prompted to reflect on my life, I consider being a “second generation” among the most significant elements of my identity. Both my parents, David and Regina Burdowski, of blessed memory, survived years of violence, starvation, and degradation. Their experiences framed the way they looked at the world and shaped my upbringing and outlook. The horrors they survived scarred them—and toughened me.

The legacy of being a child of survivors encourages me—forces me, really—to reflect continually on what I am supposed to do with my life, how to be a Jew, and how the world operates after the Holocaust.

My parents built a family after the horrors of their experiences. They both died too young. My mother died when she was only fifty-five (and I was sixteen). My mother's death and her pain and suffering during the majority of my lifetime significantly affected my growth and development. It also significantly affected my career. In high school, I saw myself headed for a career in medicine, but after too many years spent next to her hospital beds, I turned from that direction and moved toward the business world.

I needed twenty years to find my way back to the intersection of Judaism and health. During the many days spent at my mother's bedside, my family and I were never visited or called on by a member of the Jewish community or a health-care provider to offer support or comfort. No chaplain, social worker, rabbi. I never knew such a possibility existed, and when I discovered the concept, I made it my life's work to ensure that others would not live without this particular form of Jewish communal support.

A Tale of Healing

One of the pleasures of working in community to bring Jewish wisdom to the medical and Jewish communities is that the teacher learns while preparing to teach. While planning the “Midrash & Medicine” conference, faculty and committee members studied together frequently. I joined planning committee members to gain exposure to the midrashic process, narrative, and Rabbinic texts from William Cutter, Eric Weiss, and Natan Fenner from the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center. Elliot Kukla and Julie Pelc (now Julie Adler), were key conference staff and faculty, and they chose a central text for the preparation stage of the conference, “Tilling Our Souls,” based on part of Psalm 103: “The days of the human life are like grass in the field, indeed like grass” (Psalm 103:15).⁴

Kukla and Adler taught that in traditional midrash, the Rabbis layered meaning on a text by excerpting another text and linking the two through a common thread. The Rabbis used this line from Psalms to

expound on a thought suggested in the book of Samuel. The midrash is a tale of healing. Adler and Pelc provided this translation and interpretation of the midrash:

It is told of Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva that, while they were walking through the streets of Jerusalem accompanied by a certain man, a sick person confronted them and said, “Masters, tell me, how shall I be healed?” They replied, “Take such-and-such, and you will be healed.” The man accompanying the sages asked them, “Who smote him with sickness?”

They replied, “The Holy One.”

The man: “And you bring yourselves into a matter that does not concern you? God smote and you would heal?”

The sages (to the man): “What is your work?”

The man: “I am a tiller of the soil...”

The sages: “Who created the vineyard?”

The man: “The Holy One.”

The sages: “Then why do you bring yourself into a matter that does not concern you? God created it, and you eat the fruit from it!”

The man: “If I did not go out and plow the vineyard, prune it, compost it, and weed it, it would have yielded nothing.”

The sages: “Have you heard the verse, *‘the days of the human life are like grass’* [Psalm 103:15]? A tree, it will not grow if not given water to drink, it will die—will not live. So, too, the human body is a tree: a healing potion is the compost, and the physician is the tiller of the soil.”

MIDRASH SAMUEL 4⁵

Comparing the human body to a living tree, and healing potions to compost, Rabbis Adler and Kukla drew from our Rabbinic sages to teach that our physicians and health-care providers are God’s assistants responding to illness, pain, and crisis:

No matter how rich the soil is by itself; if it’s not tilled and broken up, the nutrients won’t get in. This is the practice of studying texts ourselves and “breaking up” our own level of understanding. It is

also interesting to think of the image of parched earth: when there is a drought, the ground hardens and the healing elements of water and other nutrients just run off. When we are in pain, our “earth” can become hardened, too. We must “till” our soil in order for true healing to enter. Soil can only be tilled in relationship. We help one another “till,” so that the healing potions can seep in.⁶

Our quest for spiritual intimacy, the holy work that Dayle Friedman offers in her essay, is satisfied by the work we do to facilitate health and healing. From the fourth prayer of the *Amidah* or *Shemoneh Esrei* (the nineteen central daily Jewish prayers and blessings), we pray for understanding:

You graciously endow mortals with intelligence, teaching us wisdom and understanding. Grant us knowledge, discernment, and wisdom. Praised are You, *Adonai*, who graciously grants intelligence.⁷

Much work remains in the field of Judaism, health, and healing. I believe we will find the knowledge and discernment to draw on a deeply rooted wisdom that has much to say about the effects of illness even as it celebrates wellness of body, mind, and spirit.