

BOOK REVIEWS

Healing and the Jewish Imagination: Spiritual and Practical Perspectives on Judaism and Health

Edited by Rabbi William Cutter, Ph.D.

(Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007), 240 pp.

Healing and the Jewish Imagination: Spiritual and Practical Perspectives on Judaism and Health is a brilliant and enlightening beginning to an important conversation about health, healing, pain, mortality, and suffering within and beyond the Jewish community. Every Jewish and non-Jewish clinician, scholar, and spiritual leader who focuses on health, healing, and the human condition, whether through medical science, religious text, or public health will benefit from the sobering, uplifting, and cutting-edge thought offered by the book's fifteen contributors. The overarching topics range from "Hope and the Hebrew Bible" (Tamara Eskenzi and Adriane Leveen), "Overcoming Stigma" (Rachel Adler, David Shulman, and Albert J. Winn), "From Disability to Enablement" (Elliott Dorff and Tamara M. Green), and "Jewish Bioethics in Story and Law" (Peter Knobel and Louis E. Newman). As someone who is immersed in Jewish pastoral education as an ACPE Supervisor and director of a Jewish chaplaincy training program, I am thankful for this resource and for the new questions about my own work and thought it stimulates me to ask.

William Cutter introduces his book by stating a reality our mainstream culture finds difficult to accept: "It is certain that our bodies do not last forever, and that they can't even do everything we want during their physical lifetime. This condition makes life difficult and interesting, and it is a condition that has created much of the search for healing in Jewish tradition." He later writes, "[T]he essays in this book—in their aggregate—make the case that Jewish thinking provides an opportunity to gain some spiritual ground when we lack the things we seek."

One of the central topics the book returns to in its chapters is distinguishing healing from curing and the interactions, throughout history, of community, liturgy, text, and ritual in this dynamic discussion. In *Healing and the Jewish Imagination*, Cutter aims to address the ways in which medicine and technology impact our intimacy and individuality during seminal events in our lives, especially the events that our secular culture maintains a history and practice of stigmatizing or ignoring altogether, such as illness and disability. In our culture, even the natural process of aging is seen as pathology.

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Cutter and his co-authors create new opportunities to ponder the intersection of tradition, medicine, and personal experience.

Arnold Eisen, in his chapter, "Choose Life: American Jews and the Quest for Healing," notes that over the past two hundred years, Jewish thinkers have "had precious little to say" about health, healing, and the individual, due to the "urgent collective tasks that have marked the Jewish entry into modernity." However, he brings attention to the exceptions: Kook, Buber, Heschel, Soloveitchik, with an emphasis on Rosenzweig, who, from varying angles of examination, all pay attention to the well-being of the individual within the collective experience. Eisen explores the role of aggadah, the personal and communal narrative experience that "teaches truths accessible in no other way."

There is a vibrant dialogical process between the authors of several chapters, where in keeping with the evolutionary and interactive roots of our textual tradition, the thinkers are free to challenge one another and broaden each other's perspectives through the lenses of both thought and experience. Examples of this interaction appear in chapter 4, "From Disability to Enablement" between Dorff and Green, as well as in chapter 6, "Jewish Bioethics in Story and Law" between Knobel and Newman.

In chapter 4, when Dorff proposes his "Copernican Revolution," he invites us to, "think of a world in which *the norm* is what we now call 'disabled,' and we able-bodied and sane people are the abnormal ones." He then asks his readers, "What would, or should, Jewish perspectives and law look like then?" Green, in her chapter, "*Misheberach* and the ADA," expresses her doubt and questions about Judaism's capacity to create a community of true inclusion. Green writes, "But it is difficult to reconcile the embrace of spiritual inclusion with the ritual exclusion from Temple service of those *kohanim* who are seen as deformed, those who have, as the sociologist Erving Goffman describes in his remarkable study *Stigma*, a 'spoiled identity.'" Together, both Dorff and Green raise questions about the expandability of Judaism, the Jewish community, and halachah to shift disability consciousness from stigma to inclusion.

The book's dialogical focus is also emphasized in chapter 6, where Knobel accurately contends that "...most of our Jewish constituents—even those committed to a Jewish way of life—pay little attention to classic halachic discourse as a way of addressing ethical issues, and especially the crucial bioethical issues that everyone

faces at one or another time in life." Newman challenges Knobel's assertion when he states that ethicists should not "minimize the value of Halacha." He writes: "...Halacha is, at least in part, an attempt to concretize the values embedded in the great stories of our people and its relationship to God." Knobel and Newman, together, through their respective lenses, address the complex relationship between halachah, aggadah, the individual Jewish experience, and biomedical ethics in contemporary society.

Tamara Eskenazi, in "Reading the Bible as a Healing Text," gifts us with an exquisite insight on understanding that while forming a collective historical consciousness, constructing guidance and faith, "one of the most pervasive agendas [of the Bible] from the very beginning was to provide hope and healing." Eskenazi asserts within the historical timeline of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, "The Bible began... as a response to crisis. Its early compilers aimed at restoring hope and providing a healing to a people whose world had come undone." From Deuteronomistic and Levitical perspectives in addition to the five *m'gillot*, Eskenazi poetically articulates some of the stories and poems the *Tanach* contains to "help us recognize the different seasons in our lives."

Healing and the Jewish Imagination includes a glance at "Health and Healing Among the Mystics" through the creative input and speculations of Arthur Green and Eitan P. Fishbane. Fishbane introduces a late-eighteenth-century Chasidic text, the *Degel Maheneh Efraim* by Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efrayim of Sudilkov, to delve into Jewish notions of the relationship between mind and body in the healing process.

Rachel Adler, in her article, "Those Who Turn Away Their Faces: *Tzaraat* and Stigma," describes *tzaraat* "as a disease as feared as dementia." Adler eloquently terms cultural ideas about impurity/purity, uncleanness/cleanness and any "disorder or anomaly [that disrupts] the way we have systematized reality," as "pollution thinking." She utilizes biblical literature, emphasizing the *m'tzora* in Leviticus, to address the dualism of health and disease in our literature and cultural perspectives. Adler encourages us to examine the "purified *metzora* or the rabbinic and postrabbinic construction of *taharah*, a transfiguration into paradoxical purity." Adler proposes, "the most powerful means of transcending [pollution thinking] is subverting it." Through *taharah* and *m'tzora*, she effectively

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examines the biblical and rabbinic legacy of this subversion process—turning fleeing from those who represent the disease of social stigma into our staying, acceptance, and comforting of them in the midst of their suffering.

David I. Schulman, in his “Spoiled Identity and the Search for Holiness: Stigma, Death and the Jewish Community,” forces us to examine the ways in which we may be further marginalizing rather than including our sick, our dying, and our suffering. He suggests that even our popular healing services may “unconsciously replicate the outside world’s isolation of those in need of healing; they can stigmatize the yearning of their heart.” Schulman reminds us, as we speculate on current trends in health and healing in the Jewish and mainstream communities, to remain aware of the pitfall of instigating social death and communal alienation for those who are near death, rather than enveloping them into the social fabric of our lives and congregations.

This review only begins to touch the depth that each author elucidates as we continue to consider our conversation about Jewish text, tradition, and practice in a contemporary society in which the importance of the individual is finally gaining ground in the world of medicine, science, and biomedical ethics. At the same time, this conversation, thanks to Dr. William Cutter, holds its foundation in the richness of complementary and sometimes contradictory ideas, ancient, medieval, and current, as they impact our collective narrative on *Healing and the Jewish Imagination*. Our imagination is enhanced by these writings. So, too, will our health and healing work benefit from this anthology.

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The Way Into Judaism and the Environment

by Jeremy Benstein

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With climate change and other environmental issues being at the forefront of global political discussions, this book will remain relevant for years. For those of us who want to bring a uniquely Jewish perspective to this debate, this is a good book to add to one’s