for change. This self-absorption can even lead to exacerbating the condition through neurotic and injurious self-testing, pain recycling, stress and other self-defeating reactions. The Jewish approach to healing involves a self-transcendence, a shift of concern to God, yet God as feeling our pain more intimately than we do, closer to us than we are to ourselves. In this way, we begin the process of re-establishing the experience of health.

Through this process, we open our hearts, minds and souls to really receive the blessings of healing that are already there for us in abundance, that facilitate healing. We learn, with patience and trust, to enhance the subtle and supple powers of our immune systems. We learn to appreciate and accept the ways in which our physical and social environments provide support that nourishes, nurtures and sustains us. We also prepare ourselves to be ready to find the often uncanny routes of healing that God provides for us: that just the right resource comes our way when we most need it.

R. Hayyim’s approach also models for us the Jewish ideal of the caregiver: that we recognize that our compassion for those who need healing is a dimension of God’s own infinite compassion for us all.

Healing of body; healing of spirit

Nancy Flam

Serious illness affronts the whole person: body, mind and spirit. Early on, Jewish liturgy acknowledged that the ill person seeks healing on different levels. In our central prayer for healing, the mi sheberakh, we pray for a complete healing: refuah sheleima. The prayer then specifies what is meant by a complete healing: refuat haguf, the healing of the body, or what we sometimes refer to as “cure,” and refuat hanefesh, the healing of the spirit, the soul, the self. Modern western medicine mainly addresses our need for physical healing. However, at the same time as we seek physical health, we also seek spiritual healing in response to the assaults not to our body, but to our person: emotional upheaval, social dislocation, and spiritual discomfort.

I am a rabbi, not a physician. When I talk about “Jewish healing,” I refer to the spiritual, not physical dimension of healing. I speak of how the Jewish tradition and community achieves (or helps another person achieve) a sense of spiritual well-being, wholeness, perspective, fulfillment or comfort, especially around issues of illness, suffering and loss.

The key traditional Jewish resources for spiritual healing are the three pillars of Judaism itself: Torah (the study of Jewish texts), avodah (prayer) and gemilut hassadim (acts of loving kindness). As Jews, these practices are always at the core of our spiritual life. However, when we are confronted with serious illness, we refract these practices through a particular lens, and in so doing discover the Jewish genius of refuat hanefesh. In reverse order, I explore these resources below.

Gemilut Hassadim

Perhaps the central healing practice which the tradition teaches is the mitzvah of bikkur holim, visiting those who are ill. There is a natural tendency toward isolation at times of illness. Not only are we often physically displaced from our usual roles as workers, parents and community members, but we often experience psychological isolation as well. The mitzvah of bikkur holim mitigates the existential aloneness and abandonment that illness often brings.

The core of the mitzvah is to be with someone and to be present, to provide company and to share some of the burden by empathically carrying it just a bit. In the world of pastoral care, this actually has a name. It is called “the ministry of presence.” We offer our full attention and our full love to the one we are visiting without our own agenda interfering, without expectation. We are just together in the moment. Our hope is that our loving presence will convey a sense of God’s own loving presence.

Avodah

The second main Jewish resource for one who is ill is avodah: prayer or worship in its broadest context. By

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for publications and a list of local Jewish healing centers.
avodah, I mean to suggest such activities as individual and communal prayer, meditation, and the spiritual practice of offering berakhot (blessings).

Prayer is an essential spiritual tool to use at a time of illness. It is a natural tool. During a hard time, we need to engage our capacity to hope. Prayer allows us an opportunity to articulate our hopes for healing, for cessation from suffering, for blessing to break through in the midst of pain.

Prayer is also what we do when we do not know what to do, when we are aware that our well-being is not entirely in our control. In this sense, prayer can help us acknowledge that our lives are indeed, b'yado, in God's hands.

Prayer can be a refuge, an inner sanctuary where we find retreat from procedures, treatments and all of the outer world with its many demands. We may find a sense of calm through prayer, a kind of “time out” for reflection.

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

Meditation is a wonderful resource, as well. Chanting a niggun (wordless tune) over and over again can help calm us and connect us to the Source of peace and comfort. Meditating on a particular verse from the Bible or from the siddur can help us embody its meaning in a full way.

Saying blessings can help us lift and savor what is beautiful in the moment. We have blessings for pleasures of taste, sight and smell; blessings of gratitude for being in the presence of someone wise, or someone disfigured. In the latter case, we thank God for creating many kinds of human beings. We have a whole list of blessings for getting up in the morning, so that our waking routine does not begin with a slam of the alarm clock, but rather with words of gratitude for simple miracles, such as opening our eyes, stretching, standing up.

It is also possible to use old blessings in new contexts, to sanctify the experience of receiving chemotherapy, of meeting with one’s doctor, of doing artificial insemination. The spiritual genius about blessings is that they help us reframe our experience in the context of divine reality.

Torah

Finally, Torah study, in its broadest sense, is an excellent spiritual resource for those who are ill. Study of traditional Jewish texts and commentary is, of course, a fundamental pillar of Jewish religious life. Through Torah study we attempt to understand God’s will for us. Through study we can connect with God.

Thinking about what God has to do with illness, suffering and healing is an essential cognitive resource. Cognitive resources are just as important as non-cognitive resources (such as prayer, or having another person to be present to us). The reason for this importance is perhaps best explained by analogy. It is well-known that experiencing physical pain without knowing the cause often magnifies the experience of the pain itself. Once we get a diagnosis, particularly if the diagnosis is not life-threatening, it often happens that the physical sensations of pain are more bearable.

It is similar with emotional and spiritual suffering. If we can find or develop a framework with which to understand our suffering, then sometimes the suffering itself becomes more bearable.

Therefore, one may search the tradition and find comfort from any of a number of perspectives: the perspective of Torah that states that good is requited with good, and bad with bad; the perspective of the Wisdom literature which underscores the grand mystery underlying creation; early rabbinic suggestions that justice is meted out in the world to come or that suffering may come to offer us an opportunity to do teshuvah; contemporary rabbinic theologies which do not hold God responsible for suffering but rather see God’s role as the source of hope, etc. At any one time, we may resonate with one or another perspective. Studying the tradition equips us with knowledge that can help us think about our suffering and search for healing.

Conclusion

Torah, avodah, and gemilut hassadim, the central pillars of Jewish practice, are indeed the central resources a Jew uses toward spiritual healing at a time of illness. These practices, which at all times form the basis of a Jew’s spiritual life lived deeply, can be refracted through the lens of someone living with serious illness to yield great treasures.

PATHWAYS TOWARD HEALING

CLAL—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, in cooperation with The National Center for Jewish Healing and funded by the Cummings Foundation, has created a curriculum on Jewish healing.

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The Jewish people hold tremendous wisdom about living deeply, both at times of abundance, and at difficult times. Our task is to study and practice our inheritance, such that its living waters can nourish us. ±

A perspective on Jewish healing
Naomi Mark

“How do you do that?” This was the question often posed to me over the last seven years, during which I served as a social worker counseling cancer patients and their families, at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in NYC. Having recently left that job, I now realize that being the non–medical member of an interdisciplinary team of physicians, nurses, and others, did evoke questions for me as well. If healing is not simply physical, then what non–physical (spiritual, emotional, psychological) elements are involved in healing? How can one attempt to assist in the healing of those struggling to cope with catastrophic illness? Given the sometimes insurmountable obstacles facing these patients, what can be done or said that could possibly make things better? What is it that I and other mental health providers, chaplains, and countless others do that qualifies as “Jewish healing”? Drawing on both therapeutic and Jewish principles, I offer here a conceptual framework and an approach to “healing” for those who are healers and those who are trying to promote healing or offer help to someone who is sick.

“Standing There”: The Foundation Of Healing

“Don’t just stand there—do something!” is the instinctive response one feels upon witnessing others in pain or distress. Within the field of medicine, this motto is the usual practice: order more tests, try different medications, initiate a referral to a related specialist, etc. Often the more dedicated the medical team, the more activity is generated; the intensity and sense of imminent crisis is constant when working with serious illness.

In healing the human spirit, however, “doing something” is often not enough. Dr. David Spiegel, chief of the Department of Psychiatry at Stanford University Hospital and author of many books on his work with cancer patients, therefore, reformulated the maxim, “Don’t just do something—stand there!” Being present and “standing there” together with those who are ill is far more difficult than it may initially seem, but it is on this foundation that the healing relationship is forged and it is within this relationship that the healing takes place.

Challenges For Helpers/Caregivers/Healers

1 Identity: “The patient is not the illness”

One of the most difficult aspects of being chronically ill is the way in which others tend to identify the ill person with the illness. We are all familiar with numerous tales of patients who experienced the stripping of their former identities as they slowly become identified even by those closest to them as the disease which they are fighting to overcome. The illness can often take over the perceptions of hospital staff, families, and tragically, at times that of the ill themselves. Tapping into the many other aspects of personal identity can therefore be restorative. The idea that illness is not to become a total identity, but rather part of a bigger picture, parallels the notion in halakhah that the poor are also obligated to give tzedakah. They are not to be viewed simply as poor people but are entitled to the same privileges and responsibilities of giving as everyone else.

2 Contextualization: Illness as part of the story

When illness is seen in a vacuum, ripped from the context of the entire flow of the ill person’s history, it can be more difficult for the ill to cope and to assume control. A sense of shame may develop or increase. Traditional Judaism encourages that the illness be understood as part of the whole picture of one’s life, inspiring a change in name, and ultimately a spirit of teshuvah.

It can therefore be restorative for the ill to share their stories and to have the illness understood as but one chapter of their life narrative. When provided with a fuller context with which to view the current crisis, the ill person may then be able to integrate this episode into his/her larger sense of self, to let go of the shame/secrecy about the illness and to begin to serve as a model for others on the integration of wellness and sickness in our community.

The feeling of being “broken by the world” is experienced by each of us individually, and depending on our life circumstance, at different thresholds. Yet, as the Kotzker Rebbe taught, there is nothing as whole as a broken heart—demonstrating that the struggle to find healing is more than just an attempt to recapture our

(continued, p.8)