
prayers, psalms, stories or rituals he couldn't offer Jewish patients to heal their spirit as they move through surgery, treatments, recovery and the various life adjustments that illness requires.

The JHC was established in order to retrieve these resources and to add to them through innovative programs and creative publications. Our work is in three major areas:

1. Direct services, which includes hospice care, prayer services of healing, educational seminars, workshops and conferences offering Jewish approaches to spiritual healing. Jewish exploration and support groups for Jews who want to integrate a spiritual perspective to the challenges of living with illnesses such as HIV+/AIDS, breast cancer, and spiritual counseling.

2. Training programs to help congregational rabbis, Jewish health care professionals, chaplains and *bikkur holim* volunteers deepen their skills and expand their repertoires.

3. Publications, including *The Outstretched Arm* newsletter, a booklet of blessings entitled, "When the Body Hurts, the Soul Still Longs to Sing", and several other tools now in production, research and referral services.

To some degree, our work may be seen as "uncovering the obvious", that is, turning to traditional Jewish narratives and observances and seeking spiritual healing from these texts and practices. The Passover *Haggadah*, *Tashlikh* on Rosh Hashanah, the *sukkah*...the story of Noah or Ruth, Hannah or Jonah...the prescribed bedtime *K'riat Sh'ma* ritual...familiar songs that derive from the Psalms...all of these are there for the taking, vehicles for achieving healing and wholeness.

The Gateway Called Illness

When David W., 39, an active member of a synagogue, was undergoing treatment for cancer, he began meditation and yoga at a local "mind-body" center, unaware that his own Jewish tradition offered rich and diverse practices for strengthening the spirit during times of illness.

It is important to stress that the Jewish tradition does not revolve around "solo performances". In Judaism, spiritual healing is not a venture for the lonely sufferer--deriving instead, from connectedness and community. For many people, illness triggers an intense search for help, support and meaning, and many are thus "primed" for a renewed and revitalized Jewish involvement and identification. If the Jewish community can reach out and respond to these individuals with care, compassion, empathy and authenticity, a major bridge will be forged

in our oft-touted struggle for Jewish continuity. Meeting the very real, human needs of people who are ill and of their family, friends and caregivers, and doing so with a balance of tradition and innovation, with both sophistication and sensitivity, draws people into a profound level of involvement and affiliation.

Underlying the JHC's mission is the conviction that Jewish tradition has much to say to those in pain. Jewish prayers, stories, psalms, rituals, holidays and so on can bring hope, comfort and strength to those who are feeling discouraged, overwhelmed and defeated. They can provide purpose and context to those who feel particularly rootless and alienated. They can bring spiritual healing--even when physical cure is remote or impossible. □

Bikkur holim and the synagogue

Avis D. Miller

Major illness is a life cycle event, bringing with it questions of faith, spiritual longings and the need for community. If medicine speaks the language of cure, then religion speaks the language of healing. These two goals are complementary. The locus of cure is the medical community, with its physicians, its pharmaceuticals and its hospitals. The locus of healing, for Jews, is in the caring religious community. For most committed American Jews, it is the institution of the synagogue which provides the structure for this ongoing community.

Six years ago, Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, DC, decided to raise our communal consciousness about the *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim*, visiting the sick. As so often happens, our interest began with a personal encounter with the beauty and the power of the *mitzvah*. Our inspiration for this endeavor was Bettina Silver Lorris, whose life and death touched many in the community, for whom it was the first loss of a contemporary. When Tina joined Adas Israel to become part of its Adult *Bat Mitzvah* class, she was already ill with cancer. But in her seven remaining years, she immersed herself in Jewishness, learning to read Hebrew and to chant expertly from the Torah. She became an integral part of the synagogue community. Entertained by her wit and inspired by her courage, those who visited Tina during the final stages of her illness at home, in the hospital, and finally at the

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hospice, invariably came away feeling that they had received far more than they had given.

Teaching a Response to Illness

We began with an intensive, four session symposium, which we called: "Give Me Your Hand", the phrase taken from the story in the Talmud, in which Rabbi Jochanan visits his friend, Rabbi Elazar, who is seriously ill. Rabbi Elazar gives Rabbi Jochanan his hand, and Rabbi Jochanan "raised him". The vignette teaches that for healing, a sick person needs the help of a caring community.

The first session of the symposium was completely devoted to the study of Jewish tradition on the subject of visiting the sick. I presented texts which we discussed together and drew out the implications for the contemporary practice of *bikkur holim*. What does Jewish tradition have to say about whom we should visit, and when we should visit? When should we be silent and listen actively; when we speak, what should we say? What is the role of touch, and what is the role of prayer? Through study, we established our bond with the legacy of past generations, and became a link in the chain that will extend to our descendants.

The second session featured doctors, including those with specialties in surgery, oncology, pediatrics, geriatrics and psychiatry. At the next session were other health professionals, including psychologists, nurses and social workers, those who worked in hospitals, hospices and home care.

But it was the fourth session that people experienced as the most compelling. We heard from those who had suffered serious illness, either themselves or in their family. We listened to families speak about the illness and death of a young husband, about the near fatal burns of a son, about daily living with pain and incapacity caused by Gauchers, a Jewish genetic disease, about a struggle with cancer that was still being fought. Each person spoke very movingly about the role their caring community had played for them. At the conclusion of the symposium, we rose to recite *Kaddish d'Rabbanan*.

Organizing the Task

The symposium bore two fruits. One was the publication of a handbook on *bikkur holim*, the first of its kind, which became an underground best seller, and is still in print. The booklet, like the symposium, entitled *Give Me Your Hand*, correlates the wisdom of the Jewish tradition with the best of current medical knowledge about visiting the sick. It also contains sections with special advice about visiting children and the elderly, as well as people

with particular kinds of illness--AIDS, Alzheimers, strokes and spinal cord injuries, those undergoing chemotherapy and the terminally ill. It includes a bibliography, prayers and a checklist of do's and don'ts for visitors.

The other result of the symposium was the formation of a *bikkur holim* committee, which is charged with finding out who from the congregation is ill, who are homebound, and which hospitals and nursing homes are caring for our members, not a simple matter for a large congregation in an area with dozens of facilities.

Some members of the committee perform administrative functions such as checking hospital lists and sending out "we're thinking about you" notes, while others actually visit. Although the *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim* is incumbent upon all Jews, occasionally we had to exercise discretion in allowing people to represent the congregation. Jewish law actually touches on this problem in the discussion in the *Shulkhan Arukh* about whether a person should visit his ailing enemy. Visits by certain congregants might prove counterproductive. We found it helpful to have an outside professional assist us in making these difficult decisions about who should visit and who should be involved in an administrative function.

Hand-in-Hand

Congregational visits supplement visits by the congregation's clergy. An important message is that visiting the sick is not just the job of "professional Jews", but the responsibility--and the privilege--of the entire community.

For Jews, visiting the sick is not merely the "right" thing to do. It is a *mitzvah*, a commanded act of spiritual significance. Tradition teaches that the *Shechinah*, the presence of God, hovers above the bed, making visiting the sick an act of holiness that enriches the life of the visitor and the visited alike.

A Hasidic commentary explains why *yod yod* is a name for God: When one *yod* (one Jew) is close to another *yod*--when one Jew gives another his hand in loving support--God's Presence is with them. The *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim* offers meaning to Jews who visit, and healing to those who suffer. □

But others say about...

The Hebron Massacre

...Baruch Goldstein represents the evil within, the dark side of our Jewishness that is the product of centuries of internalized oppression. During the course of the greater

part of the last two millennia, we had no power to act on these malevolent impulses. But in post-Holocaust Israel, where we bear the psychic weight of the six million while being confronted by a seemingly intractable enemy, whom we dominate, the temptation to acquiesce to the seductive appeal for vengeance is almost irresistible. That is precisely why it is all the more urgent for Jews to acknowledge the allure of this inclination as an initial step in the process of cleansing and ultimately purging ourselves of our demons. In order to move beyond our obsessions, we first must own them and admit that they are ours....

Chaim Seidler-Feller
Los Angeles, CA

Books worth your summer perusal

Two beach nominees: forget the kitchen and revel in the lore and recipes (e.g., Uzbekistan coriandered fish) in Joan Nathan's gracious *Jewish Cooking in America* (Knopf); or tense up with some Jerusalem highbrow critics in Batya Gur's *Literary Murder* (Harper Collins). More demanding: fourteen interesting Jews from Rachel Cowan through Norman Lamm to Adin Steinsaltz talk directly to Joshua O. Haberman about *The God I Believe In* (Free Press) and much else. Relax with Morris B. Margolies's somewhat uncritical but loving *A Gathering of Angels* (Ballantine) from all over Jewish literature. *Auschwitz, A History in Photographs* (Indiana) by Teresa Swiebocka (of the Auschwitz museum) chills you even when the pictures are landscapes; but Jacob Glatstein's Holocaust poems, *I Keep Recalling* (Ktav), Barnett Zumoff, trans., pain the heart; while David Blumenthal's *Facing the Abusing God* (Westminster/John Knox) uses post-modern style to innovatively explore the overlap between personal abuse and Holocaust suffering. Shimon Peres's dreams of *The New Middle East* (Holt) deserve

attention while mixing the politician's realism and image-making. Academic depth grounds Benjamin Ginsberg's anxiety lest *The Fatal Embrace* (Chicago) by Jews of the state lead out-of-power-niks to virulent antisemitism. Where Stefan C. Reif (Of Geniza fame) recounts the history of *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer* (Cambridge) deeply yet accessibly, Reuven Hammer's *Entering Jewish Prayer* (Schocken) does so more as a guide to doing, thus also providing some pleasant prayer commentaries. Discussing the British as well as the U.S. version of *The Jewish Woman in Contemporary Society* (NYU), Adrienne Baker gives some new insight in this not overly anthropologized survey.

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