THE JEWISH HEALING CENTER

The Outstretched Arm

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Drawing the Map

The question posed most often to those of us associated with the Jewish Healing Center is, "what *is* Jewish healing?"

Our realm of concern lies in the area of spiritual healing — achieving wholeness, deriving meaning or understanding, and using an array of techniques for coping with, illness and suffering. Healing is not physical cure, although in some cases spiritual healing can indeed facilitate physical improvement. Our activities complement normative medical care.

The Jewish Healing Center's essential tasks include understanding and retrieving healing traditions and inspiring and creating new ones. Within Judaism and the Jewish community are the resources to develop activities, environments, and structures to help Jews heal when they get sick.

Inside:

Letter from the Executive Director 2
Conference.....3
Who We Are 4
From the West Coast.....4
East Coast Activities.....5
Paths to Healing 6

Discoveries

Rabbi Nancy Flam, associate director, points out that over the centuries, Jews have performed a number of religious activities that they have understood to be healing practices. Examples include chanting prayers at the graves of famous rabbis, receiving amulets, and reciting psalms.

At the same time, she adds, Jews have performed other practices that may not have been construed as ones that promote healing. With our current knowledge of Western and alternative medicine, however, we can understand them as activities that may lead to that result.

One recent study suggests that there "may be a relationship between helping others and a number of health-related factors." This observation, although qualified, provokes an important question for us: Can we say that leading a life of *mitzvot* — in particular, community *mitzvot*, deeds which better our fellow human beings — can itself be understood as an element of Judaism that can lead to healing?

Similarly, another recent study demonstrated a significant correlation

Continued on page 7

Our Charter

During times of illness, many American Jews — whether affiliated with a congregation or not — do not have available or do not know how to find the spiritual nourishment that can help them heal emotionally and, perhaps, physically.

A handful of Jewish hospital chaplains, a few Jewish hospices, rabbinic visitation to hospitalized or homebound patients, and the traditional practices of *bikkur holim* (visiting the sick) and communal prayer for the ill — these define the extent of organized spiritual care available today for Jews who are ill, their families, and friends. And while they offer support and assistance, they are not yet enough.

At the same time, a disproportionate number of Jews flock to an array of non-Jewish institutions and programs in the fields of healing and recovery where they can investigate some of the healing techniques of proven medical and psychological benefit. Perhaps ironically, although Jews feature prominently as founders and teachers at many of these places, the program contents are unrelated to Judaism.

Meanwhile, interest in healing as a spiritual, as well as physical, challenge, continues to grow. Programs,

The Outstretched Arm, newsletter of the Jewish Healing Center, Fall 1991. Courtesy of Rachel Cowan.

guide and database that we are creating.

- Rabbi Susan Freeman is writing several guided meditations that spring from Biblical imagery and verses to add to "The Outstretched Arm," prepared for our inaugural conference.
- Rabbi Freeman is also teaching a course on Judaism and Healing at Congregation Shir HeHarim in Brattleboro, Vermont.
- We have commissioned Felice Kahn Zisken in Jerusalem to investigate the state of Jewish healing in Israel. She will submit monthly reports about the people, programs, and resources that she discovers.

Paths to Healing

Rabbi Rachel Cowan originated the notion of the Healing Center. On Yom Kippur 5752 (September 18th) she delivered a moving sermon at Congregation Ansche Chesed in Manhattan. Below are excerpts from that talk.

The disciples of a rebbe came to ask him to explain what atonement is. He tried to describe his ideas, but they said they did not understand. He told them to go find the biggest boulder in the fields outside the village and to bring it to him. They did so. Then he asked them to find three big rocks and bring them to him. They did so. Then he asked them to bring him hundreds of pebbles. They did so. Fine, he said. Now put them back where you found them.

When my friend told me this story, I was instantly struck with the metaphor of pebbles. I suppose that the intended meaning of the story is that we are so careless with our relationships that we don't even know where to locate each of our sins. We have to mend many little hurts, and that is hard.

But I heard it differently. When we are hurt or depressed or feel that we have strayed far from the path we would like to be on, we can't imagine how to take big, transformative actions. But we do have the energy to take small steps. We can pick up pebbles and look at them carefully and put them down somewhere else, out of our way.

Many of us sit in the shadow of that boulder. We know where it came from, but we can't move it back. It blocks us. It cuts us off. We stagger in the aftermath of the death of someone we loved; we wonder if we can keep up our courage, our will to go on, in the face of illness or accident, the loss of a job or relationship, the throb of depression. How do we live hopefully, knowing that pain is a permanent part of our life?

I have been knocked off stride by this holiday season. The memories of the first and last days of Paul's illness, and the deep longing I feel for his presence, have come out of hiding. Busy with the new normality of my life, I forgot that recovery is not a straight uphill journey. How, I now wonder, can we really help ourselves and help each other to feel whole, at one with ourselves? What are the little steps, where are the few pebbles we can place rightfully outside our paths?

Most all of us have had our vision of wholeness shattered. We will never get it back. . . But slowly, and with ups, downs, and side tracks, most of us have managed to put together fragments of that whole, and to rebuild structures that give our lives coherence. We have filled the empty spaces with love, with friendship, with books, with work and tasks and causes, with passions and commitments.

Often we are content, even happy, with our patched-up lives. But suddenly, we find that we can see only the cracks.

And from time to time we break down. We feel we just can't keep going. We need help to find the courage to face the reality that our lives and our world are so imperfect.

These holidays, the *Yamim Noraim* (Days of Awe), bring us face to heart with this pain. I spent much of Rosh Hashana feeling as though there were a knife twisting in my gut. I kept trying to figure out where could I, could we, get the courage to change. How do we let go of pain? How do we face the next day with optimism when we have to cope with the same depressing reality? Where does God fit into this puzzle?

You can panic when you start to get into these questions. The boulder looks gigantic, immovable . . . You are in the *meitzar*, the depths, and you don't know if anyone is listening when you cry out. Worse, you wonder if you'll let them help you if you do.

Finally, I noticed the obvious. The *Yamim Noraim* open up the pain — but they are a vehicle for healing it, too.

The Outstretched Arm, newsletter of the Jewish Healing Center, Fall 1991. Courtesy of Rachel Cowan.

In the *Amidah* today, we thanked God for the gift of these days of repentance.

And they are a gift. Our ancestors, in their wisdom, understood that we need many days. Reflection, repentance, and realignment do not come in a flash, not even in a day.

The liturgy is a tool. Granted, it poses many difficulties for us moderns, as it probably did for our ancestors. We don't like the constant theme of the smallness, sinfulness, powerlessness, of humanity. Nor can we accept the perfect goodness and justice of God. After all, this is a God who has just commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son as a test. This is a God who coexists in our world with evil, cruelty, injustice. Wars are fought in God's name.

In our lives we are always striving to feel powerful. But this imagery paints us as passive creatures. We are God's sheep, driven leaves, dust, passing shadows. The *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) sent scapegoats into the wilderness to expiate our sins. Our fate is predetermined. We pray "who shall live and who shall die?" And we fear the year will bring more sadness and pain.

"It is written, it is sealed," we chant, "morning and evening." So short the time, so final the judgment, so mechanical the process.

Furthermore, we cannot accept the concept of decree. We know too much about suffering and science to believe that misfortune flows from sin. Unlike our forbears, we cannot explain illness by our own moral failures.

The liturgy and the ritual give us supports to hold onto. We can work our way through the difficulties, choosing the contradictions we are willing to live with, and seeking guidance from the text. We are lifted by the poetry and the song of prayer. If the Torah is a tree of life, we can climb on its branches.

The liturgy exists in a context of activity. We are commanded to reach out to family and friends. We must ask for their forgiveness.

We pray in community. If we open our mouths — even if just to hum — we strengthen the voice of the whole and we come out of ourselves.

I think we can re-imagine our relationship with God so that we are not simply clay in hand. God cannot redeem the world without us. We cannot repair it without the belief that it is our mission to do so, and without a sense of connection to eternal truths and to generations before and after.

How do we build that relationship? Through *tz'dakah, t'fillah, t'shuvah* (charity, prayer, and repentance). Through *tz'dakah*, we reach out to help others. Prayer releases us from the narrow confines of self and carries us toward the infinite. And through *t'shuvah*, we turn our paths to walk more closely with God.

Drawing the Map, from page 1

between psychosocial factors such as the patient's support system and prolonged life after diagnosis of late-stage breast cancer. This work generated such excitement that several scientists are now trying to replicate it and confirm (or refute) the results. And it prompts us to wonder how the role of community — a significant factor in Jewish life — affects one's ability to heal.

While the intellectual and religious orientation of the Jewish Healing Center is grounded in historic Jewish wisdom, we recognize that authentic Judaism is ever-evolving. Just as Jewish civilization has always borrowed from the best ideas and insights of host and neighboring cultures, the Jewish Healing Center is strongly influenced by modern psychology, medical science, and pertinent insights of other religious traditions.

Those of us who have worked to create the Jewish Healing Center feel privileged and challenged to be in the early days of a voyage into uncharted waters. We don't know what we'll discover, but we are sure that it will be of value.

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