

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.

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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

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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,

Letter from the Executive Director

publications, and other resources devoted to all facets of this subject are proliferating. As the American population ages and more people grapple with problems of chronic and severe illness, this hunger for spiritual fare will only deepen. Clearly, the time is ripe to focus the Jewish community's attention on this vitally important area.

The Jewish Healing Center is the response of a group in New York, brought together by Rabbi Rachel Cowan. We have studied and reflected on the challenges of healing the spirit during the arc of illness and also when the body cannot be cured. Early in our discussions, we determined that a Jewish Healing Center would be a unique community resource, and an essential one. So we set about to create it.

Pathways

The Center brings together Jews confronting serious illness, knowledgeable Jewish professionals — including doctors, nurses, and social workers — and scholars and rabbis. Each constituent group has important needs that are not now met in other environments.

Our work divides into four main categories: providing direct services, organizing training programs, sponsoring research, and offering a library and resource center. While we've identified three client groups — patients and their families, medical personnel, and rabbis and chaplains — the Center is open to all.

Programs and services designed for seriously ill Jews, their families and friends, will integrate the rich

The Jewish Healing Center enters the world showered with many blessings. Foremost is a generous three-year grant from The Nathan Cummings Foundation, which allows us to focus on our ambitious and detailed agenda as we experiment and discover what works — and what doesn't — and as we introduce the Healing Center to the community at large.

This grant not only assures us continuity, it provides breathing space and time to chart our long-term goals and growth. You'll be reading more about future programs in forthcoming issues of this newsletter.

As a fledgling organization, we have needed the institutional equivalent of an older sibling: someone to take us under a wing, advise and educate us. As a practical matter, we have required a well-established not-for-profit organization to handle our financial matters. The Shefa Fund and its founder and president, Jeffrey Dekro, cheerfully fulfill these functions. The Shefa Fund, which sponsors projects that advance Jewish renewal, has been generous with counsel and administrative and financial expertise.

Michael Lerner, president and founder of Commonweal, has our warmest thanks for the many hours he has spent tutoring us in the ways of the not-for-profit world. His unstinting support and thoughtful advice have been invaluable.

We have also been blessed by the enthusiastic reception that the concept of the Jewish Healing Center has received. Many people have willingly shared their insights, reflections and experiences. Others have proffered advice about the nuts-and-bolts details of starting a new organization. Almost everyone who hears about the Center wants to participate in some fashion.

It is this kind of instinctive, immediate involvement that will help our newborn Center thrive. We invite you to pass along information about programs, teachers, and resources that we should know about. And we'll welcome your opinions, suggestions, and advice.

resources of Judaism with mind-body techniques of healing such as meditation, visualization and peer group support. Among the activities we will offer are spiritual counseling, Shabbat retreats, workshops, and courses. It is our conviction that authentic spiritual practices within the Jewish tradition can alleviate much suffering.

Training programs in pastoral care

designed for rabbis and chaplains, and workshops that help doctors cope with difficult ethical issues in their practices and identify their patients' spiritual needs, will be introduced soon. For both rabbis and medical personnel, we plan to compile texts and other materials that will help them work more compassionately with congregants and patients.

The Jewish Healing Center should

also be a clearinghouse for information about programs, activities, and teachers in New York and in other parts of the country. Developing a library that will house books, articles, and audio-visual materials, is an immediate goal. We will also sponsor an active research and publication program: we have already commissioned both original works of research and curriculum materials for use in synagogues and other settings.

Destinations

With time, the Jewish Healing Center will be a place to:

- ❖ Enfranchise the ill to look to the tradition and the community in the face of despair;

- Retrieve and adapt authentically Jewish spiritual practices such as meditation, contemplative silence, and *t'fillah* (prayer), in the quest for strength and courage;

- ❖ Develop Jewish forms of commonly utilized healing techniques such as visualization;

- ❖ Facilitate the celebration of Jewish rituals and holidays for those without the physical or emotional energy to do so;

- Invite scholars, writers and artists from across the country and Israel to study and teach;

- ❖ Forge a community of committed and knowledgeable Jewish leaders who can create materials and programs in other cities;

- ❖ Stimulate a spiritual energy within the Jewish community that will bless us all, since at some time in our lives, every one of us will struggle for physical and emotional well-being.

The founding of the Jewish

Healing Center heralds what we hope will become an era of deepening concern, education, and service for those in our community who struggle with the spiritual demands of illness. ■

Conference

The Jewish Healing Center's inaugural day-long conference in April brought together 35 rabbis, scholars, medical professionals, patients, and former patients to grapple with the question of what Jewish healing means, and to share their notions of what the Jewish Healing Center should be.



Panel 4 (left to right): Prof. Tamara Green, Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Rabbi Rachel Cowan

The conference yielded many surprises — among them, the urgent need felt by rabbis and physicians for programs designed to help them work more meaningfully and compassionately with ill congregants and patients. It also yielded consensus: by day's end, even those who had arrived feeling skeptical about the need for the Center enthusiastically offered suggestions for a range of future activities.

Four panels addressed different

aspects of what Jewish healing might be: the Jewish struggle with suffering; a Jewish vision of health and *sh'lemut* (wholeness); learning from other healing traditions; and imagining a future for Jewish healing. Each panelist was asked to prepare brief remarks designed to stimulate lively debate. The dozen distinguished panelists included Rabbis Jonathan Omer-Man, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, and Tsvi Blanchard, and Drs. Herbert Benson and Samuel Klagsbrun.

A midday theatrical performance powerfully explored the themes of suffering and healing. Composer Elizabeth Swados and her troupe of singers and dancers performed selections from *Job*, a workshop production with clowns. Clowns, who stumble, fall and suffer pies in the face and other unearned blows, are the innocents making their way through a precarious world. This is a powerful metaphor for all of us, who are subject to the random strikes of fortune and who, like clowns, search for a way to understand our fate. The work evoked an intense response from the audience and moved many to tears.

The day's program concluded with a guided meditation by Rabbi Susan Freeman that elaborated on the comforting image of *z'ro'a n'tuyah* — the outstretched arm.

Edited transcripts of the conference tapes are now available for \$10, which covers the costs of photocopying and postage. Send your request and check to:

The Jewish Healing Center
348 12th Street, #4R
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215 ■

Who We Are

The staff of the Jewish Healing Center comprises two rabbis and a journalist; our executive committee includes two more rabbis and a gifted novelist. Each has provided a capsule biographical description for *The Outstretched Arm*:

❖ Executive director Ellen

Hermanson: “Until recently, I was a reporter who specialized in business and personal finance. But the overwhelming cumulative impact of undergoing childbirth and breast cancer within six months redirected my search for meaningful work. After first meeting with Rachel Cowan and my other friends on the executive board, I knew I had found it.”

❖ Associate director Rabbi Nancy Flam: “During the past two years I served as the assistant rabbi and the principal of the Port Washington Community Synagogue. I trained in Clinical Pastoral Education at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York and served as volunteer chaplain at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and Long Island College Hospital. In these and other contexts, I have been awed by the healing which can occur when one person meets another with full attention and full love.”

❖ New York program director Rabbi Simkha Weintraub: “The Jewish Healing Center offers me the opportunity to integrate my rabbinic desire to mine our tradition for its eternal resources, my background in education and social work, and my training and orientation as a couples/family therapist. Personally, it

represents a new and *b’sbert* (predestined) stage in my ongoing experiences with illness and recovery.”

❖ Executive board member Rachel Cowan: “My personal concern with healing stems from my experience with my late husband Paul’s struggle to survive leukemia, and my own struggles with mourning and healing.”

❖ Executive board member Nessa Rapoport: “There is a tradition of healing and a vision of wellbeing unique to Judaism, one that accommodates a fierce engagement with this life, a confidence in community, a belief that sacred texts can be redeeming, and a way of achieving *sh’lemut* — wholeness — even without *shalvah* — tranquility. What we hope to do is to set a bountiful table: to retrieve and reformulate the many authentic modes of healing within the Jewish tradition.”

❖ Executive board member Rabbi Susan Freeman: “My interest in healing dates to my rabbinic thesis, which is titled *The Theology of Healing from a Talmudic Perspective*. As a dancer, I’m interested in the way ritual and dance can promote healing. I co-authored *Torah in Motion: Creating Dance Midrash* with JoAnn Tucker, founder of the Avodah Dance Troupe. Currently, I’m the rabbi of Congregation Shir HeHarim in Brattleboro, Vermont.”

From the West Coast

Judaism, like all religions, must furnish answers to fundamental questions of existence: where have we come from; how do we understand our world; what is our purpose in creation? Jewish mystical teachings provide a framework that many modern Jews find meaningful.

The 16th century Kabbalist, Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (the Ari) detailed the intricate process of creation. He explained that when God decided to create the world there was no space in which to do so because God was occupying all the space and time that existed. God therefore contracted within God’s Self to make room for the world. God filled the newly emptied space with the heavens and the earth.

However, as a consequence of this retraction, none of God’s presence was in the world. God therefore breathed a little light back into the world, just as one might exhale after inhaling. Special vessels were created to hold God’s powerful light. These vessels trapped and radiated the divine effulgence until, mysteriously, they could no longer hold the light. Suddenly, the vessels burst apart, filling the world with a chaotic dance of broken shards and sparks of light.

The Jew’s task is to identify and — through *mitzyot* — to recover the divine sparks in the world, thereby restoring wholeness to creation. In short, the world is broken and we are to be its “fixers”.

It is not difficult to resonate with such imagery of fundamental brokenness. The suffering, violence, and injustice which fill the world testify to its fracture. At the same time, the beauty and grandeur in the human spirit and the rest of nature remind us that *tikkun* (restoration) is indeed possible. We witness brokenness and commit ourselves to repair.

There is extraordinary elegance in this mystical mythos. The three-fold movement of creation, brokenness, and repair can provide us with a fundamental orientation in the universe. It answers the questions: where have we come from; how do we understand our world; what is our purpose in creation? This model inspires hope, challenges complacency, highlights human significance, and motivates action.

We know from experience, however, that not everything can be restored. Not every disease can be cured. Not every person finds meaning in her suffering. There are broken places in both body and spirit which sometimes, despite treatments or therapies, cannot be "fixed". Dr. Bernie Siegel has spoken of healing as growing "strong in the broken places". Healing may include fixing, but it is not synonymous with it. Sometimes, one heals not by mending what is broken but by incorporating what cannot be remedied into the whole and growing strong around it. An individual's healing may have more to do with reintegration than with repair.

Our work at the Healing Center focuses on exploring the texts, practices, and institutions for healing which Jewish civilization has

bequeathed to us. The Bay Area Healing Center has initiated the following programs:

- ❖ An eight-week seminar on Judaism and healing which I teach at Congregation Sha'ar Zahav. It is sponsored by the Lehrhaus Judaica and the San Francisco Jewish Community Center;
- ❖ A discussion and support group for Jewish men struggling with AIDS, to explore significant religious issues. This group will be co-sponsored by the San Francisco Jewish Family and Children's Services;
- ❖ A Shabbat gathering for Jews struggling with chronic illness to assess needs and to design programs;
- ❖ Co-sponsorship of a day-long seminar for rabbis about recognizing and reaching out to Jews with chemical dependencies. This workshop has been initiated by AJIRA (Addicted Jews in Recovery Anonymous) and the San Francisco Bureau of Jewish Education
- ❖ A training and support program for rabbis seeking better skills and insights in providing pastoral care;
- ❖ Outreach to Bay Area synagogues, providing educational programs around issues of illness, health, and healing;

Many people in the Bay Area Jewish and health care communities have enthusiastically supported the launching of the Jewish Healing Center. We look forward to expanding the depth and breadth of our programming, along with the network of people who will work together with us. *Rabbi Nancy Flam*

East Coast Activities

In New York and New England, we have the following activities underway:

- ❖ A monthly workshop led by Tamara Green, professor and chair of the classics department at Hunter College, will explore provocative and challenging issues raised while fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim* (visiting the sick).
- ❖ An eight-session support group for breast cancer patients will get underway in January. Menorah Rotenberg, a therapist and breast cancer survivor, will lead participants in an exploration of the effects of the disease on their lives and the ways in which their Jewish identity, the community, and their beliefs have influenced them during this time.
- ❖ Monthly meetings for those who are teaching courses, leading workshops, collecting resources, and performing other tasks for the Jewish Healing Center, will let us share experiences and swap ideas as we assess our various programs and evaluate their contents.
- ❖ Rabbi Simkha Weintraub is preparing a three-part workshop for medical professionals that will explore how traditional Jewish texts and thinkers illuminate critical health care issues. Topics include confidentiality and decision-making.
- ❖ Winston Pickett, formerly U.S. bureau chief of *The Jerusalem Report*, is amassing information about alternative healing programs. These data will form one section of the resource

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 Anshe 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.

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.

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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

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.

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.

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.

The Outstretched Arm

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Writer and Editor: Ellen Hermanson
Designer: Stephanie Bart-Horvath
Layout: David Langendoen

THE JEWISH HEALING CENTER

EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS

Rabbi Rachel Cowan
Rabbi Nancy Flam
Rabbi Susan Freeman
Nessa Rapoport
Rabbi Simkha Weintraub

Executive Director: Ellen Hermanson
Assoc. Director: Rabbi Nancy Flam
Program Consultant: Rabbi Simkha Weintraub

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The Outstretched Arm
348 12th Street, #4R
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215

To get in touch with the New York Office
please write or phone:

The Jewish Healing Center
348 12th Street, #4R
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215
718/ 499-5028

To reach Rabbi Flam in San Francisco
please write or phone:

The Jewish Healing Center
164 Precita Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94110
415/ 282-3305
