

The Outstretched Arm

Vol. 1, No. 2

Spring 1992

The Haggadah and Healing

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... Deut. 5:15

Reciting the Passover story reminds us not only of a transcendent moment in the history of the Jews, but of transformative times of misery and suffering — and emergence and deliverance — in our own lives. Reflecting on those moments in light of the great themes and symbols of this festival provides a wonderful opportunity to achieve understanding and healing.

The word *Haggadah* is a gerund: it means “the telling.” By linking this process with personal knowledge, we can open the door to a richer and more nuanced experience of Passover.

Early in the *seder*, the Haggadah introduces the famous homily about

the four children. This quartet signifies that those gathered around the table bring their individual experiences and attitudes. The rabbis who formalized the *seder* were acutely aware of the need to shape the telling to the concerns and levels of the participants.

Though the evening has a definite order (*seder*), the Haggadah should not be rote recitation, but rather dynamic exploration that involves questioning, probing, empathizing, and creative interpreting. The Haggadah provides the armature on which to construct the story.

With this in mind, here are some

ideas about how everyone who is struggling with illness might draw new meaning from the *seder* and, simultaneously, contribute to it.

I’ve focused on two key elements of the *seder*: the ten plagues and the three essential symbols. I hope that these suggestions will encourage you to bring the *seder* to bear on your experience of illness — and to bring your experience of illness to bear on your *seder*.

The Ten Plagues

For those coping with illness, undergoing treatment, or seeking recovery,

An Abundance of Blessings

At an exhilarating conference for Bay Area Jewish women in San Francisco, I led an afternoon workshop on Jewish texts of healing that led to an extraordinary outpouring of creativity and spirituality.

Our first text was the blessing for health said in the morning upon using the toilet:

“Blessed are You, our Eternal God, Creator of the Universe, who

has made our bodies in wisdom, creating openings, arteries, glands, and organs, marvelous in structure, intricate in design. Should but one of them, by being blocked or opened, fail to function, it would be impossible to stand before You. Wondrous Fashioner and Sustainer of life, Source of our health and our strength, we give You thanks and praise.”

I mentioned that there are a number of blessings to be said upon waking, which sanctify our morning: blessings for opening one’s eyes

Continued on page 7

Inside:

Letter from the Executive Director	2
Healing in Israel	3
Health Care’s Spiritual Side...4	
West Coast Highlights.....4	
NY News	5
Contributions	5

the ten plagues elicit a wide range of reactions:

- ❖ Empathy with the Egyptians: “I, too, have known blood, boils, and deep darkness. Any person’s illness is a call to compassion and assistance.”
- ❖ Doubt and questioning: “Where is the justice in God’s repeated hardening of Pharaoh’s heart? In the suffering of those who were innocent? In any pain and disease?”
- ❖ Comfort: “At least here, suffering was time-limited and space-bound. It was part of a divine plan. It was not random, unending or meaningless.”
- ❖ Terror: “The scope and intensity of the plagues are truly horrifying. They reach from the young to the old, from the heavens to the depths of the sea, from simple animals to Pharaoh’s royal family.”

Of course, there can be many other emotional, intellectual, spiritual and psychological responses.

Rather than race mechanically through the recitation of the plagues, select some of the following ideas, as appropriate and helpful.

- ❖ Listen closely to the name of each plague. Imagine the reality; digest the possibilities and implications of each one.
- ❖ Explore the needs of those plagued today, particularly those who suffer AIDS, cancer, heart disease and other serious illnesses and chronic conditions.
- ❖ Discuss who among you is suffering or has suffered serious illness. Explore what it means for them, and what they need from, and can offer, you.
- ❖ Sing songs of healing and strength, such as *Esa Einay*, *Im Amarti Mata Ragli*, *Ahat Sha’alti* and *Elekha Hashem Ekra*.

Letter from the Executive Director

Holidays evoke powerful memories. No matter where I celebrate Passover, I always recall one particular *seder* at my grandmother’s house when I was a child. The youngest of three sisters, I proudly chanted the Four Questions for the first time in awkward Hebrew that year. Most of you, I’m sure, have your own catalogue of memories that unfolds for all the holidays and Shabbat.

Holidays are such important milestones in our journey through the year. They prompt us to think about our futures and pasts, our sorrows and joys, our unfulfilled dreams and our goals. The reflection, prayer and study associated with them can help us achieve a new understanding of an event and make our peace with someone who did us harm. Holidays and memories can join in a way that enriches both and helps us situate ourselves in the eternal cycle of darkness and renewal.

The second night of Passover three years ago, my husband, 7-month-old daughter, and I joined my sister and her large clan for the *seder*. The familiar prayers and ritual were more beautiful than ever. Everything looked and felt just as it should — except that I had an awful chemical taste in my mouth that overpowered everything but the horseradish, and I couldn’t forget that the next morning I would have my sixth weekly chemotherapy injection to treat my breast cancer.

That night, I understood viscerally that the Exodus exists in a timeless world, that it is both a historical event and an ongoing drama that can occur in the life of one person. The recitation of the story of Exodus from Egypt resonated with my own experience. I had to struggle constantly against feeling enslaved by my disease and its treatment and by the fears and anguish they inspired. As we chanted the names of the ten plagues and splashed wine on our plates, I thought about drugs I had never heard of two months earlier. Cytoxan, methotrexate, fluorouracil, Adriamycin — poisons administered to eradicate the cancer — were my version of the plagues.

Continued on page 3

- ❖ Recall those who died from serious illness since last Passover. Remember their struggles, challenges, resources and legacies.
- ❖ Explore the challenges of each Biblical plague and relate those qualities or characteristics to those of illnesses experienced by those at the *seder*.
- ❖ Analyze the differences between the ten plagues and your experience:

contrast the historic, cosmic and “unreal” aspects of the former with the deeply personal and all-too-real elements of the latter.

- ❖ Examine the plagues as a 10-stage process, a flow in horribleness from blood to the killing of the firstborn. Compose a continuum that reflects your experience, either symbolically or literally.

Continued on page 6

Letter, from page 2

Daily life revolved around the antipodes of coping with chemotherapy and caring for my baby. To manage, I had to focus on the quotidian; whenever I relaxed my grip on the present, I would instantly panic. In what had become a weirdly normal, but hectic routine, this seder was an oasis of calm. It connected me to simpler times.

Surrounded by loving family and friends, I felt strong and supported that night, confident that my liberation would come. Modern medicine would work its miracles and this would literally be my season of rebirth. When we concluded the seder with the traditional promise, *le'shana haba'ah b'yerushalayim* (next year in Jerusalem), I thought, maybe not in Jerusalem, but at least in this room, with these people. I savored that happy thought about the future.

And that's what happened. In a few weeks, we'll gather once again in my sister's dining room for this much-loved event. For me, though, the story of Passover has fused with my own experience, and the seder is richer because of this.

My colleague, Rabbi Simkha Weintraub, the Jewish Healing Center's program consultant in New York, has turned his thoughts to the holidays and their enormous potential to stimulate hopefulness and healing. One task we have set for the Healing Center is helping other Jews derive this comfort. We want to study the festival cycle from the perspective of those who are ill and see what fresh insights and hidden treasures await. Simkha begins this important work in these pages.

A common exhortation at Healing Center meetings is "We need to do something *tachlis* (something concrete, in the world, substantive)." It's a key objective for the programs we offer; we want to offer real activities for our readers, as well. With that in mind, we also include a prayer, written by Rabbi Nancy Flam, our west coast director, for medical personnel to recite when a patient dies. This short prayer lets them acknowledge their pain.

You, too, can do something *tachlis*. Use the coupon on the last page to tell us about people who might be interested in the Healing Center. And support the Healing Center with a contribution, if you can. ■

Healing in Israel

As planning for the Jewish Healing Center's activities got under way, it quickly became obvious that we needed a reporter in Israel to gather information about healing and healers in the Holy Land. Felice Kahn Zisken, a New Yorker who made *aliya* almost 20 years ago, now serves as the Jewish Healing Center's eyes and ears in Jerusalem. In just a few months, she has uncovered a tremendous diversity of written sources and met with a fascinating array of healers and scholars.

"Alternative medicine is very popular in Israel," Felice wrote in her first report. "The rich variety of cultures and their methods of healing, together with a yearning for spirituality and a willingness to provide new

possibilities, provide fertile ground for a holistic approach to healing."

Among the treasures she has unearthed for us are volumes of *Koroth*, a journal published by the Israel Institute of Medical History, that are the proceedings of conferences on medicine in the Bible and in the Talmud. The proceedings from a fourth conference, on medicine as practiced by Maimonides, will be published in the U.S. this summer. Our library now has the volumes of the first and third symposia.

Interest in healing is not limited to historical study. The subject is of such widespread appeal that the Ministry of Health commissioned a report on the state of complementary medicine in Israel. The report, released in September 1991, comprises a survey of the field, a comparison between conventional medicine and complementary techniques and a set of recommendations for regulating the system and protecting the Israeli public.

We have a copy of that report, in Hebrew, in the New York office, and Felice has prepared an outline in English of the contents. If you would like copies of both items, please send \$5.00 to:

The Jewish Healing Center
348 Twelfth St., # 4-R
Brooklyn, NY 11215
718/ 965-1929

Along with her reports, Felice has sent articles in both Hebrew and English, audio tapes, conference brochures and books. They attest to a vibrant local scene. We now are cataloguing these items and will shortly have a bibliography available that we plan to update regularly. ■

Health Care's Spiritual Side

A few months ago, a woman with breast cancer called me for guidance before her surgery. She was feeling physically well and emotionally strong, though she was fearful about being in a hospital setting and relating to all the medical personnel. At the end of our conversation, I asked her if she wanted to pray together. "That would be wonderful," she said.

And so, after a moment of centering silence, I offered the traditional "*Mi She'berakh*" and then said a free-form prayer in English. When we finished, she said, "Both my doctors are Jewish; would you mind sending them a copy of the "*Mi She'berakh*?" I didn't mind at all, although I did wonder how the surgeon and oncologist would react to receiving this unsolicited traditional Jewish prayer from an unknown rabbi on behalf of one of their patients.

After her surgery, the woman called to report that everything had gone well and that — amazingly — her doctors had recited the "*Mi She'berakh*" for her. Her husband told her that immediately after the operation, the surgeon called his secretary to have her bring in the prayer. I was genuinely surprised to hear this, and also moved at the image of this meaningful addition to standard surgical ritual.

Not only that, but the prayer began to circulate around the hospital. Two nurses asked for copies to share with their patients. Now her husband offers the prayer before her

intravenous chemotherapy treatments, and the physician's assistant who helps with the treatments has also asked for the prayer. What tremendous teaching this one woman has accomplished!

Doctors' Quest for Spiritual Ties

Around the same time, I received a phone call from a third-year medical student. He said, "I haven't had to face this often yet, but I know I'll have to. From a Jewish perspective, what should I do or say when I'm in the presence of a patient who dies?"

We talked at length, and I promised that I would send him a brief prayer that he could keep in his pocket along with his dosage guidelines and patient data cards. This is the prayer I sent:

"Adonay natan, ve'Adonay lakah; yehi shem Adonay me'vorakh. The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord.

"May it be your will, O God, to provide eternal rest and peace to the soul of _____. Help him/her pass gently to the world to come; enfold him/her with love.

Although I knew _____ for only a short time, I truly cared for him/her. My heart grieves for his/her passing.

"Be with those friends and family who need strength in this hour of their sadness. And give me strength to continue my work of compassion and goodness toward other persons under my care. Help me to grow in wisdom and judgment. And let me remember to be humble amidst the holy moments of life and death."

Although I haven't spoken again with this man, I can only hope that this prayer will help him bring a sacred perspective to his work.

These two incidents reminded me that there is a growing number of Jewish health care professionals who want to infuse their work with a Jewish spiritual perspective. When I recently addressed a group of Bay Area Jewish physicians, members of the Jewish Community Federation's Maimonides Society, they expressed heartfelt gratitude at having the opportunity to discuss Jewish values and insights that might help them establish more sacred connections with their patients.

Certainly the Jewish Healing Center is committed to serving this need. If you are a health care professional who would like to be part of a growing community concerned with these issues, write or call either our San Francisco or New York office. And if you would like a laminated 3 x 5 card with the "*Mi She'berakh*" on one side and the prayer to be said at a patient's death on the other, please write or call the San Francisco office.

Rabbi Nancy Flam

West Coast Highlights

- ❖ Rabbi Nancy Flam taught an 8-week seminar, "Jewish Perspectives on Wholeness and Healing," offered through Lehrhaus Judaica in Berkeley. The course was attended by a diverse group, including health professionals and individuals struggling with illness.
- ❖ In conjunction with San Fran-

cisco Jewish Family and Children's Services, Rabbi Flam co-led an extraordinary spiritual support group for Jews with HIV-disease. This 8-week program offered its seven participants (men and women) a forum for integrating Jewish teachings and resources in their lives and struggles. We discussed such topics as prayer, God and spirituality; Jewish wisdom about grief, death and dying; the crucial role of hope and community; and the different ways we strive to heal our spirits. And, of course, the trust and love built up within the group was as important as the subjects we talked about.

❖ We have begun a weekly "Service of Healing," offered every Monday night from 6-7 p.m. at Congregation Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco. The service combines prayer, study, song and silence as a means to strengthen hope, faith, comfort and community for those of us with a range of healing needs. All are welcome.

❖ Rabbi Amy Eilberg is now leading a monthly pastoral training and support group for local rabbis interested in improving their pastoral skills and insights. Participants share experiences and difficulties while learning how to improve their pastoral listening, assessment and referral skills.

❖ Rabbi Flam offered a well-attended workshop at the recent Bay Area Conference for Jewish Women, "Women as a Force for Social Change." At the final plenary session, everyone was asked to turn to her neighbor and to share an experience from the day. One woman described her conversation with a participant in Rabbi Flam's workshop. The participant, an Orthodox

woman, wasn't sure what she could learn from a Reform woman rabbi, the listener reported. However, the participant told the listener that she had learned a lot and found things that were helpful. Now that's Jewish healing! ■■■

N.Y. News

Among the activities under way in New York are the following:

- ❖ Organizing a workshop for the annual Rabbinical Assembly convention in May. Dr. Herbert Benson and Rabbi Harold Kushner will join forces to talk about Judaism and healing. Rabbi Kushner will talk about resources from Jewish spirituality for healing; Dr. Benson will discuss the nexus of the "relaxation response," religion and health.
- ❖ Recruiting participants for an 8-week support group for young breast cancer survivors. Menorah Rotenberg, a social worker with extensive experience as a group leader and a 14-year survivor of breast cancer will co-facilitate the group with Ellen Hermanson.
- ❖ Developing a healing service with several rabbis in "Brownstone Brooklyn" that will rotate among their congregations starting in May.
- ❖ Planning a forum on spirituality and resources for healing that Rabbi Simkha Weintraub will lead at Cancer Care in June.
- ❖ Preparing an introductory kit for the Healing Center that will be available on request in May. ■■■

Contributions

We are delighted that the Jewish Healing Center's work has found favor among many of our readers. In particular, we want to acknowledge our very first individual financial contribution.



Jessica Wilpon

Nine-year old Jessica Wilpon sent \$10.09 of her own *tz'dakah* (charity) money with the hope that it would be used to help others. Jessica and her family belong to the Port Washington (NY) Community Synagogue, where Rabbi Martin Rozenberg serves as spiritual leader. Clearly, the Synagogue is doing its job, as the young are mastering the *mitzvah* (commandment) of *tz'dakah*. Thank you, Jessica!

Should you wish to make a contribution, please make your check out to The Jewish Healing Center/The Shefa Fund. We are grateful to a number of readers for their generous donations. ■■■

Haggadah, from page 2

❖ Express the pain of the plagues and their reflection in your own suffering. Express, too, your thankfulness for recovery and for the pleasure and privilege of celebrating our freedom even as we experience our slavery.

The Three Key Symbols

Shortly after the recitation of the plagues, the text introduces the three central symbols of the seder: the sacrificial *Pesach* (Passover) offering (originally lamb), the *matzah* (unleavened bread) and the *marror* (bitter herbs).

I suggest a 3-step process for this part of the ceremony: read the Haggadah itself; draw out the connections and associations among the three symbols; and superimpose the framework provided by the three symbols on your own experience.

The Pesach Offering

This symbol works on at least three levels:

The miracle: God passes over (*pasach*) and spares the Israelites during that most terrifying plague, the killing of the firstborn. This embodies redemption and providential protection — but also terror and tragedy.

The actual sacrifice: The shankbone recalls the original Pesach offering, which the soon-to-be freed Israelites prepared while still in Egypt.

The days of the Temple: The Passover Feast was consumed by throngs of Israelites at the Temple in Jerusalem in a major annual pilgrimage.

Matzah

The unleavened bread enjoys several

paradoxical dual identities:

- ❖ The bread of affliction and the bread of redemption; symbol of humility, vulnerability and servitude — and also freedom, choice, being God’s children;
- ❖ A reminder of the Israelites’ total lack of preparedness, and yet their total willingness and readiness;
- ❖ A sign of God’s self-revelation and Israel’s self-discovery.

The matzah recalls the stunningly abrupt divine deliverance — but equally, the incredibly trusting act of faith of the Israelites to follow their invisible God into the wilderness, even after 400 long years of enslavement.

Marror

Of the three symbols, this is the easiest for us to appreciate. The Jewish experience in recent times and the experience of many other people and nations who suffer hardship make it particularly accessible. Note that the bitterness is described not only in terms of excruciatingly hard labor, but as the ruthless oppression of one people by another.

As you look for the connections among the three symbols, you might find it helpful to create a chart (ahead of time), like the one below.

The Haggadah recommends that “in every generation, every individual should feel as though he or she had actually been redeemed from Egypt.” This sentence empowers those who have struggled with illness to rethink the three symbols through the prism of illness and recovery. Relate the many aspects — some of them paradoxical and dualistic, as above — of these intensely personal experiences to the national story of slavery and freedom:

- ❖ Do you feel that you are still enslaved? In what ways have you been set free?
- ❖ If you had to name three actual, physical symbols to parallel those of the seder, what would they be? What encapsulates both your confinement and your delivery? What embodies your suffering and bitterness?
- ❖ As you articulate aspects of your odyssey with illness, treatment and recovery, try to relate them to the Exodus story and the liberation of the Hebrew slaves: How was their experience like yours? What emotional, psychological and spiritual processes did they have to undergo that reflect your own?

Your *midrash* — your personal interpretation based on your particu

Pesach	Matzah	Marror
Future	Present	Past
Relief	Reorganizing	Pain
Redemption	Thankfulness	Bitterness
Miracles	Positive response, adaptive	Oppression
Recovery, hope	Treatment	Diagnosis
Sobriety	Recovery	Addiction

— and whatever else you think of!

lar experience — links your history to that of the eternal narrative. It is a unique one that adds to the meaning of Passover for all assembled. “In each generation” means nothing if not here and now, and “every individual” implies all those gathered at your table and their deepest, most profound experiences.

The Haggadah is not just a chronicle of a bygone historic moment. It is a script for a live, unfolding drama, with all of us as players.

Next year in Jerusalem! ■■■■

Rabbi Simkha Weintraub

Abundance, from page 1

(being able to see), for putting one’s feet on the earth (being ambulatory) and, indeed, for using the toilet (being able to move one’s bowels).

And I told the assembly of more than 60 women about a recent experience in the AIDS Spiritual Support Group that I co-facilitate. When we studied the morning blessings in this group, one man said, “What do I do if, because of my illness, I lose my sight? What do I do if I’m not ambulatory? What do I say if I can’t use the toilet?”

All the group members felt the weight of these questions, and fashioning answers proved difficult: One might refrain from saying these blessings, so as not to utter a *b’rakha le’vatala*, a prayer said in vain. Or one might say the blessings anyway, as a hope that one might enjoy them in the future. Or one might make a metaphorical leap and utter the words while changing the focus or meaning (the blessing about “opening one’s eyes” could refer to finding insight or

understanding, for instance).

At the end of our discussion, we realized that none of these options felt spiritually satisfying; this man wanted something to say that would help connect him to God even though he might be ill and in pain. That blessing hasn’t been written yet, we concluded.

At the women’s conference, after I finished telling this story, I asked the women to imagine themselves unwell, unable to walk, perhaps in pain. What might *they* say in that moment, which would have the possibility of connecting *them* with God?

The myriad blessings that flowed from this group moved all of us profoundly. These are a few of them:

❖ Blessed are You, Spirit of Life, who has the power to release me from life but sustains me for Your purpose. Give me the strength to accept this life until that purpose is fulfilled.

❖ I thank you God for the memory of those functions I enjoyed (and was so blessed to take for granted) for so many years, and for the ability to feel and express my anger and my grief over losing what for so many years I understood to be an integral part of my essence. With my very essence, with my breath, I say, “*Elohay, ne’shama shenata bi te’hora hi*. My God, the soul which you have given me is a pure one . . .” (This blessing now flows into the traditional blessing said in thanks for one’s soul.)

❖ Blessed are You, God, Creator, and Power of the universe. You have created beauty in the trees, flowers, and mountains. Although I am in pain and cannot always feel and see that beauty, I thank You for creating it.

❖ Spirit of the Universe, Breath of Life in all forms, with thankfulness I am in Your presence and You are in me, this body that is failing yet still lives. With You I greet this new day in praise for the wondrousness of all life.

I will be able to return to the man who asked those poignant questions, and I will give him a booklet filled with 60 blessings — thanks to the women who shared their hearts and spirits.

If you would like to receive a copy of the blessings booklet, send \$5.00 to:

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

Rabbi Nancy Flam

The Outstretched Arm

The Outstretched Arm is published by the
Jewish Healing Center.

Vol. 1, No. 2

Spring 1992

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

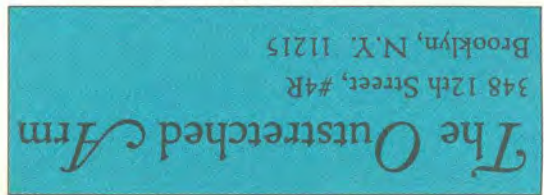
THE JEWISH HEALING CENTER

EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS

Rabbi Rachel Cowan
Rabbi Susan Freeman
Neesa Rapoport
Rabbi Simkha Weintraub

Executive Director: Ellen Hermanson
West Coast Director: Rabbi Nancy Flam
Program Consultant: Rabbi Simkha
Weintraub

Return Postage Guaranteed



Drawing the Map, from page 1

I think the following people would like to receive information about the Jewish Healing Center.

Name:
Street:
City: State: ZIP
Country (if not U.S.):
Telephone:

Name:
Street:
City: State: ZIP
Country (if not U.S.):
Telephone:

Name:
Street:
City: State: ZIP
Country (if not U.S.):
Telephone:

YOUR NAME:
Street:
City: State: ZIP
Country (if not U.S.):
Telephone:

I've enclosed a tax-deductible contribution to help support the Jewish Healing Center's work.
