

# The Outstretched Arm

Vol. II, No. 1

Fall 1992

## Sukkot: Redemption, the Harvest, and Healing

Sukkot offers many paths to healing for those dealing with illness, treatment, and recovery. Patients, families, friends, and caregivers can all draw on these powerful resources.

Three biblical commandments govern Sukkot: to dwell in a Sukkah, to gather the four species, and to rejoice. Other observances include the *hoshannot* (circling around the synagogue while reciting the *hoshanna* prayers), reading *Ecclesiastes*, inviting *ushpizin* (symbolic guests) into the sukkah, and performing various rituals and customs connected to the holiday's seventh day, known as *Hoshanna Rabbah*.

In this article, I explore these commandments and several other rituals, and suggest how they can be used and adapted to support Jews who are ill and their loved ones.

### *The Sukkah as Dirat Ara'i: Temporary Dwelling, Eternal Home*

According to Jewish law, we can use a variety of materials for building the Sukkah, and the guidelines for its dimensions are quite flexible. The bottom line, though, is that the Sukkah must not be a permanent structure.

The Sukkah conveys a paradoxical notion of protection. It suggests that true shelter does not exist in physical permanence but resides, instead, in harmony with the elements. It does not come from the vain attempt to deny, evade, or transform cosmic, natural forces such as wind and rain, but from the celebration of God's eternal safeguarding and providence. True shelter exists in exposure to the heavens and in living within the community. Similarly, true healing is born of the seasons and living in Jewish history and tradition.

Those of you struggling with serious illness can find strength in designing and constructing a Sukkah which reflects an intensified appreciation of life's blessings and curses, beauty and vulnerability. Erecting a special Sukkah or building a portion of a communal one provides constructive (literally!) activity in the

face of physical and emotional challenge. You might designate the Eastern Wall as one of healing, decorating it with images of Zion and Jerusalem integrated with personal symbols of hope and wholeness.

You may also want to extend hospitality to family and friends who have recently undergone surgery or other treatment, as well as their near ones. Chanting the *sheheheyenu* blessing, singing special "healing songs" (such as *esa einai* and *lo alekha hamlakha ligmor*), and enjoying contemplative silence can create a simple but evocative ritual.

### *The S'khakh: Open to the Heavens*

The key element of the Sukkah is the roof, known as *s'khakh* (literally, "covering"). Like the walls, the *s'khakh* must be temporary, and should be made from something organic that is detached from the ground. At night, whoever sits in the Sukkah must be able to see the stars through the *s'khakh* branches, although during the day this covering should ensure more shade than sunlight. The *s'khakh* is open to the sky, to the heavenly bodies of light, to

*Continued on page 2*

### Inside:

Letter from the Editor.....	2
From the West Coast.....	4
Extending a Hand.....	5
New York Calendar.....	5
Portraits from Jewish Hospice.....	6

God's sheltering presence, to the *Sh'khinah* (God's "feminine," indwelling, comforting, and nurturing aspect).

### Beautifying the Mitzvah

Finding beauty in observing the commandments is central to Sukkot, and Jews traditionally work hard to embellish the *s'khakh* and Sukkah walls. We typically hang fruits and vegetables overhead — examples of the harvest that are neither eaten nor preserved, but allowed to age and even rot during the holiday. The Talmud (*Betzah* 30b) suggests hanging "handmade carpets and tapestries, nuts, almonds, peaches, pomegranates, branches of grape, vines, flasks of oil, fine meal, wreaths of ears of corn..." You can supplement these items with objects that symbolize healing — treasured photographs, meaningful cards and letters, poetry, quotes from Psalms, personal talismans.

### Arba Minim: The Four Species and Spiritual Wholeness

As a central ritual of the holiday, *Leviticus* 23:40 commands us to gather together four species: the *etrog* (citron) and the *lulav's* branches of palm, willow, and myrtle. The number four, of course, suggests the four winds, the four directions, the four seasons, even the four letters of God's name. But the particular qualities of these natural elements have provoked many interpretations over the centuries. They have been

## Letter from the Editor

As autumn approaches, spiritual transition is in the air. Even as the secular calendar revs up after Labor Day — vacations end, children return to school, work and social lives intensify — the Jewish calendar cycles around to the rich constellation of holidays that marks the new year. We gather the strength to embark on the spiritual journey and the intense wave of emotions sparked by the quick succession of holidays. We prepare for the deep contemplation and fervent prayer of the *Yamim Noraim* and the joy of Sukkot.

The celebration of the new year, paired with the profound themes of repentance, judgment, and atonement that characterize Yom Kippur, resonates powerfully for Jews who are struggling with illness and who seek *r'fuat hanefesh* (healing of the soul) and *r'fuat haguf* (healing of the body).

Sukkot offers a different kind of spiritual nourishment to the sick. "Sukkot is called *zeman simhateinu* — the season of our rejoicing," writes Rabbi Michael Strassfeld in *The Jewish Holidays: A Guide and Commentary*. "Whether this is because we have successfully completed the harvest or because we have finished the process of repentance of the Days of Awe, we are meant to have a sense of fulfillment and security." Yet for the person facing bypass surgery, enduring chemotherapy, or managing a debilitating chronic illness, tapping into that rewarding sense can be an elusive and painful experience.

But Sukkot, as Rabbi Simkha Weintraub notes in "Sukkot: Redemption, the Harvest, and Healing," offers many pathways to reclaiming spiritual wholeness. This article continues the stimulating examination of the Jewish festival cycle that Rabbi Weintraub initiated in the spring issue of *The Outstretched Arm* with "The Haggadah and Healing."

Indeed, we were profoundly moved that many readers incorporated ideas from that piece in their Passover seders. The Rev. Dr. Walter J. Smith, SJ, executive vice president of the Hospital Chaplaincy in New York, requested copies to distribute in local hospitals served by his staff, and we heard from

*Continued on page 7*

explained as symbolizing four types of Jews, rating each on the basis of taste (learning) and fragrance (good deeds), and joining them together in the hope that our respective strengths will enable us to complement one another and overcome our individual limitations.

A popular approach is to assign parts of the body and human abilities to each species:

<i>Erog</i>	<i>Palm</i>	<i>Willow</i>	<i>Myrtle</i>
heart	spine	lips	eyes
feelings	actions	words	insights

To concentrate on the healing symbolism and power of the *arba minim*, one might compose a *kavvanah* — a special meditation — on what the act of gathering them together represents. For example: May it be Your Will, Adonai our God, that in joining

together these *Arba Minim* I may unite my body and soul in a complete and peaceful healing. Just as these four species represent the coming together of different types of Jews and the ultimate reunion of our people in Zion, so may they be the harbinger of a true *r'fuah shlemah*, a total healing, of *all* aspects of my being, of organs, limbs, senses, and faculties, of mind, heart, spirit, and soul, of thoughts, feelings, actions, and words. Let me share fullness with all, gathering strength from all in my community, and from You and Your Shelter of Peace. *Sukkat Shalom*. Amen.

### *Ushpizin: Figures from the Past to Heal the Present*

Many Jews enrich their experience of the Sukkah by symbolically welcoming significant figures from Jewish history. We summon them by reciting prayers that invite and recall these individuals and by posting signs bearing their names. This custom, called *ushpizin*, traditionally drew on the Biblical figures of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David (all of whose lives entailed wandering or exile of one sort or another). Since *ushpizin* is not a legal requirement, many Jews have updated the list to include women such as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Abigail, and Esther.

Those dealing with sickness, treatment, and recovery can adapt this beautiful ancient custom to include Jews who themselves struggled with illness, as well as those who helped heal others. You can devote each day of Sukkot to a different figure, glean-

ing from their lives and the legends built around them, spiritual guidance and nourishment.

Possibilities include:

*Abraham*: In Rabbinic lore, Abraham is not only the first Jew, but the first patient for whom God Himself made a *bikur holim* visit. This was during Abraham's recovery from his divinely commanded auto-circumcision, at age 99; see *Genesis* 18:1 and commentaries; also Talmud *Sotah* 14a.

*Miriam*: While she was afflicted by debilitating and life-threatening leprosy, her brothers, Aaron and Moses, prayed, the latter crying out, "Oh, God! Heal her now!"; see *Numbers* 12 and commentaries.

*Hannah*: Struggled with infertility; see *I Samuel* 1, 2 and commentaries. Chapter 2 includes her beautiful prayer of joy, thanks, and faith.

*Elijah*: The great prophet of the 9th century B.C.E., became known as a miraculous healer; see various chapters in *I and II Kings* and many stories in the Talmud (and Jewish folklore in general) of Elijah's restoring individuals' health.

*Note*: Many Sephardic Jews set aside a special, ornate chair for each day's honored guest and declare, "This is the chair of the *ushpizin*." Adapting this custom, which parallels that of Elijah's Cup at Passover, one might designate an Elijah's Chair in the Sukkah as a focal point for reflection and prayers of hope and healing.

*Elisha*: Prophet who succeeded Elijah, his mentor, whose healing works he continued. See *II Kings* 2, 4, and 8, where he cures miscarriages, revives a seriously ill child, and more.

*Rabbi Yohanan*: Talmudic scholar (1st century C.E.) known for his empathy

in reaching out to the afflicted; see anecdote in Talmud *Berachot* 5b.

*Maimonides*: (1135-1204 C.E.)

Preeminent rabbinic authority, law codifier, philosopher, and royal physician, author of many medical works sensitive to the spiritual needs of the ill.

*Franz Rosenzweig*: (1886-1929)

German Jewish theologian/ philosopher who struggled valiantly against illness in his short life. He continued his intellectual and literary activities despite a paralysis that virtually precluded mobility and speech for seven years.

*Henrietta Szold*: (1860-1945) Zionist, philanthropist, founder and first president of Hadassah, which funded, and still supports, Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem.

### *A Time for Every Purpose*

On the Shabbat that falls during the middle of Sukkot, some Ashkenazim read *Sefer Kohelet* (*Ecclesiastes*).

*Kohelet* is unusual in its cynical view that all is vanity and transitory, but this outlook may tie in with Sukkot's message that material possessions (and houses) do not provide true security. Perhaps there is another connection, too — between *Ecclesiastes*' almost hedonistic exhortation to "Eat, drink, and pursue pleasure" (although the book concludes with a more sedate, pious directive [see 12:13], and the commandment to rejoice during Sukkot (*Deuteronomy* 16:14,15)).

But *Ecclesiastes* also includes the beautiful, comforting verses (3:1-8) popularly known as "To Everything there is a Season." Certainly a cen-

tral theme of Sukkot is the reaffirmation of one's part in the cycle of life. Singing these lines (Pete Seeger composed a well-known melody for the English version), embracing their meaning — even writing them on the wall of the Sukkah — can create a meaningful ritual for those who are ill and those who care for them.

### *Hoshannah Rabbah: Beating the Willows, Joining the Flow*

The seventh and last day of Sukkot is known as *Hoshannah Rabbah*. On this day, we increase the number of *hoshannot*, encirclings of the synagogue, to seven, marching triumphantly with our *lulav* and *etrog* in hand. Some congregations and *havurot* might like the idea of dedicating a special *hoshannah* to healing. In advance, participants can alphabetically assemble verses or phrases from the Torah that deal with healing (the *hoshannot* are all alphabetized); people who have been ill, their friends and family members, and health care professionals can then lead a special procession around the sanctuary while chanting these lines.

An even more dramatic and unusual ritual entails the willful beating of the willow branches, virtually denuding them by striking them on the floor or against a pew. One interpretation of this custom is that we symbolically join nature and God in this new season, when dead or dying leaves fall to the ground to fertilize the soil.

One can also perceive in this ritual an uncharacteristic level of aggression and anger — it is not often that

Jews gather to harm or destroy part of Creation. Here we sense part of the ambivalence of the harvest: it is difficult to accept that winter (read: hardship, deprivation, emptiness...) is coming and that autumn's bounty cannot last.

### *Rejoicing: Simha — Where Spontaneity Meets Responsibility*

The Hebrew cognate that is singularly associated with Sukkot is *S-M-H*, the root of *simha*, happiness. We are actually *commanded* to rejoice — see especially *Deuteronomy* 16:14,15 — and the holiday is nicknamed “*Z'man Simhateinu*,” the Season of (our) Rejoicing.

In *Pirke Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*) 4:1, our rabbis teach: “Who is wealthy? One that is happy with his/her lot.” We simultaneously rejoice in our humble, flimsy huts *and* in the vast, eternal home of the universe. Sukkot helps us put our lot in context — to appreciate our portion of eternity, to savor our piece of the whole, our link in the chain.

The message of Sukkot, then, is that to be human is to be vulnerable. No one lives without illness and death. Our Sukkah, *the place of shared vulnerability*, is where we accept, explore, and even celebrate both our earthly existence *and* our aspirations of holiness, our finite existence *and* our infinite worth. What enables us to transcend the limitations of our physical beings is our “corporate consciousness,” our place in both the endless cosmos, and, closer to home, an eternal people. Sukkot lets us share the immediate, tangible harvest

while partaking in a taste of freedom, redemption, and the Messianic Age.

Rabbi Simkha Weintraub

## From the West Coast

❖ *Kol Haneshama*, Jewish Hospice Care Program: Rabbi Amy Eilberg is now directing pastoral care services for Jews living in San Francisco or the Peninsula who are facing issues of death and dying. Please call the office for assistance: 415/387-4999.

❖ *Service of Healing*: Our weekly service of prayer, study, song, and meditation is designed for those seeking healing of body and spirit. Join us each Monday evening, 6:00-7:15 p.m., at Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, 220 Danvers St., San Francisco.

❖ *Rabbis' Pastoral Care Training and Support Group*: This monthly program helps rabbis enhance their pastoral skills and insights. Fall schedule: Sept. 1, Nov. 3, Dec. 1. Each session starts at noon and ends at 2:00. To find out about joining, call the office.

❖ *Spiritual Gathering for Jews Dealing with Chronic or Terminal Illness*, for the Jewish Community of Marin: Co-sponsored by The Jewish Healing Center, Jewish Family and Children's Services, and the Marin Jewish Community Center. Oct. 25, 3:00-5:00 p.m., Congregation Rodef Shalom, San Raphael.

❖ *A Forum on Hospice Services in the Community*: Featuring Rabbi Amy Eilberg, Robert Brody, MD, and Norma Satten. Sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women,

*Continued on page 7*

## Extending a Hand

In reflecting on suffering and struggle, we often think that others could benefit from our experiences.

Sharing information and lessons learned the hard way puts our own circumstances in perspective and helps us heal ourselves.

You can help others now by contributing to The Jewish Healing Center's *Yad l'Yad* (From Hand to Hand) Network. Many of us develop coping and healing rituals to see us through the ordeals of diagnosis, surgery, treatment, and the anniversaries of these and related events. We want to learn about your experiences and the resources you have

developed or adapted to reduce fear, inspire hope, connect with loved ones, and seek wholeness during these especially difficult times. We are especially interested in whether you have used sources from Jewish life — texts, prayers, traditions, holidays — in this endeavor.

Please send us a description of the ritual or other technique that you have used (along with any texts), or simply describe the experience. As *Yad l'Yad* grows, we will share this information with others in need, but we will do so only with your permission. Let us know if we can reprint or adapt your words, and whether we can use your name or you prefer to remain anonymous. If you prefer, we will keep your work confidential, to be used only as background in developing resource materials. ■

## New York Calendar

We are delighted to co-sponsor four programs this fall with the Jewish Community Center of the Upper West Side. For complete details, call the JCC at 212/580-0099.

- ❖ *Explaining Illness to Children: Stories and Strategies*; Monday, Sept. 21; Rabbi Simkha Weintraub.
- ❖ *Jewish Perspectives on Wholeness and Healing*: Study and discussion group focusing on texts from ancient and contemporary sources that explore the nexus of healing, spirituality and Judaism. Thursday evenings: Nov. 12-Dec. 17 (no class on Nov. 26).
- ❖ *Breast Cancer Support Group*: A supportive environment for the exploration of both Jewish and general concerns of premenopausal breast cancer survivors, including using ritual to accept a new body image, the spiritual challenge of fears of recurrence, and the importance of hope and community. Monday evenings, Nov. 2-Dec. 21; no sessions Nov. 25 and Dec. 14.
- ❖ *Traditional Tools for Jewish Health Care Professionals*: Rabbi Weintraub will lead a three-part course that explores resources for medical personnel confronting sensitive ethical and personal issues.
- ❖ The JHC is co-sponsoring three healing services in Brooklyn: Brooklyn Heights Synagogue, Sept. 11, 718/ 522-2070; Park Slope Jewish Center, Oct. 14, 718/ 768-1453; Kane Street Synagogue, Nov. 20, 718/ 875-1550. ■

*God is hiding in the world. Our task is to let the divine emerge from our deeds.*

—A.J. Heschel We welcome and need your deeds of *tz'dakah*.

Enclosed is my contribution of: \_\_\_\_\_

Please make your check payable to The Jewish Healing Center/The Shefa Fund.

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We deeply appreciate the financial contributions of friends of The Jewish Healing Center. In addition, we want to acknowledge those of you have volunteered your time, skill and other resources on behalf of The Jewish Healing Center.

Jennie Cohen	Jody Reiss	Congregation Beth
Ida Lewis	Eve Golden	Sholom, San Francisco
Nikki Bengal	Ari Davidow	Bruce Ratner
Edo Castro	Direct Language, Inc.	David Berliner
Phyllis Emanuel		

## Portraits from Jewish Hospice

*I call heaven and earth to witness this day; I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. (Deuteronomy 30:19)*

On first reading, it appears that this Biblical verse suggests a conventional equation: life is blessing, death is curse. But many who have lived or worked with people as they approach death know a deeper truth, which must be the deeper teaching of this verse as well. Sometimes life is curse: some people begin to live only when death draws near. But as long as there is life, there can be moments of blessing.

I'll never forget Michelle, a flamboyant, powerful, creative woman in her 50s, dying slowly of a respiratory ailment. Michelle had spent many of her earlier years in the pursuit of external beauty and success. She had accomplished a great deal and accumulated great wealth. Only during her 40s had she begun to look inward, cultivating a life of the spirit and facing the emptiness in many of her relationships.

By the time we met, Michelle was dying, but her life shone with love and gratitude. She had learned to treasure the small blessings of each day — the ability to breathe well enough to take a shower, the pleasure of a ride around the block in her wheelchair, the exquisite joy of an hour with her grandchild.

She knew that she needed to be ready for death at any time. Each night, she reviewed her relationships

and picked up the phone to apologize to anyone whom she felt she had offended. Michelle could not be sure her lungs would carry her through the night. She had learned to live each day fully.

Once, Michelle took me out to celebrate her surviving a particularly frightening stint in the hospital. An urgent announcement over the loudspeaker interrupted our lunch in an elegant restaurant: there was a fire in the building; we had to be ready to evacuate. I looked around in panic; Michelle's caregiver had helped her into her dining chair and removed the wheelchair. Would I be strong enough to carry Michelle to the nearest exit? I was frightened. But then I saw a look of utter calm on her face. "If I die here today," she said, completely serene, "it will be okay." What a blessing to live this way.

I remember a little girl named Dana, who died before her tenth birthday. She had known far more than her share of sorrow and pain in a very short lifetime; she had watched her brother die, lived through her parents' painful divorce, and now knew that she would die of cancer. Yet she never lost her sweetness, her loving connection to her family, her ability to make her family laugh. Dana's family had a gift for savoring the time they had together. When Dana died, there was peace, and in the *shiva* home, along with grief and tears, there was love and laughter.

I once worked with a man, whom I'll call Jim, who had lived a life of struggle. Raised amid financial hardship and emotional abandonment, he carried the fears and rage of his

childhood into his adult life. While he attained noteworthy professional achievements, his primary relationships were marred by his judgmental and abusive manner. Where was the blessing in this life?

I was with Jim during the days before he died. Four days before his death, he slipped silently into coma. His critical tongue was silenced: he was quiet and his children sat quietly with him for days, at last able to love him and to tell him so, until he peacefully let go. It was surely a moment of blessing.

These are three portraits from Jewish hospice, a kind of care that brings the wisdom of Jewish tradition and the love of Jewish community into the homes of terminally ill Jews and their families. In September, The Jewish Healing Center will give birth to its own Jewish hospice care program, to be called *Kol Hanesnama*. The last verse of the book of Psalms cries, "*Kol hanesnama tehalal yah, hallelujah.*" ("With every breath we can praise God, Hallelujah.") As long as there is breath, there can be moments of blessing, of joy and love and gratitude.

*Kol Hanesnama* will offer the spiritual component of hospice care to terminally ill Jews and their families in the Bay area, in conjunction with local hospice providers. It is modeled after *Yad l'Chaim*, the Jewish hospice care program of the Jewish Chaplaincy Service of Greater Philadelphia, which I directed in 1989-90. The Jewish Community Endowment Fund of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco has provided generous financial support for this work.

During the past year, I have established links among various hospitals, Jewish congregations and organizations, and social service agencies to help identify persons struggling with life-threatening illness who could benefit from the spiritual care that Kol Haneshama will offer. Clients will receive medical care and social services through their secular hospice programs or other care providers. Kol Haneshama will offer compassion, companionship, and community on the path toward the end of life, as well as support for bereaved family members after death has come.

An important aspect of this work will be training a corps of lay volunteers, so that Kol Haneshama can reach more Jews in need of hospice

care, and to enable other Jews to perform the *mitzvah* of caring for the dying and their families.

With help from the community, Kol Haneshama will stand with Jews as they journey towards death, hoping to find moments of blessing, beauty, and love as long as there is life. With God's help, both those served and those who work with Kol Haneshama will be touched by the Psalmist's conviction that in every moment there are ways to sing the praises of life. ■■■

Rabbi Amy Eilberg

Letter, from page 2

many readers who created "healing seders" of their own.

Fall, of course, is a time to gather summer's bounty. For this issue of *The Outstretched Arm*, we have harvested a collection of articles that shine light on important resources for Jews confronting illness, and for those who love and care for them. This includes Rabbi Amy Eilberg's explanation of *Kol Haneshama*, the Jewish Healing Center's new hospice program.

The Jewish Healing Center is also in transition. We have moved into office space generously provided by Congregation Beth Sholom in San Francisco, and Rabbi Amy Eilberg has joined our staff to establish and run Kol Haneshama. In New York, we will co-sponsor programs at the Jewish Community Center of the Upper West Side, whose executive

director, Debby Hirshman, recently joined our Executive Board.

As the holidays draw near, we want to wish a joyous *shana tovah* to the many friends who have offered your advice and support. And we want to thank Jeffrey Dekro, president of The Shefa Fund, which handles our financial obligations, and his colleagues. They generously provide counsel, support, and friendship to our young and growing enterprise.

Finally, please note our new mailing address and phone number: The Jewish Healing Center, 141 Alton Ave., San Francisco, CA 94116; 415/387-4999. ■■■

West Coast, from page 4

San Francisco Section. Wednesday, Oct. 28, Sheraton at Fisherman's Wharf; free admission and free parking.

❖ *Spiritual and Ethical Issues in Health and Illness: Jewish Perspectives*, will be a four-part lecture series co-sponsored by JHC, Lehrhaus Judaica, and Congregation Emanu-El. Topics will include "Physician-Aided Suicide" (Laurie Zolloth Dorfman, RN, MA); "Mourning: A Separate Path" (Anne Brener, LCSW); "Praying for Healing: Does it Work?" (Rabbi Nancy Flam); and "Tales of Jewish Hospice" (Rabbi Amy Eilberg). Each Tuesday evening in January, Congregation Emanu-El, San Francisco. ■■■

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## New Resources

The Jewish Healing Center has produced two valuable new resources: a collection of heartfelt blessings for times of illness, titled *When the Body Hurts, the Soul Still Longs to Sing* (written by a gathering of Jewish lay women), and a laminated card for Jewish health care professionals that includes the traditional Jewish prayer for healing (*Mi Sheberakh*) and an original prayer to be offered upon the death of a patient.

The prayer booklet is a loving gift for anyone needing spiritual uplift in the midst of illness; the prayer card helps medical professionals incorporate Jewish prayer and values in their work. We are particularly delighted

that several rabbis have already ordered large numbers of the prayer cards, which they will distribute to the health care professionals in their congregations.

*When the Body Hurts the Soul Still Longs to Sing*

One copy: \$4.00  
10+ copies: \$3.25 ea.  
50+ copies: \$2.75 ea.

Laminated 3" x 5" prayer card

Single card: \$1.75  
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