

# The Outstretched Arm

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## Letters To (and From!) God

A congregant whom I was fond of but did not see very often came to talk with me. When she revealed that she was undergoing chemotherapy I asked her, "What have you learned from your cancer?"

"Well," she replied, "I have learned that my husband is really wonderful. I have known this for a long time but in the midst of my illness he has been particularly caring and empathetic. I have also learned how utterly alone I am. The hour that I wait at my doctor's office for test results is brutal. The results might reveal that I will need a far stronger dose of chemotherapy. During that wait it is as if there is no one in the world but me. I am frightened and so alone."

I had just finished an essay on the writing of letters to and from God as a



tool for teaching prayer. I shared the essay with her and a suggestion. "Before you go to the doctor's office," I said, "write a letter to God. In your letter share your anxieties and fears over your illness and what the test results might reveal. Then reread your letter and write back 'as if' you were God. Your letter back will be an act of cosmic empathy that will help you."

Before she left she said, "Rabbi, a friend of mine told me that in this time of uncertainty I should do something spiritual, but I did not know where to begin. Regrettably I have never learned how to pray. Your suggestion of writing a letter to God

seems to give me access to that greater Power. I am glad I came to see you because now I have a place to begin."

A few weeks later I spoke with the congregant. She had written her letters to God and it had made a difference. Through her letter writing, she shared, she no longer felt so all alone at the doctor's office. The letter writing had prepared her to meet her anxiety and, moreover, had given her a new awareness that in her time of need there was a caring, Divine Presence in her life.

This congregant is an oncology nurse. She has since used the technique of letter writing to God with her patients. She tells me that the

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## From Our Readership

### On Cancer, *Shul* and Family

I had my first scan at noon to determine whether cancer had spread from my testicle into the lymph nodes in my abdomen and into my lungs. I had spent three hours wandering in the drizzle around Manhattan's West Side. Now I sat in my urologist's office waiting for him to read the scan. He was caught in traffic.

Around the corner from his office is a Catholic church. As I passed it, I thought that if I were Catholic, I could go in, light a candle, and pray that the test was negative. But I'm an observant Jew; that option wasn't available to me.

What did Judaism have to offer me that day? I have a warm and supportive wife with whom I am making a Jewish life, but I had chosen to spend the day alone. I belong to a wonderful Jewish community in Brooklyn, but it certainly wasn't a day for communal activities. I tried to pray for the scan to be negative, but that felt strange. Praying for something specific was alien; it felt like a misuse of prayer. So I simply waited.

The scan showed that the cancer had spread into my abdominal lymph nodes, but my lungs were clear. My urologist told me that I needed extremely complicated surgery to remove the nodes, and that after that, I would need intensive chemotherapy. I called my wife to give her the news, and went home to make *shabbos*.

To say the least, I was feeling ambivalent about God and His religion at that point, so the notion of setting apart a day to honor the majesty of God's creation didn't sit well with me. I hadn't been able to ask God to make my scan negative, but I still thought that if He cared, He would have done something about it. And if God created the world and everything in it, hadn't He also created my cancer? So there I was, lighting *shabbos* candles, wondering what it all meant.

I soon found out. I had decided that I would be candid with my family and friends. I was not going to do this alone, and I wasn't going to put the burden of support on my wife. I was determined not to blame myself for this disease, nor to allow anyone to stigmatize me. Many of my closest friends would be in *shul* on Saturday, and I would tell them my bad news.

My friends were terrific. Maybe Judaism hadn't really given me a framework to deal with testicular cancer alone, but it had given me two important institutions to help me with it: my family and my *shul*.

The following week was tough. I saw an oncologist and he explained the

response has been consistently positive. In contrast to meditation and other aids in dealing with anxiety, the letter writing has felt more accessible to her patients. Moreover, the letter writing has opened up, for some, a new awareness of the support and strength which comes from God through prayer.

The technique of writing letters to God is rooted in Jewish folk practice, most commonly identified with the Western Wall of Jerusalem. For at least the past two hundred years, Jews at the Wall have augmented their traditional prayers with a personal note to God. The private prayer, often written on a small scrap of paper called a "*kvittel*" (in Yiddish), is then jammed between the massive stones, which marks the site of the ancient Temple.

When we write a *kvittel* to God, whether at the Western Wall or at home, we are engaged in an act of private prayer. In the moment of writing, we suspend theological questions. In that moment we allow ourselves to write "as if" God is listening. When we allow ourselves to write God from our stream of consciousness, we engage in a very self-revealing form of communication.

Since most of us operate "as if" God is all knowing, we tend to write frankly and openly. If we hedged the truth, as we often do with loved ones and ourselves, God would know. Secondly, God's opinion of us will not change by the truth which we share. And, lastly, we can depend on God to maintain our confidences. Consequently, our letters to God honestly disclose our longings, fears, and disappointments.

*Continued on page 10*

Correspondence with God also provides a larger perspective on our lives. I often find that when I write to God I begin with the venting of a problem or the sharing of a vulnerability. The articulation of pain and negativity provides catharsis and self-understanding. Yet, since I'm writing God, I also take into account that God is the Creator. Since there is much good in my life that also comes through creation, I invariably shift to taking stock of my blessings and conclude with a humble thank you.

Writing a letter to God helps forge a deeper relationship with our Creator. Through acting "as if" God is present, God indeed begins to feel present. Just knowing that we can vent to a caring God gives us perspective and strength.

The model for a relationship with God is our relationship with other loved ones. Because we are concrete by nature, we think of God in human-like terms, while simultaneously holding on to an awareness of God's Otherness. In that light, it is natural to wonder what God would respond to our letters.

Therapists often recommend that a client write a letter to another person with whom he/she is unable to communicate. The letter allows the writer to fully express his/her pent up feelings and concerns. As a followup, therapists will then ask the client to write a response to his/her letter as if he/she were the other person. This act of empathy demands seeing the relationship and problems through the other person's eyes. The potential result is a renewed understanding of the other person and their mutual bond.

In that light, I ask my students and congregants to write a response to their letters to God "as if" they were God. I direct this exercise with caution. I emphasize that we are indeed not God and our letter writing must encompass humility. Yet, I emphasize that we who are created in God's image can stretch ourselves to imagine our own lives from God's perspective.

No doubt our "letters from God" reflect our own theologies. Yet, I am struck by the recurring phenomena of feeling loved by God. As one student framed it, "When I began to write, I thought that God was really going to give it to me. But after the first sentence, God was reassuring and sup-

portive." Others in the group shared that they were also surprised by the love they felt in their "letters from God."

When we pray it is our challenge not only to speak to God but to listen to a "small still voice" to which the prophets made reference. In writing a letter to ourselves "as if it was from God," we gain a fresh perspective on our lives. We are challenged to live up to our ideals; our problems are framed from a viewpoint that transcends our own lives; and we potentially feel embraced by a Presence which moves through us and yet is Beyond us.

*Rabbi Elie Spitz is spiritual leader of Congregation Bnai Israel, Tustin, California.*

## Living Well — A Life of Blessings

It is an emerging truism in the literature on death and dying that people die the way they lived. Surely, many people die under cruel and unbearable circumstances, suddenly, out of context, in no way related to the lives they lived. But for those who struggle with terminal illness, there is often time to walk through the dying process with some awareness of what is ahead. Sometimes miracles happen in this process, people are transformed, suddenly gifted with the possibility of living more fully than ever before. Still, most people walk through the dying process in much the same way they faced the other major challenges of their lives. If bitterness and isolation, a sense of unfairness and unworthiness characterized the person's life, it is likely that these ways of being will color the dying process. Where people

were blessed with a sense of life being full of beauty and love and hope, the dying process unfolds in a very different way. People die the way they lived.

One Jewish expression of this same notion is the Jewish tradition which urges us to do *teshuvah* (repentance, introspection, soul-searching, work of self-improvement) the day before we die. What? How do I know when I must do my most careful *teshuvah*? Since I have no idea when I may die, I must do this work today and every day. I must live the way I will, sooner or later, die.

Are we living the way we would want to die? Are we living as fully as we want to live? What does living fully mean?

Judaism has much to teach on the subject of living well. Philosophical

statements abound in Jewish texts about the essence of life well lived, about values and ethics. Yet somehow, the source that speaks to me most eloquently of Judaism's teaching on life well lived is not a general statement about life, but a simple set of prayers that speaks to the concrete tasks of waking up each morning, cultivating a sense of wonder in the miracle of living each moment of life.

At the start of *Shacharit*, the Morning Service, one finds the following prayer, called *Birkot Hashachar*, the Morning Blessings. (My translations are influenced by those of my colleague, Rabbi Jules Harlow, editor of *Siddur Sim Shalom*.)

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who has given the crow the wisdom to distinguish between day and night.*

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who has made me in Your image.*

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who has made me a free person.*

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who has made me a Jew.*

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who gives sight to the blind.*

## Welcome to Marsha Guggenheim

We heartily welcome our new Administrative Director, Marsha Mignon Guggenheim. Marsha was formerly the Administrator of a large organ transplant testing laboratory at the UC San Francisco Medical Center, where she worked for ten years. She had management responsibility for all transplant, paternity testing and research grant programs. As a volunteer for the Jewish Vocational Services, she has worked with Russian emigres, teaching them job interviewing skills.



Born in Stockton, California, where she was part of a close-knit Jewish community, Marsha moved to San Francisco in 1969. She put herself through college and received a Bachelor's degree in Public Administration from the University of San Francisco. She has since taken graduate courses at UC Berkeley and Golden Gate University.

Marsha is thrilled to join the staff of the Jewish Healing Center, where she feels, "excited by the opportunity to utilize [her] administrative skills in helping to develop a much needed and important service." Among her projects, Marsha looks forward to enlarging the Center's information and referral services, making it a resource for the entire Jewish community.

This year, Marsha is busy looking at both colleges and pre-schools for her 17-year-old daughter, Abra, and her son, Josh, now two and a half. Marsha's husband, Ralph, is a producer of computer animated films. Her favorite activities take place in the outdoors: backpacking, bird-watching, and walking in Golden Gate Park. In her "spare time," Marsha would love to learn to play the cello.

We are delighted to have Marsha aboard!

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who clothes the naked.*

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who releases those who are bound.*

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who raises up those who are bowed down.*

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who spreads out the earth over the waters.*

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who has provided for all of my needs.*

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who guides us on our path.*

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who strengthens the people Israel with courage.*

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who crowns the people Israel with glory.*

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who gives strength to the weary.*

*Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of all the world, who removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids.*

Originally, these prayers were intended to be said individually, as one walked through the mundane activities of arising in the morning. Upon first hearing the cry of the rooster (in our era, the blaring noise of the alarm clock, or perhaps the irritating/wondrous sound of a baby crying), one was to recite the first blessing, “Thank You, God, it’s morning.” Then, when just awake enough to be aware, to recognize one’s identity again this morning, one would recite the three blessings thanking God for making us as we were made, “Thank You, God, You made me in Your image, You

made me a free person, You made me a Jew.”

Only now, having reached this basic level of awareness, would one open one’s eyes, and recite, “Thank You, God, You have restored my sight (after the blindness of sleep).” Upon putting on an article of clothing, “Thank You, God, You have given me ample clothing.” Upon moving one’s limbs after the inertness of sleep, “Thank You, God, You have released my bound limbs, allowing me to move again.” Upon standing upright for the first time this morning, “Thank You, God, for allowing me to stand tall.” Upon touching the ground for the first time, “Thank You, God, for placing the earth over the waters.” And so on, each minute movement and activity of the morning routine transformed into an opportunity for spiritual awareness, a chance to notice God’s presence in our simplest activities, to appreciate the small miracles of every moment that we are alive.

Now, I have always loved this prayer, really paid attention to it, even as it now appears as a list of blessings recited at the beginning of the morning service, detached from immediate connection with the activities of awakening. But it was only recently that, in the midst of conversation with a friend, I realized that this prayer is far more than a celebration of morning. The author of this prayer wanted us to walk through our morning routine with awareness of God’s involvement in our lives, of the many small blessings that surround us always, though they may so often escape our notice.

This prayer insists that we notice what works in our lives, what is beautiful, blessed, even wondrous, even

when other things are profoundly not working. A celebration of the transition from sleep to awakening — of course. But surely, the *Siddur* (prayer book) does not only want us to be spiritually awake in the morning! This prayer is a paradigm, a detailed example of how we might live our whole day, our whole lives, if we could only stay more fully awake.

There is a Jewish tradition that encourages each of us to recite 100 *berachot* (blessings) each day. Our tradition gives us blessings for awakening, a blessing for using the toilet, a blessing to recite before and after consuming different kinds of foods and beverages, a unique blessing upon seeing a rainbow or a sunset or an old friend, upon meeting a wise person or a beautiful person or a disfigured person. The list goes on. For these occasions and more, we are asked throughout the day to stop, to take notice, to live in awareness of what is valuable and beautiful in our lives, and what is not in our control — but a gift from God. We are challenged to pay attention to the blessings — large and small — in our lives, moment by moment, day by day, no matter how long we have to live in this body.

Several times in the Torah, we find God promising us “*orech yamim*,” usually translated, “length of days,” in return for living well. Understandably, many people have read this promise as quantitative: if you do right, you will live long. Unfortunately, humankind has always known that this is not the way things are; if this is the meaning of God’s promise, the promise is not kept.

One ancient Jew who asked this question was Elisha ben Abuya, a man

## Healing at Bedtime: The Traditional *Kriat Sh'ma*

known in Jewish tradition as an apostate, who asked this most reasonable question, in the midst of a crisis of faith. Elisha knew that the Torah promises *orech yamim* to those, in particular, who observe the *mitzvot* of honoring one's parents and of *shilu'ach haken*, sending away the mother bird before gathering her eggs. Elisha saw a young boy, known to honor his parents deeply, climbing a tree, carefully sending away the mother bird to spare her pain as he sought to gather her eggs. Suddenly, the limb on which the boy was climbing cracked, and in one senseless moment, the boy fell to his death. Elisha, his faith shaken to the core, sensed that God's promises were meaningless. This child, among all people, by Torah's own definition, should have lived long. Elisha declared, "There is no Judge; there is no justice," and left Judaism forever.

There is no answer to the senseless, tragic shortening of life. But I do not believe the Torah would have us believe that life is as mechanistic, as quantifiable, as "if you do right, you will live long." I do believe that we are offered the chance to live well, to live fully, to live deeply, as long as we are blessed with breath and awareness. As long as we are alive, we are invited to live fully, and in this lies the blessing.

*Rabbi Amy Eilberg*  
Director, Kol Haneshama:  
Hospice Care Program  
of the Jewish Healing Center



For people dealing with illness, bedtime can be a time of both heightened vulnerability, anxiety, and stress, as well as a special opportunity for openness, intimacy, comfort, and reassurance.

Jewish tradition offers a bedtime ritual with some very beautiful and sensitive prayers that can be particularly moving, meaningful, and supportive for those who are ill, their loved ones, and caregivers. Without denying one's very real fears and tensions, they can facilitate an ambience of hope, trust, and confidence.

Reproduced below are some elements from the traditional Jewish bedtime ritual, *Kriat Sh'ma Al HaMitah*, accompanied by an original translation. These prayers provide a time-hallowed framework for the expression of deep sentiments and profound beliefs; one should also feel free to integrate original, individual prayers alongside them. For many people, simple breathing exercises, repeated chanting of syllables, words, and phrases, and other relaxation/meditation techniques might also prove useful and evocative.

*Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, CSW*  
Program Consultant  
Jewish Healing Center

### The *Sh'ma* at Bedtime (excerpts from the traditional ritual)

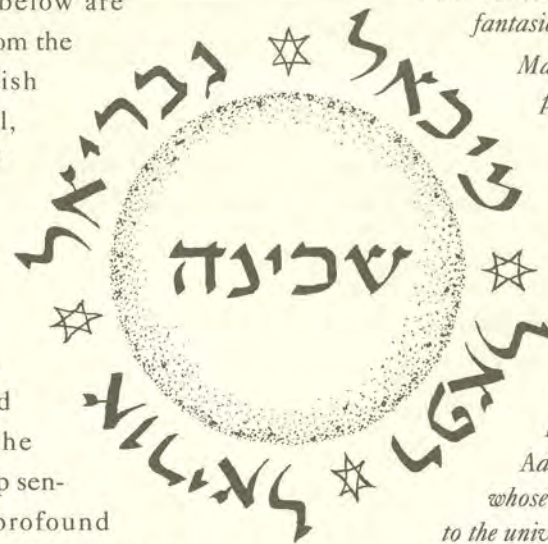
#### Who Closes My Eyes... A Blessing at Bedtime

*Praised are You,  
Adonai, our God,  
Ruler of the universe,  
who closes my eyes in sleep,  
my eyelids in slumber.  
May it be Your will,  
Adonai,  
My God and the God of my ancestors,  
to lie me down in peace  
and then to raise me up in peace.  
Let no disturbing thoughts upset me,  
no evil dreams nor troubling  
fantasies.*

*May my bed be complete and whole  
in Your sight.*

*Grant me light  
so that I do not  
sleep the sleep of  
death,  
for it is You  
who illumines  
and enlightens.*

*Praised are You,  
Adonai,  
whose majesty gives light  
to the universe.*



### The *Sh'ma* Itself (Deuteronomy 6: 4-9)

*(God is a Faithful Ruler)*  
*Hear, O Israel, Adonai, our God, Adonai,  
is One.*

*Blessed be the Name of God's glorious  
majesty forever and ever.*

*You shall love Adonai your God with all  
your heart, with all your soul, and with all  
your might. And these words which I com-*

## Profile: Dr. Lea Baider

*mand you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when you are sitting at home and when you go on a journey, when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be frontlets between your eyes. You shall inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

### **Hashkivenu: "Lie us Down..."**

*Lie us down,  
Adonai our God,  
in peace;  
and raise us up again,  
our Ruler,  
in life.*

*Spread over us Your sukkah of peace,  
direct us with Your good counsel,  
and save us for Your own Name's sake.*

*Shield us;  
remove from us  
every enemy, pestilence, sword, famine,  
and sorrow.*

*Remove all adversaries  
from before us and from behind us,  
and shelter us in the shadow of Your  
wings.*

*For You are our  
guarding and saving God,  
yes, a gracious and compassionate God  
and Ruler.*

*Guard our going out  
and our coming in  
for life and peace,  
now and always!*

### **A Prayer for Protection at Night**

*In the name of Adonai  
the God of Israel:*

*May the angel Michael be at my right,  
and the angel Gabriel be at my left;  
and in front of me the angel Uriel,  
and behind me the angel Raphael...  
and above my head  
the Sh'khinah (Divine Presence).*

Argentinean born Dr. Lea Baider, quiet, intense, passionately committed to helping her patients find the emotional and spiritual resources to live meaningfully in the face of their cancer, directs the psychooncology unit at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. She specializes in working with a special group of cancer patients — Holocaust survivors. During a conversation in Jerusalem last summer, she spoke to me about her observations.

For most of her patients, she has found that the initial response to their cancer diagnosis is despair and resignation. They survived once, but now their turn has really come, and they see no point in fighting. Over the years, they had fashioned for themselves some explanation for their initial survival. Now, they can't explain why an individual *shoah* has happened to them again. They can't imagine a reason why they should survive once more. The feelings of having a life-threatening illness unite with repressed memories of being passive, helpless victims of forces beyond their control during the Holocaust.

Dr. Baider sees her role as helping them see that precisely because they survived once, they can hope to survive again. Repression helped them live after their ordeal; now that they have cancer, reviving those memories will give them access to the resources that helped them survive the first time. Her role is to help them open their memories, to listen to their pain, to tolerate their emotions, and then to help them connect with their inner strength.

These memories often provide the base for a renewed, private spiritual life. Her patients often attach symbolic meaning to phrases of prayers, Torah, or blessings. In lighting candles, one woman said that as she looks at the lights, she remembers all the lights she used to see; that she felt connected to her mother and her grandmother. Several men found comfort in recalling biblical passages they had studied with their father, or in *cheder*. Instead of feeling alone and terrified, they feel connected to a larger, universal force, to a source of caring and curing.

She has learned that her patients reject imposed religious doctrines, but through their therapy with her, they learn to construct rituals and liturgies that are rich in personal meaning. Some people develop daily religious practices, others turn to ritual less frequently. These rituals help them feel that there is an internal order amidst the chaos of their invisible, overwhelming disease. As they feel healing in their soul, she reports, they come to believe they may achieve healing in their disease.

Her work has focused largely on Holocaust survivors. She also works with groups of men whose wives are ill. Unable to cope with the feelings of helplessness engendered in them by their spouses' disease, they withdraw and fail to give the women needed support. Through the group experience, they learn how to cope, how to express their feelings, how to deal completely with their situation.

Now she has a new focus for her work. Between January 1990 and May

1992, 350 Russian *olim* (immigrants) in Jerusalem were diagnosed with cancer. She wants to understand what spiritual resources will help them cope with the trauma that follows so closely the trauma of emigration. They have no religious memories; they did not light candles. What system of support can they construct? How can she help them build on their strengths to mobilize the resources to survive their disease? She hopes to raise the money to hire a Russian psychologist to interview them. She hopes to help them find the keys to their own emotional and spiritual healing.

— *Rabbi Rachel Cowan*  
Director, Jewish Life  
Program, The Nathan  
Cummings Foundation

## West Coast Events

❖ **Service of Healing** The service combines prayer, study, song and silence as a means to strengthen hope, faith, comfort and community for those with a range of healing needs. The first Monday of every month from 6–7 pm at Congregation Sha’ar Zahav, (220 Danvers Street, San Francisco).

❖ **Kol Haneshama: Jewish Hospice Care** Rabbi Amy Eilberg offers pastoral care to Jews in San Francisco and the Peninsula dealing with issues of death and dying; call the Jewish Healing Center office (415) 387-4999 for more information.

❖ **“Spiritual and Ethical Issues in Health and Illness: Jewish Perspectives”** A four-part lecture series co-sponsored by the Jewish Healing Center, 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 (2 Lake Street, San Francisco); call (510) 845-6420 to register.

❖ **“Healing and Wholeness: How Judaism Helps Us Cope”** Rabbi Nancy Flam teaches a four-part series to explore ways in which Jewish wisdom and practice can help us cope with the challenges of illness. February 2, 9, 23, March 2; 7–8:30 pm; Congregation Sha’ar Zahav; call (510) 845-6420 to register.

❖ **“Praying For Healing: Does It Work?”** A lecture by Rabbi Nancy Flam. February 7, 10:15 am, Peninsula Temple Sholom, Burlingame; call (415) 697-2266 for more information.

❖ **“Grief Through Loss: Recovery Perspectives on Grief”** Rabbi Amy Eilberg speaks to AJIRA (Addicted Jews in Recovery Anonymous) on March 14, at the San Francisco JCC (3200 California Street), 6 pm; call the JCC (415) 346-6040 for more information.

❖ **Spiritual Support Group for Jews with HIV-Disease** Co-sponsored by the San Francisco Jewish Family and Children’s Services; begins Spring 1993; call the Jewish Healing Center office (415) 387-4999 for more details.

❖ **Information & Referral** Marsha Guggenheim can refer you to books, articles, audiovisual material, bibliographies and Bay Area agencies to help you learn more about Judaism and healing; call the Jewish Healing Center office (415) 387-4999 from 1–5 pm, weekdays.

## East Coast Calendar

Continuing our association with the Jewish Community Center of the Upper West Side, several Jewish Healing Center workshops will be offered in New York this Spring, including:

❖ **“The Seder and Healing: A Workshop for Jews Dealing With Serious Illness”** Taught by Rabbi Simkha Weintraub; March 16.

❖ **“Traditional Tools for Jewish Health Care Professionals”** Led by Rabbi Simkha Weintraub; May 17, June 14, and June 28.

Contact the JCC of the Upper West Side at (212) 580-0099, for additional information and registration.





# Praying For Healing

Every week for the past nine months, about 25 people have gathered together in San Francisco to pray a special "Service of Healing." Designed to reach out to Jews struggling with physical illness, it also embraces family, friends, caregivers, and those who seek *r'fuat hanefesh* — healing of the spirit. The liturgy, inspired by a service created by Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, integrates song, silence, study, and sharing.

Our community is diverse. Some who come are fighting disease: AIDS, cancer, diabetes, hepatitis, mental illness. Some are grieving: for parents, siblings, lovers, friends, clients. Some come to pray for those who cannot come themselves. And still others come in search of an hour's blessed respite from lives ordinarily too busy for spiritual nourishment.

What are we doing when we gather to pray? Do we really expect our prayers to heal our illness? Or does healing come in the strength, comfort, and guidance we derive from one another? I suspect that the answers to these questions are as numerous as the participants at any given service.

No doubt, there are times when some worshippers pray ardently to God to remove their affliction, much as the Psalmist did:

*I cry aloud to God;  
I cry to God to give ear to me.  
In my time of distress I turn to the Almighty,  
with my hand uplifted;  
my eyes flow all night without respite;  
I will not be comforted.  
I call God to mind, I moan,  
I complain, my spirit falls. (Psalm 77)*

They hope that God will be moved by the fervor of their prayers to take note, intercede, and cure. God is anthropomorphized as a supernatural Being who cares about individual persons and their day-to-day concerns, as a friend or a parent might care. God is thought to be moved by words, and stirred to action in response to our own.

Some worshippers do not believe that God listens to prayers and then chooses whether or not to answer them.

Rather, they understand that "our words of worship in no way alter God or change His course of conduct. They can, however, alter us." (Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn) That is, our prayer can remind us of the best in ourselves and inspire us to "rise above our ordinary understandings and accomplishments." (Rabbi Gittelsohn) Prayer is a self-reflective act; it has more to do with us than it does to do with God. In a wholly naturalistic way, the words of prayer themselves and their being offered in community can bring us strength, comfort, and hope.

Finally, there are times when prayer holds no supplication or expectation, but is rather a kind of communing with God, a simple and profound being in God's presence. Herbert Baumgard wrote that

*"the Chasidim did not have to 'think' about the legitimacy or the efficacy of prayer. They understood it to be as much an essential part of man as his biological urge. They spoke of man's need to pray in this fashion: When God created the world, He invested a part of Himself (a spark) in everything that He created. These sparks now yearn to re-unite with their source. In this sense, a prayer is the yearning of the divine spark within man to join itself to more of itself... Prayer is God, that is, the divine communing with the divine."*

In this paradigm, prayer does not have to do with asking God for something; prayer is the language one uses to make contact with the divine: the divine within, and the divine without. One is focused on the process of prayer, not its product. Simply to be in God's presence is enough.

No matter how our participants understand their prayers, it is clear that they effect a healing of spirit. When you are in San Francisco, join us now the first Monday of each month at 6:00 p.m. at Congregation Sha'ar Zahav.

In addition, note that healing services occur monthly at Temple Israel in Boston (the first Tuesday of each month; call (617) 566-3960 for more information) and at the home of Phyllis Emanuel in Berkeley, at (510) 527-4374. Let us know about other healing services around the country. And please send us copies of those liturgies for our resource library.

— Rabbi Nancy Flam  
West Coast Director  
Jewish Healing Center

Continued from page 2

recommended chemotherapy. The notion of having chemotherapy was, of course, terrifying. Again, Judaism didn't have much to offer my wife and me as we sat crying in the doctor's office.

I had sought a second opinion about the surgery at another hospital, and the only available day was an appointment that fell on the first anniversary of my mother-in-law's death. The fact that she had died of breast cancer at age 54, after struggling with the disease for more than 10 years, didn't help our moods. After hearing a second opinion that didn't quite jive with those of the urologists and oncologist, I was faced with a critical decision:

which mode of treatment? My wife and I discussed this on the way to the cemetery.

Nothing in my past prepared me for how I felt as I reached her grave. There I was, confronted with death from cancer. Could I ask God to save me? He hadn't saved her. Why should my life matter more to Him than hers? Judaism didn't help me answer these questions.

As the week progressed, I tried to hold my professional and personal lives together while I consulted doctors. I found the whole process of gathering information and opinions extremely perplexing and unsettling. Even though I felt that Judaism had nothing to offer in connection with the hard decisions I had to make, I

couldn't wait until *shabbos*.

There had been many weeks in my life when I thought that I didn't need a break from my daily activities — they were a lot of fun and I didn't want a day off from them. That week, however, I couldn't wait to get away from doctors, hospitals, and the phone. *Shabbos*, of course, was the answer.

— Ralph Kleinman  
An attorney who lives  
in New York with his  
wife and two sons

### Credits

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Lisa Pleskow Kassow

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Anne Herrod



## Today Rabbah!

Thank you to all of you who have donated your time, energy and other resources to the Jewish Healing Center:

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## Jewish Healing Center Resources

### Spiritual Resources for Healing

An audiotape of a presentation given by Rabbi Harold Kushner (author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*) and Dr. Herbert Benson (author of *The Relaxation Response*) at the annual convention of the Rabbinical Assembly, co-sponsored by The Jewish Healing Center, May 1992. To order audiotape, call Convention Cassettes Unlimited, 1-800/776-5454; \$10.00.

***When The Body Hurts, The Soul Still Longs to Sing*** A booklet of contemporary prayers written by Jewish laywomen for those dealing with illness.

"I was deeply moved by the range, sensitivity and compassion exhibited in the Jewish Healing Center's blessings booklet, *When The Body Hurts The Soul Still Longs To Sing*, and I would recommend it to anyone."

Rabbi Harold Kushner

"This striking collection of straightforward responses to illness and pain leads us to courage and renewed faith and sustains us with hopefulness. It is also a text which can help anyone find his or her own way in personal prayer."

Rabbi Jules Harlow

**Mi Sheberach/Original Prayer**

A prayer card for Jewish health care professionals which includes the traditional prayer for healing on one side, and a prayer to be said at a patient's death on the other. This card helps Jewish health care workers bring a spiritual dimension to their work.

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

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

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(laminated 3" x 5" prayer card)

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In addition I want to make a tax-deductible contribution of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ to the "Jewish Healing Center/The Shefa Fund."

Phone or send your order to: Jewish Healing Center, 141 Alton Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94116; (415) 387-4999; FAX: (415) 661-9403.

\* California residents: please compute appropriate sales tax and include it with your payment.



**Mi Sheberach: A Prayer for Healing of Body and Spirit**

O God, who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, send Your blessing to \_\_\_\_\_.

Have mercy on him/her, and graciously restore his/her health and strength. Grant him/her a *refu-a sheleima*, a complete recovery, a healing of body and a healing of spirit, along with all others who are stricken. May healing come speedily, and let us say: Amen.

מי שבכך אבותינו,  
 אברהם, יצחק ויעקב,  
 ואמותינו, שרה, רבקה,  
 רחל וליאה, הוא יברך  
 וירפא את החולה  
 בן \_\_\_\_\_  
 (בת)  
 הקדוש ברוך הוא ימלא  
 רחמים עליי (עליה)  
 להחלימו (להחלימה)  
 ולרפאותו (ולרפאותה),  
 ולהחיותו (ולהחיותה)  
 וישלח לו (לה) בריחה  
 רפואה שלמה, רפואת  
 הנפש ורפואת הגוף,  
 בתוך שאר חולי ישראל  
 השתא בעגלא ובזמן  
 קרוב, ונאמר: אמן.

Pictured here are the cover piece from *When The Body Hurts The Soul Still Longs To Sing* and the prayer *Mi Sheberach*. The amulet is of painted wood and parchment from 19th century Bologna, Italy, Private Collection. Photo by Mario Berardi, Bologna.

*Return Postage Guaranteed*

The Outstretched Arm  
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## “Well-Healed”

Some day, we hope that this double-entendre  
will accurately describe the Jewish Healing Center.

But we're not even *close* yet.

Help bring us closer.

Support the Jewish Healing Center  
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Enclosed is my contribution of \$ \_\_\_\_\_

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