

The Outstretched Arm

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Feasting For Freedom: The Unasked Questions

This year as I begin my preparations for *Pesach*, I find myself asking once again what it means for me to be "feasting for freedom" as I continue to confront the confines of illness. And once more, I am struck by the symbolism of the Seder's Fourth Child. This is the child who does not know how to ask, the child who has yet to understand what questions to frame, the child who in some innocence waits for awareness.

When I first became ill more than a decade ago, I felt so much like this child. I was bewildered by the complexities of my situation. There were so many changes, and so much information to understand that impacted on my very existence. At first, I didn't even know what questions to ask my doctors. But being an educator had given me skills to research and construct appropriate questions; I soon knew how to find out what the diagnoses meant, what the tests consisted

of, what the prognoses implied. And I began to believe that I would feel secure and safe once more when I had the answers to all these questions--questions that had seemed at first so difficult, puzzling and complicated.

Yet even after I became a "savvy-consumer" of medical information, and had gone on to teach about women and chronic illness, I found myself still feeling unsure about how to live the rest of my life. I had received many answers to much about my medical condition. But I realized that once again I was like that Fourth Child: I did not know yet what questions to ask about living with a "shattered heart." (Psalm 147:3)

As I began to speak with others who were dealing with the experience of chronic/life-threatening illness, I heard many people anguish over why they were ill, what they had done that might have caused the illness, or what aspect of themselves



*The Four Sons: Geismar Haggadah, Berlin, 1928
From the Collections of Harvard University*

the illness demonstrated. Some of those I spoke with asked out of deep spiritual concerns; others out of a belief that in finding a cause in themselves they could find a solution in the same place.

I, too, found myself wanting to find meaning in illness. As an educator and a writer, my job was always to place the characters in the appropriate context, to consider the narrative flow, to find the meaning in the text. Everything--I had learned--stood for something and I was supposed to

Continued on page 2

Inside

Feasting for Freedom	1
<i>Refaeinu 1994</i>	2
The Jewish Healer II	4
Meet Jennafer Carlin	4
Meditation	5
Seder Thoughts	6
Today Rabbah	7
<i>Hesed Hevrah</i>	7
Resources	8
Events	10
These Weeks Count	11

Feasting for Freedom, continued understand exactly what. Wasn't that what it meant to live a considered life? So I began to try to find those right words to ask the right questions. I turned again to the teachings of Torah and encountered a favorite passage in *Isaiah*, "Incline your ear and come to Me:/Hearken, and you shall be revived." (55:3) I realized then that my task must include a distinctive quality of listening--listening not only with an educator's open mind, but with a seeker's open heart as well. The right question was no longer about how to interpret data, or understand information, or reach conclusions. The right question became one of how to listen anew to what the familiar strains of Jewish liturgy and ritual have to offer to one on my journey.

Attending a Healing Service at my synagogue several years ago, I became quite interested in a story from the Talmud that my rabbi told. In this particular passage in the *Mishnah* (*Berachot* Chap. 9:3), there is a discussion of the meaning of "a vain prayer." The rabbis state that if a man is coming home from a journey and hears cries of distress in the town and begins to pray that the Almighty grant that the alarm is not coming from his house--that this is a vain prayer. Whichever house is burning is already burning, and if it is this individual's house, there is no point in praying to change what already has happened. Instead, my rabbi explained, the man should pray for the guidance and strength to cope with whatever situation he must face when he returns home.

As I listened to my rabbi's words at that *Shabbat Shuvah* service, I knew that in terms of my health my house was already afire. And I think it was then that I began to recognize that asking to know *why* was surely a vain prayer. "Why" was something that had already happened and about which I could do nothing. I knew then that seeking this knowledge

would not strengthen me. Certainly life itself is made up of a sweep of events beyond my own understanding: this is the awe we feel when we first see the ocean; Judaism teaches us to recite a blessing. I asked myself if this same sense of awe in the face of accepting what had already happened--and was thus beyond my control--could become the underpinnings of a faith born of illness. I knew that in our world there is the tragedy of a terribly disabled child, but there is also the ocean that delights the eye and uplifts the heart. These are both random phenomena, part of the texture of life that is spread out before us. The question I had to grapple with was whether I could feel humbled by both the tragedy and the majesty without growing afraid.

Reading in *Isaiah* once again, I found myself surprised and comforted by words that had hardly comforted me before: God's assurance, "For my

plans are not your plans,/Nor are My ways your ways." (55:8) I saw that I could be saddened by the anguish of terrible illness, and puzzled by its apparent meaninglessness. But my spiritual journey now had nothing to do with what was behind me--what had already occurred or the reasons for it. Before me instead lay the task of learning how to live once the alarm is given. And pondering *these* unasked questions made me feel amazingly free. Like the Fourth Child at the Seder, I could look forward with anticipation, and even joy, to understanding the journey which lay ahead of me now.

Whatever answers I have found came to me in a context of humility born of faith--a faith based on knowing what we cannot know. Rabbi Hayim Halberstam of Zanz noted that the word *at* (you) in the *at p'tah lo*

Continued on page 3

REFAEINU 1994

When Rabbi Nancy Flam, West Coast Director of the Jewish Healing Center, recited the *shehecheyanu*, the traditional offering of thanks given for "helping us to reach this day," at the opening session of *Refaeinu 1994*, it was a recognition both of the unpredictable hazards of nature and of the importance of healing in Jewish life. Despite blizzards on the East Coast, earthquakes in California, and floods in the South, more than 130 rabbis and other Jewish professionals gathered at Stony Point, NY, on February 13-15 for the conference that was sponsored by the JHC. Their goals were to explore what healing means within a Jewish context, to investigate the Jewish sources and resources for confronting illness and healing, and to assess how healing

can be woven into the fabric of Jewish life, both communally and personally.

Refaeinu 1994 provided the opportunity to mine traditional approaches and create new ones. In plenary sessions and in workshops, the participants studied *tehilim*, discussed the power of ritual and prayer for those who are ill, role-played visiting the sick, argued theologies of sickness and suffering, took part in a model healing service, and *davened* together.

There were powerful and moving lessons to be learned everywhere. At the opening plenary session, the speakers talked of their own experience of illness, suffering and pain, and the ways in which it had reshaped their perceptions of their Jew-

ish lives. For Rabbi Rachel Cowan, it meant having to repair her relationship with *Adonai* after her husband's death. Rabbi Zahara Davidowitz-Farkas described the way in which her own illness has the power to force her to revisit every past loss and grief when she acts as hospital chaplain. "How can I pray for someone else when I believe that *Adonai* has nothing to do with it? But how can I believe that there is no order in the world?" And eventually she came to the conclusion that "sitting in the middle," the acceptance of these contradictions, is profoundly Jewish. Chronic illness, for singer and songwriter Debbie Friedman, has meant struggling with the transformation of moments of pain into moments of understanding, trying to "bless what is good and what is not good." Our only options are to withdraw or to somehow use the experience of illness. A terrible accident brought Rabbi Nancy Wechsler to a similar conclusion: "I don't like that it happened, but what happened has a value." Rabbi Hershel Jaffe spoke of

what he saw as the unexpected connections he felt between his role in the negotiations for the release of the American hostages in Teheran in 1980 and his sense of being held hostage to a life-threatening illness that struck him two years later.

At the second plenary, "From Hanina ben Dosa to Rambam to Us," Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman spoke of the rabbi as healer. He began by asking what we might learn from the midrash which declares that the Ark which the Israelites carried through the wilderness contained not only the second set of tablets on which the law was inscribed, but also the fragments of the first tablets that Moses had smashed in his rage. Only when the broken tablets are in the Ark are the Jewish people whole: "You are standing here this day all of you before *Adonai Elohechah*." It is our task, he maintained, to make sure that all of us are present before *Adonai*, both those who can stand and those who cannot.

What can the rabbi do to insure that this happens? Rabbi Amy Eilberg,

Director of *Kol Haneshama*, JHC's hospice care program in San Francisco, offered the notion of "holy chutzpah," the nerve to believe that "perhaps I can convey God's blessing." She suggested that even when physical healing is not possible it is possible to pray for *refuat ha-nefesh*, healing of the spirit. It is not enough, she said, to say a *mi sheberach* in synagogue, but it is also not enough to recite a *mi sheberach* by the patient's bedside. Rather, the rabbi must attempt to be the conduit between community and individual, bringing the community with her every time she enters the hospital room.

On the final day of the conference, at the plenary that had as its

Continued on page 7

Feasting for Freedom, continued

(you open it [the discussion] for him) contains the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet-- *alef* and *tav*. This phrase comes from the passage in the Haggadah that explains how to answer the question of the child who does not know how to ask, and thus instructs: "You open it [the discussion] for him." Rabbi Halberstam concluded that all the heavenly gates from the highest to the lowest are open to those who know that they do not know.¹ There will always be unasked-- and more importantly, unanswered-- questions. And accepting what I cannot know has become my path to true freedom. "The splendor of God is awesome. *Shaddai*-- we cannot attain to God." (Job 37:22-23) In recognizing this, I let go of all that had happened in the past, and began to listen to all that is before me that can be an experience of the divine.

*Susan Sobel-Feldman
Writer and Educator in San Francisco*

¹ *Passover Haggadah The Feast of Freedom*, The Rabbinical Assembly, edited by Rachel Anne Rabinowicz



From left to right: Rabbi Harold Kushner; Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell; Rabbi Neil Gillman; Rabbi Nancy Flam



The Jewish Healer: II

This is the second of an occasional series in which Jewish members of the health care professions explore the impact of Judaism on their work.

On Friday afternoons, I shuffle the charts of clients into a desk drawer and shut off the computer. I leave the office early and return home to a Shabbat of family, community and warmth. As a clinical supervisor at an agency committed to the support and service of persons with AIDS, I often wonder how my work with clients and my identity as a Jew coalesce.

As I ride the bus home, I think about my clients, and with distance from the work week, struggle to understand how an individual might adapt to living with AIDS. For my clients, the illness becomes a shadow portending a continual physical decline. But we live in a world that constantly shifts between light and shadow. A person with AIDS is not a *ger* (stranger, foreigner, outsider); he or she is a person with a distinct spiritual and emotional quest, no matter what the physical condition. Traveling through an imperfect world and striving for *tikkun olam*, we work endlessly to heal others and create some comfort. Confronting the illness of others becomes part of the challenge; and as Jews, it is our commandment to draw upon our potential for acts of lovingkindness.

As Jews we are commanded to empathize with the stranger. In the Jewish community's response to the crisis of AIDS, we have been, too often, lacking in empathy and support. Persons with AIDS are often seen as others, people not in our *chevra*. In the Jewish community, AIDS is not viewed as an appropriate illness.

As a Jew, I am very sensitive to the establishment of appropriate boundaries. Historically, we have been surrounded by others who declared that Jews are "not appropriate." My clients are considered "not appropriate" because they have AIDS. But

persons with AIDS are mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, friends, mentors and beloved uncles. They are the people we know. I often wonder if my sense of exile and otherness as a Jew has led me to work with people who are deemed "strangers" because they have an illness.

As Jews we are animated by stories. When reading the Bible, we find stories that illuminate our own lives; we create *midrashim* that explain ourselves. In my work, I often encourage my clients to frame their experiences in stories. By finding a personal metaphor, a client can begin to look beyond the day-to-day difficulties of his life and draw upon his memory and imagination. By framing his experiences and travails in a personal *midrash*, he can begin to feel a sense of empowerment. These stories also form a link between client and therapist. The client is still the person with AIDS, and yet he is an individual accepted and approached with empathy and understanding. Knowing how to listen well as a therapist and as a Jew are not so different.

Although I once thought the community I work with was foreign, I have learned that it is not. People with AIDS are not strangers. Their lives are rich with the spiritual quests that we all share, and it is through their *midrashim* that we can join with them in the affirmation of the lives.

*Ralph Mernit, MA
Clinical Supervisor
Gay Men's Health Crisis
New York City*



Meet Jennafer Carlin

**THE JEWISH HEALING
CENTER'S SECRETARY**



The warm voice that often greets you on the JHC's telephone is Jennafer Carlin's. Jennafer joined the JHC six months ago bringing top administrative skills and experience to the Center. Prior to joining the JHC, Jennafer worked at Jewish Family and Children's Services as a Case Worker.

Born in Los Angeles, Jennafer grew up in Malibu. She attended college in New York, spent a semester studying French in Switzerland and then returned to Los Angeles. She graduated from UCLA with a degree in Women's Studies and Psychology. After graduation, Jennafer moved to San Francisco and enrolled in a Master's Program in Counseling at San Francisco State University. She has taken a leave of absence from the program, but looks forward to completing her degree and working as a hospital social worker.

We are delighted to have Jennafer as part of the Jewish Healing Center!



Meditation

Journey to Freedom: Journey to Healing

Introduction

In this meditation, slavery is likened to unhealed life, and freedom is likened to healing. The understanding of what is healed and what is unhealed must be expansive enough so that “unhealed” is not limited in its meaning to being physically ill, and “healed” is not limited to being cured of disease. The meditator is encouraged to broaden his/her perspective by drawing on the analogy of slavery and freedom: slavery is to freedom what unhealed is to healed.

What associations will come up by using this analogy may vary, but may include as “unhealed” that which is associated with slavery: heaviness, fogginess, muddiness, fixedness, being held down/back, weighted down, fearfulness, imprisonment. . . The associations with “healed” as linked to freedom may include release, wholeness, the lifting of burdens, clarity, peacefulness, confidence. If you are suffering from a specific illness, you might want to use this meditation to try to go beyond the daily struggles, to explore what might be available to you besides feelings of being unendingly “enslaved” by your illness.

Meditation

This is a journey from slavery to freedom. Close your eyes and take several slow deep breaths. Feel that your body is very heavy. Take a few minutes to go through each body part, feet to head, and feel the heaviness, the weightiness of every limb, of every bone . . .

You were a slave once in the land of Egypt. Remember when you were a slave among slaves. Go back. You were pressed hard: “Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.” *Vayemar-*

raru et-chai-yehem ba-avodah kashah b'chomer u'vilveinim u'vechol-avodah ba-sadeh et kol-avodatam asher-avdu vahem befarech. (Exodus 1:14)

Rub your fingers together. Feel the muddy dirt between your fingertips. Imagine the mud on your skin, the streaks of dirt on your arms and your legs, the crusty sweat on your brow. Note the muddiness on the surface of your body, but realize that this is not what is of most concern to you.

It is as if your mind and body were filled with mud as well. The words of Pharaoh swirl through your head: “Be off now to your work! No straw shall be issued to you, but you must produce your quota of bricks. . . You must not reduce your daily quantity of bricks.” *Lo-tigre-u milivneichem devar-yom b'yomo.* (Exodus 5:18-19)

You are heavy, weighted down by the imprisoning experience of being a slave. Though you are heavy and weighted down, you have an intense desire to be relieved of your burdens, to be released from what is pressing down on you, to wash away the bitterness. . . to wash away the mud. You want to wash away the mud. . . From your skin, your brow. Wash away the mud that fills your mind and body. . . Wash away the sluggishness circulating through you.

Your intense desire to go free propels you along as a certain momentum builds in the environment around you. The momentum you are propelled by is the swelling of a wave of sentiment that surrounds you: to go, to leave the mud, the bricks, the bitterness and slavery behind.

Release the bricks in your arms and allow your bent-over body to straighten. Brush off the dirt from your skin, dry your brow. Breathe easier as you join in the journey away

from slavery, towards freedom.

You are journeying away from slavery towards the sea, towards freedom. As you glimpse the sea, you feel compelled to go towards the water. You feel an urge for the water to wash over your skin. Hurry to the water, splash some of the cool, cleansing water over you. Pour handfuls of water through your hair; splash water on your face, your shoulders; scoop water over your back . . .

The water is refreshing. Your skin is tingling, smoothed. And you step away from the water. Still, you want to clear the sense of muddiness from your mind: the internal, clogging feeling of heaviness.

It is night now. Lie down on the shore of the sea, away from the water. Still hold on to the feeling, the image of clear, refreshing water. Imagine this clear purity flowing through your body, cleaning your mind. Feel the clarity circulating through your veins, your arteries. Clarity of mind, clarity of body.

It is while you are lying down on the shore of the sea that the passage-way to freedom is being prepared for you. As you prepare yourself, so too is the passage to freedom opening. “Then Moses held out his arm over the sea and the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground.” (Exodus 14:21)

It is morning now. The water that you had poured and splashed over you the day before is no longer there. “The waters were split.” *Vayibak-u ha-mayim.* (Exodus 14:21) And the sense of water flowing, washing through you is gone as well. What remains is breath, clear breath, air that circulates freely around you, inside of you. Breathe in deeply, and exhale fully. Again, breathe in deeply and exhale fully. Enjoy your breathing;

Continued on page 6

Meditation, continued

enjoy its fullness, its lightness.

"And the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left." (Exodus 14:21-22) Walk through the passageway to freedom. Walk along the dry ground. Walk through the walls of water on your right and on your left. Walk through the passageway to freedom. The fullness of the experience of freedom envelops you. You are more aware than ever before. You feel the certainty of God's presence, God's role in your journey. When shortly after you have walked through the passageway to freedom, God speaks, and you know the words to be true: "I the Lord am your healer," *Ani Adonai rofecha*. (Exodus 15:26)

Prompting

Begin by associating what is unhealed in you with being enslaved. Picture yourself as a slave, burdened and overwhelmed by heavy, dirty work, but compelled to go towards freedom. Your journey to freedom takes you to a body of water. At the edge of the water, wash the dirt from your body. Feel the muddiness dissolve from your mind as well. Your body is refreshed, your mind is clear; the waters clear, and you walk through the corridor, the passageway to freedom.

*Rabbi Susan Freeman
Education Director
Congregation B'nai Israel
Northampton, MA*



Thoughts at the Seder Table

"In every generation, every person should feel as though she or he had actually been redeemed from Egypt." Everyone present at the Passover seder is commanded to see themselves as slaves in Egypt, to live and relive the experience of the Exodus, to feel both the terror and exhilaration as we start out on a journey into the unknown wilderness. As we read the Haggadah, we must try to understand what it must have been like, what it is and what it will be like. The eve of *Pesach* is a night of waiting, a time of anticipation. Who of us knows where or how the journey will end?

For those who are ill and in pain, *Pesach* can take on a bittersweet meaning. Liberation and slavery: not only as part of our collective Jewish history, but so often, for each of us in our own lives: being sick can mean that we are always in Egypt, we are always wandering in the desert, that we cannot find our way into the Promised Land. The past when we enjoyed good health is easy to recall, the present is often difficult, and the future can loom up before us like an abyss.

Illness is, in itself, a journey into the unknown wilderness, a journey whose destination may fill us with

terror and desperation. Just like the ancient Israelites, I'm really not sure I want to go on this trip that certainly was not my idea. Besides, how can I think of liberation when my body is enslaved by pain? Why do I feel that all the ten plagues were visited upon me, and not the Egyptians? How can I feel redeemed from bondage when illness is everpresent, and no amount of bribery can buy me release? How can I look back on the past year during which illness was a cruel and demanding taskmaster, and still savor the meaning of freedom? On this night of waiting, what can I anticipate? When we arrive at Sinai for the giving of Torah, will I be able to stand there and watch the miracle?

But *Pesach* is also about *all* of us sitting together around the table, drawing strength from one another to relive the past, to be here in the present, and to make our way into the future. Somehow, I must turn the night of waiting into a time of gathering strength for whatever lies ahead. In one way or another, I know that I will be standing there at Sinai.

*Professor Tamara Green
Board of Directors
Jewish Healing Center*



Refaeinu 1994, continued theme *Theologies of Healing*, Rabbi Flam reinterpreted the classic relationship of God's *din* (judgement) and *rachamim* (compassion). She interpreted *din* as a morally neutral attribute: a reflection of God setting limits to all created things. Acts of *rachamim*, expressed by human beings toward one another, then "soften the decree" of living in a world that is finite. She added that the Jewish impulse is to add to the world's compassion.

Rabbi Neil Gillman spoke of the ways in which Jewish tradition is bound up in the texts. How, then, he asked, do we bind together what our texts reveal and what our experience teaches? How do we move from hope to ultimate hope? How do we move from healing to redemption? We must use, he argued, our Jewish belief in redemption to make sense of our lives, to be present in the here and now, in order to recapture on another level the powers of affirmation.

"What do you do when theology collides with your reality?" posed Rabbi Harold Kushner. He suggested that human beings are God's language, and thus our suffering is part of God's experience in the world. It is we who impose our own meanings on human suffering.

In addition to the three plenary sessions, more than a dozen morning and afternoon workshops provided the opportunity to explore topics that ranged from "On Choosing the Hour of Our Death: Jewish Reflections on Terminal Illness" and "Self-Awareness in the Work of Healing: Knowing Our Own Issues," to "When Zayde is Ill: Helping Children Deal with Illness in the Family" and "Sparks and Vessels: Body Awareness as a Key to Spiritual Growth." Discussion was energetic and lively, and spilled over to the break periods and meal times.

Finally, at an organizing meeting listed on the program as "Getting *Tachlis*: Where Do We Go From Here?" those present repeated the necessity of placing these issues on

the national Jewish agenda. Concerns ranged from the collection of appropriate materials, both traditional and newly created, for use both by rabbis and by those who are ill, to the sponsorship of future workshops on such issues as the writing of ethical wills, the ethics of medical treatment and research, and organizing communal *bikkur cholim*. Many participants envisioned a broader and more inclusive outreach to other Jewish professionals working in the healing professions through regional and local efforts and computer networking. All agreed that *Refaeinu 1994* was just the beginning.

Professor Tamara Green
Board of Directors
Jewish Healing Center



Todah Rabbah!

FOR YOUR TIME AND ENERGY!

Rabbi Devora Bartnoff
Denah Bookstein
Rabbi Debra Cantor
Congregation Beth Sholom, S.F.
Rabbi Rachel Cowan
Rabbi William Cutter
Rabbi Zahara Davidowitz-Farkas
Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell
Robin Fisher
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Debbie Friedman
Rabbi Daniel Freeland
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Janice Segall
Rabbi Daniel Syme
Temple Anshe Chesed, N.Y.C.
Rabbi Harlan Wechsler
Rabbi Nancy Wechsler
Rabbi Shohama Wiener
Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman

Hesed Hevrah

Visiting the sick and caring for the dying are *mitzvot* incumbent on every Jew. So, too, the blessings of engaging in these *mitzvot* need to be shared by all kinds of Jews, not just those of us who are paid to do this work.

In the fall of 1993, *Kol Haneshama* launched its volunteer program, fondly called "The *Hesed Hevrah*," The Lovingkindness Gang." Modeled after traditional Jewish *mitzvah* fellowships, the *Hesed Hevrah* is a mini-community of people volunteering their time to offer deep companionship to dying Jews and their loved ones, in cooperation with *Kol Haneshama* staff.

Chosen from thirty well-qualified applicants, the nine members of this year's *Hesed Hevrah* brought an extraordinary degree of compassion, commitment and openness to their intensive training program in November and December. Some received their first client assignments in January, already making a beautiful difference in the lives of people receiving care from *Kol Haneshama*.

Our deep gratitude to Volunteer Coordinator Louis Wechsler and Pastoral Intern, Diane Wexler, for their many gifts to the program. And to all the *Hesed Hevrah* volunteers, a very beautiful group of people, our deep appreciation for who you are and for what you do.

To Nancy Bott, Kathy Campbell, Ann Dehovitz, Alan Kaufman, Jennifer Kaufman, Martin Lindauer, Jane Stepak, Miriam Schleicher, and Mike Strongin, *Todah Rabbah!*

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



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