

Spirituality and healing

Kol Nidre– Rabbi Stephen Wise –

5773

A few weeks ago I needed to see my family doctor, it wasn't just one thing, but everything. My knee was sore, I thought I tore a ligament. I had a headache and my throat was sore. I got to his office and its so quiet and then the doctor came in and I started feeling better. He asked me what was wrong, I was describing the pain in my knee and then he touched the joint and it suddenly felt better. Then he touched my forehead and my headache was gone. Has that ever happened to you. Can doctors simply heal by entering a room? Does God only heal in the doctors office? Or perhaps its because your doctor is possibly the only person who actually has time for you, and so when you stop in

your crazy hectic lives and actually tell someone the story of what ails you, it suddenly feels better?

There is much research that confirms this familiar effect. God's healing may indeed be mediated through doctors who come in and want to help, nurses who tend to your daily needs, the clergy who come to your bedside to comfort your troubled spirit. As Maimonides wrote in his Guide to the Perplexed, it's the price we pay for the privilege of being sensitive, embodied persons.

2500 years ago Greek Physician Hippocrates taught that "where there is love of man, there is also love of the art of medicine." In other words, for most of human history people believed that they could recover from illness through the goodness of their physicians or healers or care-givers. The sense that healing can happen through relationships remained

conventional wisdom through the centuries until the years following World War 2. Impressive advances through the 1950's and 60's, including the availability of antibiotics, initiated a new understanding of the art of medical education. With sophisticated diagnostic tests, pharmaceutical magic bullets and new surgical techniques, it seemed good bedside manner was old-fashioned. The postwar period has focused almost entirely on bio-medicine, that is the knowledge and application of surgery and medication, which determines the medical outcome.

Yet we all know that bio-medicine does not have all the answers. There is not always an easy diagnosis, finding the right specialist or taking the perfect drug. How many of us have seen it first hand or through your loved ones? How many times have you been told, "well you are an interesting case" – "you demonstrate a typical seizure activity, but its in your nasal cavity

instead of your brain”. A doctor might say, “well I did all the tests, it’s not my area of expertise, go see a different specialist”, until you go around and around. We have discovered so many diseases and intricacies of our bodies that it reminds us just how incredibly complicated is this body God created for us . That is why we pray each morning, Baruch Ata Adonai, eloheinu melech haolom asher yatzar et haaadam b’chochma u’vara boh nekavim nekavim, chalulim chalulim – blessed are you god for creating the many pathways and openings in our bodies, for we know if one of them were to fail, we would be unable to stand before you – or breath, or walk, or swallow, or see, or hear or be.

This helps explain why a new model of medicine and healing has emerged over the past decade. The physician must of course master the biomedicine and we are grateful for their incredible dexterity on the

surgical table and the healing drugs they prescribe.

But as Rabbi Samuel Karff, the creator of the health and the human spirit curriculum at the university of texas medical school, writes, “the effective clinician will connect to the patient as a person and because of the mind–body connection, the quality of the doctor–patient relationship can affect the medical outcome.”

We are now able to track the effect of uncontrolled stress on the body’s immune system as well as the effect of meditation in lowering one’s blood pressure.

Rabbi Karff teaches physicans to use Martin Buber’s philosophy in treating patients. Buber, in his classic work “I and thou” describes two modes of living in the world. “I–it” and “I–thou”. The I–it mode is impersonal and functional. Its the mode for problem solving and analyzing, to further a goal. To develop space travel, or cut down a tree– these are in the mode of I–it. By contrast when the astronaut views with awe

the world from space and thinks about creation, or when the nature lover sees the expression of beauty in the forest, they have entered the i-thou realm.

Physicians alternate between the two modes. The surgeon in the operating room and the cardiologist studying an electrocardiogram are in I-it. But when the surgeon comes out to convey heartbreaking news to a family, the tools are not clinical knowledge but empathy and compassion. The most healing gesture is a hug. Treating the patient as a person rather than simply an embodiment of a disease is a sacred act, even if the physician is not religious. What happens when a patient in pain or distress wants to pray. The doctor usually calls a chaplain, but why not allow for the possibility that prayer and staying in the room can help in addition to the IV drip.

And this extends beyond the doctor–patient relationship to all of us who are in pain ourselves or with our friends and family who are ill. We must also search for ways to leave the I–it relationship and move to I–thou, to fully be there for people, and help them towards healing.

What do you say when someone tells you a member of their family is ailing. Of course you say you are sorry and ask how they are doing. But what about the person right in front of you who is feeling distressed and needs to reach out and find comfort. Then its harder to know what to say. But if someone opens up its an opportunity to step in and share their pain and allow space for healing to begin. We may not be doctors or solve their troubles, but we can be good listeners and that can do a lot.

In the torah portion we read from the book of Genesis on the high holydays, there are two specific instances of healing through two of our most tragic biblical figures, Sarah and Hagar. Sarah was unable to conceive and she bears this pain through the first few chapters of the story in silence. Finally she opens up to Abraham and tells him of her frustration. After their conversation two things happen. first they decide Hagar, the maidservant of Abraham should bear a child. Second God hears Sarah's prayer and she becomes pregnant within one year. Only after sharing her struggles out loud with her husband, does God hear her prayer and grant her the ability to have children, even at an age beyond which even she thought she could have children.

But what about Hagar. Jealousy quickly rears its ugly head as Sarah contemplates the changing relationship with her husband once Hagar bears

Ishmael. Moreover with the birth of Yitzkah, there is no more need for Hagar's child to carry on Abraham's name and legacy. Hagar is sent away to the desert, and in a tragically poignant moment in the text, sits down to cry, fearing she and her son will perish in the heat of the wilderness. As soon as she cries out to God for help, God replies to her that she will survive and her son shall produce nations of children. God opens her eyes to healing by revealing a well of water to sustain her, the well that was there all along if only she was ready to see it. It is only when each of these women share their pain aloud that the healing process begins.

I believe we learn from this the power of sharing our struggles, both our physical and emotional difficulties, with our spouse, our friends, our clergy and our God. We don't know the bio-medical reasons for Sarah's sudden conception but is it too much of a

stretch to see how her soul was healed after talking about her fears with Abraham. Hagar feared for her life and the health of herself and her son as she was cast out to the desert. But only after seeking help did the sustaining waters reveal themselves.

I unfortunately found out the challenge of keeping hardships behind closed doors when Cheryl and I dealt with the frustration of infertility. We were one of those unexplained cases and the doctors informed us to be patient. But we didn't want to wait, we were ready to have children. And the hardest part was watching friends and siblings conceive so easily, laughing about how it happened so quickly even before they started really "trying" and here we were trying all the time. We never shared what was happening. We just smiled and were happy for others but secretly we worried if we would ever have children ourselves. These days I find people much more open to having discussions about

infertility. When people open up to Cheryl and I about it, then we talk about what happened to us. The sharing lets people know that lots of people go through this, it reduces the stress and that is a major factor in fertility treatment. We share stories and frustrations, techniques and advice. It turns from being fear and stigma to conversation and healing. We can't suddenly cure someone of infertility, but talking about it allows sharing of feelings, so you don't have to hide and the healing of body and spirit can take place.

There is healing power in the human spirit. Rabbi Karff defines spirit as a person's inner world of beliefs, passions, values and goals – all that gives meaning to our lives. We are creatures who seek meaning. We want our lives to mean something, to be worth living, to have a purpose. Even in the midst of the darkest moments, because we fear we have not accomplished

what we want, we need to be healed. The will to live can be difficult to find when we are sick, but it can be recovered. Meaning sustains the will to strive for wellness. It seems to me that the wellspring that gives meaning to our lives is love. There was once a study done by the American college of physicians that asked doctors to write a narrative of a patient encounter that reaffirmed the meaning of their medical practice. The majority did not describe a dramatic biomedical triumph, but rather a time they discovered a way to help just by being present. Even in the absence of curative options, they found ways to help patients by appreciating them, maintaining their dignity and comfort and expressing love to them.

Young rabbinic students, as part of our curriculum, learn the field of hospital chaplaincy. I did not know what a crucial part this would play in my rabbinate. We took a course on how to be with people

in hospice or hospital, what things to say, what not to say. We discussed healing and looked at ancient Jewish texts on bikkur cholim – the mitzvah of visiting the sick. After all was said and done, we were sent cold into hospital rooms, told to document our conversations and return to the classroom to analyze what happened. What I learned was that I was not there to provide answers, but rather to simply listen. This meant sitting down at eye level when I visit. To look people in the eye, and take their hand if appropriate. To ask how they are doing and then sit back. And often I would ask at the end if they wanted to pray. And this has made all the difference. Listening and sharing in moments of prayer, sometimes singing the Shma or misheberach, these moments of connection have led to healing.

I want to talk about one case in particular. Jack, a congregant of mine in Florida, had pancreatic cancer

and I went to visit him. Most of us know that this is one of the more dire cancers and the prognosis was not good. He seemed in good spirits so we got to talking. He informed me that he had lasted longer than anyone with this particular cancer. In fact they were flying him up to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore so doctors could study him and figure out what kept him alive. I visited him often, and for some reason he really opened up to me and lit up when I entered the room. In response I too really enjoyed each visit and his daughter called me weeks later to tell me how helpful it was for my visits. What the doctors at John Hopkins could not see inside Jack's body was his spirit. He did not have any special biological gifts. There was nothing to learn from his blood type or organ chemistry. But he had a will to live that gave added meaning in his life. His caregivers and clergy saw that will and responded with more conversation,

more opening up of the spirit, and thus more healing. Pancreatic cancer is one of the worst forms of cancer and a few years later it did take his life. But he lasted longer than any doctor could have imagined.

It would be nice to bottle that spirit and pass it on to other patients. And I think I know what would be in that bottle. It's what's in a doctor's voice when you visit them and suddenly feel better. It's what was in Sarah and Hagar when they opened up about their condition and found healing. It's in the conversation between a Rabbi and congregant in times of need. It's the acts of gemilut chasadim, acts of love and kindness between two people, any two people, who see in each other the spirit of God. When they move beyond the basic I-it relationship to the more transcendental and spiritual I-thou. It's the sense of love of life and meaning. And that is what makes all the difference in the world. Shana Tovah.

