

Healing and Consolation – Shabbat Eikev 2020

May the One Who blessed our ancestors,
 Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
 Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah,
 send blessing and healing to all who are in need of it,
 Healing of body and of spirit,
 Together with all who face illness,
 from among the Jewish people and among all people across the world,
 And let us say, Amen.

As a rabbi, I am privileged to have many opportunities to offer healing prayers, and I find it one of the most meaningful prayer experiences of my work. In Hebrew healing prayers, we ask for *refuah shelemah*, a phrase which reverberates with deep meaning: *refuah* means healing, and *shelema*, from *shalem* means whole; it is related of course to the word, shalom, peace. And so when we pray for physical health, we also pray for wholeness and for peace. In Judaism, all of those are bound up together.

This week, I want to share some thoughts about healing, specifically the *mi-sheberach*, the traditional Jewish healing prayer. We are just past the profound sadness of Tisha b'Av, which felt especially apt right now when we strongly sense the brokenness of the world. Now, we are in the rich period of the Jewish calendar that ultimately takes us to the High Holy Days. Our ancient sages decided that for 7 weeks following Tisha b'Av, each Shabbat we chant a "haftarah of consolation," *nechama*. I believe that right now what we need as consolation we might call healing, wholeness and peace. And so – I think of the *mi-sheberach*, one of my favorite Jewish prayers, and one that seems to have special meaning for many people. Even those who generally say they do not connect with prayer, or find the notion of prayer irrational, or futile, seem to find comfort in this prayer. Let us explore the prayer and perhaps understand why.

The formula of the *mi-sheberach* - "may the One Who blessed.....send blessing..." is used for many different occasions and... blessings. The standard formula stays the same, but the topics may change. Historians have found in the literature misheberach prayers for every kind of illness. There are misheberach prayers for people who refrain from gossip, for people who maintain responsible business ethics. Scholars even found a moving misheberach for the

community of people who disappeared suddenly from Budapest in 1943, with a prayer that they would make a swift return.

We are familiar with the most commonly used *misheberachs* in our day – for a person who has taken an Aliyah to the Torah, for those about to be married (aufruf), and to name a baby boy or girl. We can personalize this prayer for different occasions - birthdays, anniversaries, anything we like – I know one rabbi who wrote a *mi-sheberach* for teenagers who have just gotten their drivers' license! And of course, we say it for the ill.

The *mi-sheberach* derives from an ancient formula, apparently modeled on the most common and heartfelt petitionary prayers of our ancestors: prayers for rain. “May The One who causes rain surely be able to bring rain upon us....” (Mishnah Ta’anit) Over time, though, the themes moved from a prayer for matters in the lives of a community to a prayer also for individuals.

One of the beauties of this prayer – something unique in Jewish prayer – is that while it is communal, it is also often personalized. We call individuals by name, and within the basic framework, can be spontaneous - as a hospital chaplain I used it this way often: May this person’s breath begin to flow effortlessly through her body; may the cancer drugs defeat this person’s disease, and so on. This opportunity to improvise within Jewish prayer is all too rare and is a gift of this prayer.

We notice too, that the prayer addresses God, but God’s name is not in it. As a result, the way that God is addressed also allows for the personal – May the One Who blessed --- this is not one of God’s formal names, this is not the nurturing God, the God of justice, the inspiring God, the God of nature, – this is the One Who blessed. That can be whichever God you or I– the pray-er needs at this time for this prayer.

The healing prayer is both vertical and horizontal. Sometimes it is a prayer for divine intervention: “God, help, do something!” This is the vertical approach, what is awkwardly referred to as “theurgy,” trying to influence God’s actions.

Today many of us don’t believe that there is literally a being out there deciding to cure my family member of cancer while ignoring the heart disease of someone else. Still, prayer can be our opportunity to hope. Especially when it comes to the most terrifying frailties of life – we yearn to connect with the power of a higher being, to access that power to help. So even the most skeptical among us may find ourselves wanting the *mi-sheberach* said - for a loved one, an acquaintance, or for ourselves.

That is the vertical aspect of the prayer; then comes the horizontal: the prayer binds people together in community. At some point in the prayer's evolution, the names of the ancestors were added: "May the One who blessed Abraham and Sarah, now bless ...my friend who is ill." That is about belonging to a people, a shared legacy. All Jews, whether born or Jew by choice, are the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachel and Leah. By recalling the ancestors, we remind all of us that we belong to one family. And when we add to the prayer – and those across all the world – *kol yoshvei teiveil* - we draw our friends and family who are not Jews into the blessing circle as well, remembering that we all belong to one human family.

The *misheberach* becomes even more deeply personal as we name an individual, and that person's mother or parents. When we name our parents, we tap into our deepest and most primal selves, the childlike vulnerability we may feel when we are ill.

Our prayers for healing are for the whole person: *nefesh* and *guf* . Healing of body and healing of soul. Sometimes our hope is for a cure. Sometimes it is for a temporary reprieve. Sometimes there is no cure in sight – and the hope is for healing of soul, for spiritual strength and peace.

It is a principle of Jewish law that a healing prayer, even when focused on one person, must also include a phrase that includes "all those in need of healing." This not only reminds us to care for others, but also eases the loneliness of illness. When we are ill, it can feel as though we are the only ones – it is happening to us alone. As we pray for "all who face illness," we know that we share a universal human condition – illness comes to anyone and everyone, we are not alone or unique. So this prayer helps counter the feelings of loneliness, the marginalization or isolation that the ill person may feel.

In this time of global pandemic and so much unease, the *mi-sheberach* reminds us that we are all connected in our need for healing, be it healing of body or of soul. as we face these challenging times together. We bring blessing to those we name as we show that they are remembered and cared about. The prayer binds us to one another: the pray-ers and the subjects of the prayer. And as it brings us together, the *mi-sheberach* for healing drives us towards hope.

May the One who blessed our ancestors, bless all who are in need of healing at this time...

Mi shebeirach avoteinu, M'kor hab'racha l'imoteinu, May the source of strength,
Who blessed the ones before us, Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing,
And let us say, Amen. Shabbat Shalom