Hear My Prayer, See My Tears, and Heal Me

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Thesis Summary

This thesis explores and analyzes the experience of praying for healing, as found in various biblical and Talmudic stories. Each chapter includes a section on liturgy, analyzing the actual text of healing prayers in the traditional Jewish prayer book and contemporary interpretations. Modern commentaries on the original sources also aid my analysis. An in depth look at these stories and texts shows that there are various ways to express one's suffering to God and reach out to God for healing. Perhaps most importantly, they show the reader that Jewish tradition contains examples of those who personally struggled with illness and found hope in God.

The thesis contains four chapters. Chapter One addresses why and how God responds to prayers for healing. In delving into this topic, I also explore the issues of what is healing and how the experience of prayer affects us not just physically, but spiritually and emotionally. Chapter Two moves from the text and theological understandings of healing, God, and prayer to the larger experience of prayer, including the manner of the prayer, surrounding environment and location, and physical gestures. Chapter 3 illustrates and examines how the experience of prayer varies greatly based on who is actually praying. Finally, Chapter Four explores a critical and interesting aspect of praying for healing that is often overlooked: the praise and gratitude to God that follows recovery.

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Introduction

At some point in our lives, we all face illness and the breakdown of our physical selves. We experience this not only with our own selves, but with those we love and care for. How we respond to this reality varies from individual to individual, yet many turn to God in the hope that God will heal the sick. The Talmud reassures those who are sick that God will indeed sustain them: "Ravin said in the name of Rav: From where do we know that the Holy One, Blessed is He sustains a sick person? As it says, 'God will fortify him on the sickbed.' (Psalms 41:4)" (BT *N'darim* 40a). Not only is God active in sustaining and supporting a sick person, but God is also present: "And Ravin said in the name of Rav: From where do we know that the Divine Presence rests above the bed of a sick person? As it is stated, 'God will fortify him on the sickbed.' (Psalms 41:4)" (BT *N'darim* 40a). With this understanding that God sustains and abides with those who suffer from illness, Jewish tradition emphasizes the importance of praying for the sick. God is expected to heal. Thus, an essential part of one's obligation in visiting the sick, *bikkur cholim*, is to pray, to reach out to God for healing. This necessity of prayer leads to an elaboration of the laws about when, where, and how one should pray (Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 335:4-6). Whether one is praying for oneself or for another, the experience of being ill is linked to the act of prayer.

This thesis explores and analyzes the experience of praying for healing, as found in various biblical and Talmudic stories. In looking at stories, rather than halachic discussions, one is able to reflect on the actual experience of prayer, rather than the assumptions and expectations of the Rabbis. The characters are not bound by Jewish law but act out of their own suffering and hope. Writing from a Reform Jewish perspective, I

believe readers have much to gain from examining not just *halacha*, but the responses of others in times of pain and need. An in depth look at these stories shows that there are various ways to express one's suffering to God and reach out to God for healing. Perhaps most importantly, they show the reader that Jewish tradition contains examples of those who personally struggled with illness and found hope in God. Seeing as the prayer book is the medium by which many Jews express themselves to God and absorb theological understandings of God, each chapter also includes a section on liturgy, analyzing the actual text of healing prayers in the Jewish prayer book. I provide multiple ways of understanding each prayer and also survey modern versions and reinterpretations.

In my analysis I explore the characters' understanding of God, the context in which they reach out to God, the relationship between the characters and God, and their reaction to recovery. I raise a number of essential questions throughout the thesis. First, why and how does God respond to prayers for healing? In delving into this topic, I also address the issues of what is healing and how the experience of prayer affects us not just physically, but spiritually and emotionally. Second, how does the context of the prayer, beyond the text itself, aid in and serve as communication to God? The manner of prayer, surrounding environment and location, and physical gestures are all part of one's expression of prayer. Third, how does the one who is praying affect the prayer itself, the sick person and the prayer's reception by God? When one is praying for another, the relationship between the worshipper and the sick person, as well as the personal status of the worshipper all influence the experience of prayer. The experience also dramatically changes when one is praying for one's own healing. Finally, how do we respond to being healed? Often when discussing prayers for healing, one ignores the potential for a

response to God answering those prayers. Yet in many of the stories and in the prayer book itself, characters react strongly to their healing. Whether through acknowledging, praising or thanking God, one who is healed is inclined to respond.

The thesis moves through the experience of praying for healing, beginning with the actual words of the prayers. From there it expands the lens to how the prayer is expressed: the manner of prayer, the environment, and the physical gestures that may accompany it. Then the scope widens beyond the words and their context to include the character who is actually praying. Finally, the thesis shifts to the prayers and reactions of those who have experienced healing. By looking at the experience as a whole, this thesis suggests that we can gain insights into the ways that one reaches out to God, in pain but with glimmers of hope.

Chapter One: The Effect of Prayer on Us and God in Healing

Before we can begin to explore the topic of prayer and healing, we must first examine exactly what the term healing means. While biblical, Talmudic, and liturgical sources mainly understand healing as a physical cure, modern commentaries expand the notion to include spiritual and emotional wellbeing. The experience of prayer itself can uplift our souls, remind us of our hopes and concerns and bring us closer to the Divine Presence, thus lessening our spiritual and emotional anguish. The ancient sources sought a more physical recovery for they understood God as the source of both illness and healing. Just as God wounded the body, so too could God return it to physical wholeness. The biblical and Talmudic stories thus assume that prayer is an effective means to remind God of God's potential and responsibility to heal and bring about God's healing power. The understanding of God as compassionate judge also appears in multiple stories of healing. This idea of God assumes that sickness is a punishment for sin, yet one can appeal to God's mercy and compassion. Jewish liturgy contains various blessings and prayers related to the body and healing. The liturgy praises God for creating the body and links it with our spiritual nature. Yet it also acknowledges that the body fails us sometimes and includes prayers for healing and renewal.

What is healing?

The biblical and Talmudic stories, as well as our ancient liturgies, mostly understand the concept of healing as referring to a physical cure. When the biblical characters and rabbis cry out to God, they look for a complete recovery to a healthy state of being. For them, God has the power to rid the body of its physical ailments. Today,

many modern scholars and theologians see healing as separate from a physical cure, encompassing emotional wellbeing and spiritual wholeness. The Hebrew word for one who is sick, *choleh*, shares the same root as the word for emptiness or hollowness. A spiritual healing can fill this void, perhaps leading one not to a physical cure, but to a better state of wellbeing. Even early commentators observed the connection between the spirit and the body. Malbim writes "It is the spirit that sustains the body. And even if there is a sickness in the body, the spirit has great enough strength to support the illness, giving them strength to bear [the illness] and renew their courage." [1] Healing comes when the spirit is nourished and strengthened. Rabbi Peter S. Knobel explains the three types of healing mentioned in the *Mi Shebeirach* prayer for healing. *R'fuat haguf*, the healing of the body, implies a physical cure and improvement to our bodies. *R'fuat hanefesh*, the healing of the spirit, involves acceptance of our state, acknowledgement of our worth despite illness, pain and suffering, and a willingness to embrace life in spite of it. Ultimately, a *r'fuah sh'leimah*, a complete healing, is the sense of wholeness that transcends the brokenness of illness.[2] Thus healing is different from a cure. Anne Brener points out that sometimes one can be cured physically, and still ache spiritually, just as someone might achieve wholeness even when still burdened by disease. Though often troubling, at times wholeness can only be achieved through death.[3]

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[1] Kerry M Olitzky, *Jewish Paths toward Healing and Wholeness: A Personal Guide to Dealing with Suffering* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), 30-31.

[2] Peter S. Knobel, "Sources of Healing in Judaism: Jewish Folkways in a New Age," in *Healing and Judaism: Monograph Series*, no. 3, ed. Kerry M. Olitzky and Nancy H. Wiener. (New York: National Center for Jewish Healing, 1997), 2-3.

[3] Anne Brener, "Prayer and Presence," in *Jewish Pastoral Care, 2nd Edition: A Practical Handbook from Traditional and Contemporary Sources*, ed. Dayle A. Friedman. (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), 130.

With this understanding of healing, the spirit then must be nourished and supported. While the Talmud contains numerous folk remedies to bring about a physical cure, it also understands the value of spiritual healing by encouraging Torah study and prayer when one is ill. BT *Eiruvin* 54a states "If he feels pains in his head, let him engage in the study of the Torah…If he feels pains in his throat let him engage in the study of the Torah…If he feels pains in his bowels, let him engage in the study of the Torah…If he feels pain in his bones, let him engage in the study of the Torah…If he feels pain in all his body, let him engage in the study of the Torah, since it is said: And [it is] healing to all his flesh. (Proverbs 4:22). Torah is seen as giving spiritual nourishment to the person, allowing him or her to rise above the pain.

One distinguished modern theologian, Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, struggles with limiting healing to spiritual wholeness. He recognizes modernity's aversion to attributing power to God that cannot be confirmed in a scientific, rational manner. While today we may acknowledge the influence of the spiritual self on our physical bodies, we still remain reluctant to draw an explicit connection between God's power and a physical cure. He writes "God being God and I being me, a believing Jew, I can no longer ask for anything less than God's independent action to stop this suffering and to restore today's list [of those ill] to health."[4]

[4] Eugene Borowitz, " 'Please, God, Heal Her, Please'," in *Healing and Judaism: Monograph Series,* no. 1, ed. Kerry M. Olitzky and Nancy H. Wiener. (New York: National Center for Jewish Healing, 1997), 30.

Prayer's Spiritual Effect on Us

Healing also comes through a process of reaching out to God through prayer. Prayer in this context is not rote, obligatory recitation of ancient liturgical texts. Rabbi Bonita Taylor explains that the Hebrew word for praying, *l'hitpalel*, signifies not only communication with God, but a process of looking into one's own soul. This self-reflection is indeed necessary before reaching out to God.[5] We must tap into and acknowledge our own longings and needs before expressing them to God. This first step is essential because so often in sickness, our bodies consume all our attention and energy. Blood test results, how far we can bend our leg, the intricate surgery the doctor is about to perform, fill our mind until we have no space to reflect on the experience as a whole and our emotional and spiritual response. Prayer reminds us of our essential concerns, values, and hopes beyond our daily survival. Particularly when patients feel dependent on others, prayer gives them the power to name their feelings and feel in a little more control over them.

Prayer, however, is more than internal reflection. Spiritual healing comes through the process of coming into God's presence. We take our longings and bring them to God. By being in relationship with God, we become aware of new possibilities for growth and healing. Prayer is a bridge to enter a different realm. Rabbi Naomi Levy writes "Prayer is ultimately an experience, not a request. It is a sense of being connected, of being part of something larger than ourselves. It is an attempt to be in the presence of God."[6] Healing

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[5] Bonita E. Taylor, "The Power of Custom-Made Prayers," in *Jewish Pastoral Care, 2nd Edition: A Practical Handbook from Traditional and Contemporary Sources*, ed. Dayle A. Friedman. (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), 151.

[6] Naomi Levy, *Talking to God: Personal Prayers for Times of Joy, Sadness, Struggle and Celebration* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 10.

comes through feeling like we are not alone, that we are in relationship with the Divine. Rabbi David Wolpe focuses on the aspect of love in this relationship. God's love is also healing for it transcends our faults and our brokenness. It is unconditional and ultimate.[7]

Unfortunately, this path toward healing is often thwarted by a negative relationship or understanding of God. One might feel too unsure of to whom or what they are praying, and thus resist the exercise of prayer completely. During times of illness and suffering, one might feel too hurt, abandoned or angry at God to pray at all. A patient might be afraid to express these emotions to God. Evanson points out, however, that for any relationship to succeed, each party must be honest and open. Prayer can thus be an opportunity for a person to express his/her bottled up frustration and anger, to release it and let it go.[8]

Prayer's Effect on God

God as Source of Illness and Healing

The biblical notion of God understands God as the source of both illness and healing. Deuteronomy 32:39 states "See, then, that I, I am He; there is no god beside Me. I deal death and give life; I wounded and I will heal: None can deliver from my hand." God bears ultimate responsibility for healing for it was God who brought the illness. Indeed, it was God who created human bodies which eventually decay and break down. Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman understands healing as a parallel to creating. Just as God created humans when they were first formed, all healing is a type of re-creation, creating

[7] David Wolpe, "Images of God as Healer," in *Healing and Judaism: Monograph Series*, no. 5, ed. Kerry M. Olitzky and Nancy H. Wiener. (New York: National Center for Jewish Healing, 1997), 10.

[8] Bruce Evenson, "Prayer and Pastoral Care," 7.

anew what God had originally intended.[9] Yet how does God re-create? Rabbi David Wolpe shares a teaching from *Tanhuma, Va-Yakel* 9 where Rabbi Jeremiah comments on the verse "I will restore you to health, and I will heal you of your wounds." (Jeremiah 30:17). Rabbi Jeremiah speaks of God as different from those who wound with a blade and heal with a bandage. God heals with the same object with which God wounds. Thus, Rabbi Jeremiah reinterprets the verse as "heal you *from* your wounds"; the wounds themselves are the instruments of healing.[10] God heals, or re-creates, from the illness itself. Since illness and healing both have their source in God, they are organically linked. Healing in this situation, may not be a physical cure, but deeper spiritual insight and understanding of oneself and the world. While the illness may ravage our bodies, it can also elevate our souls.

Another understanding of God's healing power involves God employing other people as instruments of healing. This is most clearly illustrated in the Talmud's repetition of various folk medicinal remedies. Rabbi Eugene Borowitz notes that a rabbinic theology of medicine includes both the idea that God is the source of illness and also that God commands and inspires humans to heal. Prayer then might involve calling upon God to give wisdom and knowledge to physicians.[11]

Since God is the source of healing, biblical characters expect prayers calling upon God to heal to be efficacious. Biblical examples of the efficacy of praying for healing focus on physical cures, even under dire circumstances. Hezekiah's prayer teaches us

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[9] Lawrence A. Hoffman, in *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayer, Modern Commentaries Vol. 5 - Birkhot Hashachar (Morning Blessings)*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman. (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001), 115.

[10] Wolpe, "Images of God as Healer," 4-5.

[11] Borowitz, "'Please, God, Heal Her, Please'," 3.

about the value of praying for healing, even when facing death. Despite the fact that Hezekiah is seriously ill and Isaiah has told him that "you are going to die, you will not get well." (Isaiah 38:1), Hezekiah still turns to God for healing. In a story in BT *B'rachot* 10b, Isaiah tells Hezekiah that his illness is due to his not having procreated. Yet when Hezekiah then decides to marry to beget children, Isaiah castigates him, noting that God has already condemned Hezekiah to illness followed by death. However Hezekiah then states "Even if a sharp sword rests upon a person's neck, he should not refrain from (praying for) mercy." For the rabbis, Hezekiah's story is a lesson in the importance of praying to God even when the situation is grim. God is the ultimate source of healing so prayer still has the possibility of being effective no matter how hopeless the situation seems.

The belief in the efficacy of prayer to God is so central that biblical characters become frustrated when no one offers a verbal prayer. In II Kings 5, Elisha tells the leper Naaman to bathe seven times in the Jordan and he will be healed. Rather than following the prophet's advice, Naaman storms off in a rage. He grumbles "I thought he would surely come out to me, and would stand and invoke the Lord his God by name…" (II Kings 5:11). For Naaman, only God can heal so calling upon the name of God is necessary. God must be sought for Naaman to recover. When Elisha does not follow this rubric, Naaman assumes the suggestion is pointless and ineffective.

Interestingly, Naaman is not simply angered that God's name was not invoked, he specifically states "the Lord, his God." Naaman recognizes the value of having an established relationship with God. A relationship implies that God has a responsibility to God's servants and is thus more likely to respond to their prayers. Indeed, Naaman has

journeyed from his home in Aram to Samaria in order to reach God's prophet. For Naaman, calling out to a specific divine power and reminding it that a relationship exists can bring healing.

Hannah includes an additional element in her prayer to God. She is barren and asks God for a son. Yet in addition to her prayer, she also makes a vow. She vows that if God answers her prayer, she will dedicate her son to God. (I Samuel 1:11). Perhaps she believes that God will take greater notice of her plight if she offers something to God in return or shows God that her desire is so great that she is willing to sacrifice. This additional element of bargaining is meant to increase her prayer's effectiveness.

The issue of the effectiveness of healing raises issues about how quickly does the prayer work. Does God need to ruminate on the entreaty, weigh its merits? Or does God hear the prayer and act immediately? Rashi brings out this question in his commentary on Moses' prayer for Miriam's healing when she is struck with leprosy. Moses pleads with God "O God, pray heal her." This plea is a mere five words in the Hebrew. Rashi addresses the question of why Moses' prayer was so short. According to Rashi, the prayer was only five words so that the Israelites would not think that Moses was extending Miriam's suffering and delaying her healing by praying for a long time. Rashi understands the Israelites as assuming that God would heal Miriam immediately upon the conclusion of Moses' prayer. For the Israelites, according to Rashi, God responds to prayer so all Moses had to do was cry out to God and healing would come. However, the biblical story itself contradicts this idea. God's response is not to immediately heal Miriam but to make her wait seven days outside the camp before she can be readmitted.

In the Talmud, praying is considered so effective that not praying is like causing someone to die. Rav Dimi taught "whoever visits the sick causes the sick person to live and whoever does not visit the sick, causes the sick person to die." (BT *N'darim* 40a). At first, the Talmud interprets this as someone who visits the sick person is a friend and will pray to God that the person will live, while someone who does not visit is not a friend and will pray that the person will die. Fortunately, the Talmud questions whether someone could really pray for a sick person to die. Instead, they interpret Rav Dimi's teaching that whoever does not visit a sick person will not pray at all. In this scenario, not praying could cause death because prayer is the effective means of healing. Prayer is necessary because it is so efficacious that not crying out to God could in fact mean that someone will die, for God's mercy was not stirred.

One of the most famous stories about the efficacy of prayer shows how refraining from prayer can indeed lead to death. BT *Ketubot* 104a recounts the story of Rabbi who was very ill. His disciples pray for him nonstop. Even Rabbi's maidservant prays for his healing. Yet when she sees how deeply he suffers in his illness, she recognizes that perhaps it was not best to pray for healing. Instead, she is willing to let him go. The disciples keep praying, however, preventing Rabbi from dying. As long as the disciples pray, Rabbi will stay alive. The maidservant then climbs to the roof and throws down an earthen vessel. The shattering distracts the disciples from their prayers, and the moment they stop praying, Rabbi finally dies. This dramatic story highlights the power of prayer for the rabbis in keeping someone alive.

God as Compassionate Judge

The language of the biblical, Talmudic, and liturgical prayers for healing assumes that sickness is a punishment for sin yet prayer is an effective means to receive God's mercy. The aspect of God's judgment is traditionally known as *din*, and the aspect of God's mercy known as *rachamim*. Prayer calls upon God's *rachamim* to overcome God's *din*. This pervasive notion of sin and punishment places God as judge, examining each person's deeds and determining each person's destiny. This idea of God as judge arises from an attempt to find order and justice in the universe. It provides an easy answer for why suffering exists and allows God to remain righteous by placing the blame not on God, but on the sufferer. It also creates eschatological hope, that one day God will banish punishment entirely. Yet it also forces eschatological hope since the lived experience of sin and punishment does not always conform to the idea. Those who are righteous suffer and those who sin do not. In order to maintain the belief in God as a righteous judge, one must assume that God will sort everything out correctly in the world to come.

Rabbi Nancy Flam has reinterpreted the concepts of *din* and *rachamim* in an attempt to understand God's characteristics beyond sin and punishment. She sees *din* not as judgment, but as limits. God created a world with boundaries on everything, boundaries that cannot be expanded. This aspect of creation is inherent in all things. Thus the limits of the human body lead it to break down and eventually decay. It is not a result of punishment, but the natural order of God's creation. *Rachamim*, in this understanding, no longer reverses *din*, but softens it. Flam writes "*Rachamim* makes it possible for us to live within the reality of din." God acts with *rachamim* by inspiring us to cope with our

illness. Prayer is thus a means through which we call upon God's *rachamim* to bring spiritual healing.[12]

Numerous biblical stories involve the concept of sin and punishment in relationship to healing. When Hezekiah cries out to God for healing he beseeches God "Please O Lord, remember how I have walked before You sincerely and wholeheartedly, and have done what is pleasing to You." (Isaiah 38: 3 and II Kings 20:3). Hezekiah is reminding God of all the good he has done. His crying out seems to indicate that he doesn't think his sickness is fair, for he has been a faithful servant of God and is undeserving of sickness as a punishment. Hezekiah believes that his righteousness should be rewarded and does not understand why God would send sickness upon him. According to Redak, Hezekiah served God both in his heart and his deeds. Radak understands the line "how I have walked before you" as referring to serving God in his heart with fervent prayer. Redak points us to 2 Kings 18:3 "He did what was pleasing to the Lord" as proof of Hezekiah's good deeds. Hezekiah's crying out that he has done what was pleasing to God matches the biblical portrayal of him. Even the spelling of Hezekiah's words encompasses this message. The Hebrew, *ana*, with a *heh*, usually means "where." Thus, Rashi understands "*ana Adonai*" in Isaiah 38:3 as "Where is your mercy?" For Rashi, Hezekiah is questioning God's mercy for as a righteous person he deserves blessing, not sickness.

Despite the fact that the Bible itself states that Hezekiah was pleasing to God, the rabbis express some discomfort with his prayer's focus on his own merit. In commenting on Hezekiah's prayer in BT *B'rachot* 10b, R. Yochanan says in the name of R. Yose ben

[12] Nancy Flam, "Reflections toward a theology of illness and healing," *Sh'ma* 24:475 (May 1994): 1-2.

Zima "Anyone who depends upon his own merit (in prayer), makes (the fulfillment of) his (Prayer) dependent on the merit of others." For the rabbis, reminding God of one's merits will only lead God to heal thanks to the merits of others. Hezekiah asserts his own righteousness as a reason for God's healing him. However, healing only comes due to the honor of King David, as God proclaims "I will protect and save this city for My sake and for the sake of My servant David" (II Kings 20:6). Rashi looks to Isaiah 38:5 "Thus said the Lord, the God of your father David" as further proof that David's merit was the true grounds for God's healing. For the rabbis, if one relies on one's own merit and worth in trying to bring about healing, the prayer will only be fulfilled based on the merit of others. For the rabbis, no one can ever truly amass enough personal merit to warrant reversal of illness. It is the arrogant and overconfident person who tries to rely solely on his/herself to influence God. Everyone must look to deeds of others for help. Those who do not do so will receive no credit for their righteousness. Their healing will be dependent only on others, those whom they did not consider in their plea.

Despite this focus on the merits of others, when God commands Isaiah to assure Hezekiah that God will indeed respond to his prayer, God specifically refers to Hezekiah as "the ruler of my people" (II Kings 20:5). Hezekiah's identity is important and his illness does not strip him of his status. God knows who he is and in calling him "the ruler of my people," indicates a closeness that mirrors Hezekiah's prayer. Additionally, in both Isaiah 38 and II Kings 20, God notes that God has heard Hezekiah's prayer and seen Hezekiah's tears. Hezekiah's own personal and intimate actions matter to God. They are worthy of God's attention and God not only responds to them, but specifically points out that he is responding to them. This tension between Hezekiah and the merits of others

indicates that both are valuable. God does care about the identity and actions of the sick person. Yet relying solely upon oneself for healing is not enough.

Ultimately, the issue of one's own identity versus the merits of others raises the question of why do we deserve to be healed. Hezekiah believes that a virtuous life should be a contributing reason. His past actions make him deserving of God's mercy. God should acknowledge that Hezekiah has faithfully served God throughout his life and respond with healing power. What is not stated is the possibility of future good deeds. Hezekiah does not promise to perform good deeds should God grant him more years. Instead, Hezekiah focuses solely on the past and does not expect God to spare him based solely on his potential for good. In the rabbinic interpretation of Hezekiah's story, healing comes because of Hezekiah's connection to virtuous people. This idea, *z'chut avot*, implies that the righteousness and good deeds of those related to us can influence the efficacy of our prayers. While Hezekiah's righteousness is important, the nature of the community which surrounds him is also taken into consideration. When Hezekiah stands before God, God sees not only him but all those with whom he has a connection. This can actually be a comforting idea to those praying for healing. We are not alone in coming before God but bring the resources of those close to us. Yet while the good deeds of our community are important, what is not taken into consideration is the need of others for our presence. Neither Hezekiah nor the rabbis raise the issue that those around him will miss him or will be lost without his guidance and wisdom.

The question of merit versus sin, reward versus punishments is also found in I Kings 17, with the story of Elijah and the widow. Though Elijah caused miracles bringing food to the widow and her son, her son later falls sick. The widow cries out to Elijah

"What harm have I done you, O man of God that you should come here to recall my sin and cause the death of my son?" (I Kings 17:18). It is very clear to the widow that Elijah's presence brought up some sin of hers which led to the death[13] of her son. Though she is not praying to Elijah, she turns to him for help in understanding why God would cause such tragedy to fall upon her and her son. In response, Elijah turns to God and asks "O Lord my God, will You bring calamity upon this widow whose guest I am, and let her son die?" Elijah is asking God, is this really the type of God you are that you would do this? Perhaps Elijah assumed that his merit would protect the woman, as Redak proposes. Redak also puts forward that perhaps Elijah thinks it is cruel that God would not only punish the Israelites by denying them rain, but also punish this individual woman. Perhaps Elijah is angry that God considers his sins so great that those around him are punished, as suggested in Meşudat David. This could be considered the opposite of *z'chut avot*. Rather than the merits of others helping those who are sick, the sins of others could negatively affect them. Abarvanel proposes that Elijah is challenging God, that God would cause both the death of the children of Heil the Bethlelite because of his sin, and the death of this woman's son. In doing so, God is treating the righteous like the wicked! Elijah might also find it cruel and wrong that God would provide for the woman and her son and then suddenly cause this catastrophe. Elijah seems to be asking whether God is the God of miracles or death. Many questions and challenges to God are contained in Elijah's crying out. Despite a belief in sin and punishment, the uncertainty of the nature of God and God's actions comes across in this cry. Finally, Elijah turns to God and asks simply "O Lord my God, let this child's life return to his body!".

[13] The text is unclear whether the son has died or fallen ill.

According to the text, “The Lord heard Elijah’s plea; the child’s life is returned to his body, and he revived.” (I Kings 17:22). The phrase, *v’yishma Adonai beqol*, is used throughout the Bible for God’s responding to a request. When Israel is fighting against the king of Arad, Israel calls upon God and vows to destroy all the Canaanite cities if God delivers the king into their hands. God hears their voice. Similarly, when an angel of God comes to Manoah’s wife in Judges 13, Manoah cries out to God to send the angel again to repeat the message to him. God hears his voice. In the Bible, when God hears to the voice of a human being, the prayer is answered.

Numbers 12 also recounts a story in which a character is punished by illness. Miriam and Aaron speak out against Moses because he married a Cushite woman. Additionally, they challenge Moses’ authority, questioning “Has Adonai spoken only through Moses? Has [God] not spoken through us as well?” (Numbers 12:2). God comes down to chastise them for their rebelliousness against Moses, emphasizing the special relationship God has with him. When God departs and the cloud withdraws from the tent, there is Miriam “stricken with snow-white scales.” (Numbers 12:10). From the story line it is clear that the leprosy is a punishment for the rebelliousness. Indeed an obvious question is why Aaron was not plagued with leprosy as well. The phrase, stricken with snow white scales, is also used in II Kings 5:27 as a punishment for disobedience. While Moses pleads on her behalf, God demands that she bear out the punishment God believes she deserves. God says “If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted.” It is not completely clear from God’s statement when physical healing from leprosy will occur. Yet it is clear that Miriam will have to be isolated and alone from the community

for seven days. God does not relate this to the normal isolation of a person with *tzaraat*. It is not the leprosy that causes Miriam to be cut off from the community, but rather the shame she must carry. The punishment is not simply the leprosy, but also the shame of being rebuked by God.[14]

Talmudic examples of praying for healing also rely heavily on the notion of sin and punishment, merit and reward, judgment and mercy. While there is no standard prayer for healing prescribed in the Talmud, God's mercy is often invoked when someone is ill. Two examples in BT *Shabbat* 12b include R. Judah's prayer, "May the Omnipresent have mercy upon you and upon the sick of Israel." and R. Jose's prayer, "May the Omnipresent have compassion upon you in the midst of the sick of Israel."'In discussing one's response to sickness the Talmud in BT *B'rachot* 5a gives the following suggestion:

> Raba (some say, R. Hisda) says: If a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct. For it is said: Let us search and try our ways, and return unto the Lord (Lamentations 3:40). If he examines and finds nothing [objectionable], let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of the Torah. For it is said: Happy is the man whom Thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest out of Thy law (Psalm 94: 12). If he did attribute it [thus], and still did not find [this to be the cause], let him be sure that these are chastenings of love. For it is said: For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth (Proverb 3:12).

This passage assumes that suffering comes because of one's negative actions. Yet it explores the reality that there are those who are righteous and learned in Torah, yet still fall ill. Thus, the Talmud develops the category of *yisurin shel ahavah*, afflictions of love. These afflictions enhance the reward in the world to come. The afflictions cause you to

[14] Masha Turner, in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, eds. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss. (New York: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), 861.

draw closer to God. Additionally, these afflictions wipe away any minor sins so that one can enjoy one's full portion in the world to come.

The Talmudic passage continues with an example of one who was so afflicted. "R. Chiya bar Abba was ill. R. Yochanan went in to visit him and asked him "Are these afflictions dear to you?" R. Chiya bar Abba answered "Neither they nor their reward." R. Yochanan said "Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and Y revived him."(BT *B'rachot* 5b). Thus despite the promise of reward, R. Chiya bar Abba did not want the afflictions. He did not feel he was gaining anything from being ill and thus sought healing. This story highlights the limitations of the notions of sin and punishment and afflictions of love. Even when one might understand the cause of sickness, it may not be of any comfort.

Liturgy

The Jewish prayer book contains multiple references to our bodies and healing. Acknowledging and thanking God for the health God has bestowed upon us is one of the first blessings that is said in the morning liturgy and is said after one uses the restroom. In the blessing, *Asher Yatzar*, we recognize that God formed humans with an intricate system of openings and closings and without the proper functioning of this system we could not stand and praise God. The blessing ends "Blessed are You, Adonai, who heals all creatures, doing wonders." Elliot N. Dorff notes that this prayer is a reminder that the proper working of our body is wondrous and not something to take for granted. It is an act of God's care for humans that God created us with a body that allows us to thrive and

grow.[15] A Chasidic viewpoint, offered by Lawrence Kushner and Nehemia Polen, sees this blessing as a way to connect to God even on the basic level of bodily functions. Bodily functions are not evil or apart from God's realm. By including them in blessing, we connect our bodies to serving God. This is considered part of the Chasidic practice of *yichudim* as "an exercise in meditative awareness that brings every aspect of life- even bodily functions!- into the realm of the sacred."[16]

The blessing ends with an acknowledgement that the body does not always work as it should, as God intended it to work. In praising God as healing all creatures, we recognize that our bodies break down and need healing. Thus the prayer states that when our body works, it is an act of God "doing wonders" and when it doesn't work, we can rely on God to heal. Though this healing comes from God, Frankel proposes that it is also related to a blessing that follows, commanding us to engage in words of Torah. While God is the ultimate healer, healing can also come through meditating on words of Torah.[17]

In the Sephardic and Reform traditions, the blessing immediately following *Asher Yatzar* is *Elohai N'shama*. The juxtaposition of these two prayers highlights the importance of both the body and soul and their combination in creating a full human being. Indeed, Marc Brettler notes that in the Bible, there is no separation between body and soul. *N'shama* means breath and more fully, a breathing, living person, not simply an abstract, ethereal soul. God controls who breaths for God created the first person through

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[15] Elliott N. Dorff, in *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayer, Modern Commentaries Vol. 5 - Birkhot Hashachar (Morning Blessings)*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman. (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001), 111.

[16] Lawrence Kushner and Nehemia Polen, in *My People's Prayer Book Vol. 5*, 116.

[17] Ellen Frankel, in *My People's Prayer Book Vol. 5*, 113.

breathing into the human in Genesis 2:7.[18] Kushner and Polen share a teaching from *Genesis Rabbah* 1:3:

> Rabbi Tanchum ben Rabbi Chiya said that if a goatskin bag has a hole, even one as small as the eye of a needle, all its air escapes; yet though a person is formed with many different orifices, the person's breath does not escape through them. Who achieved this? As the psalm verse (86:10) concludes, 'Only You God!'"

The relationship between the orifices as mentioned in *Asher Yatzar* and the breath as the subject of *Elohai N'shama* is clear. The maintaining of the body and breath are one. Human beings are composed of both physical inner workings and a soul. Together they make up a full human being. Interestingly, the Reform movement's *Union Prayer Book,* published in 1895, does not include *Asher Yatzar*, only *Elohai N'shama*. The prayer book underscored the message that the essence of a person was the soul alone. A person's body was not seen as holy or having religious significance. Therefore a prayer about the connection between God and the human body was inappropriate.[19]

In the main section of the prayer service, the Amidah, we pray for healing. The short prayer, *R'faenu*, comes from Jeremiah 17:14. The theologian Elliott Dorff notes that this prayer does not promise that God will cure every ill person. Rather, if healing does occur, we must acknowledge God's role. He continues to write that this is opposite to what we assume about God's role today. Today we assume that our bodies will work and we will be healthy. Thus when things go wrong, when we become sick, we blame God and often become angry that God is not healing. However in the past, without modern medicine, sickness was expected and seen as a part of life. If healing did occur, God was given thanks and praise. Healing was a gift from God, as opposed to the result of the

[18] Marc Brettler, in *My People's Prayer Book Vol. 5,* 119.
[19] Knobel, "Sources of Healing in Judaism: Jewish Folkways in a New Age," 5.

efforts of doctors and a medical system. When we see doctors as the sole healers, we take that role from God and leave God only with the blame for suffering.[20]

Kushner and Polen share a Chasidic understanding of healing based on this prayer. This understanding is based on *Divrei Shmuel* which explains that healing is related to forgiveness. A physician may cure based on medicine and technology, but full healing comes through forgiving oneself and discovering acceptance. Asking God to heal us is not a plea for a onetime cure, but rather a plea for a complete change in the person. Heal us is a plea for the ability to find holiness within us and around us.[21]

The *Mi Shebeirach* is perhaps the most familiar prayer for healing and encompasses many ideas seen in the biblical and Talmudic texts. The origins of the *Mi Shebeirach* stem from *Mishneh Taanit* 2:4. In praying for rain at the time of a severe draught during the prayer service, the leader includes seven additional blessings in the Amidah. Each blessing reminds God of a time when God answered the prayers of those in need. The blessing begins, *mi sh'ana*, the one who answered. The *Mi Shebeirach* uses this formula for the prayer for healing, thus beginning *mi shebeirach*, the one who blessed. Just as the blessing for rain reminds God of all the occasions when God answered the prayers of other, the *Mi Shebeirach* also begins with mentioning our ancestors who God has blessed. The merit of our ancestors is meant to benefit us as well. Additionally, mentioning the ancestors reminds God that God has the power to bless and heal. We are acknowledging that God has the ability to bring healing. Calling upon the experience of our ancestors also reminds those who are ill that they are not isolated.

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[20] Elliott N. Dorff, in *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayer, Modern Commentaries Vol. 2- The Amidah,* ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman. (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001), 116.

[21] Kushner and Polen, in *My People's Prayer Book Vol. 2*, 117-119.

Those before them experienced the pain of illness yet just as they were worthy of healing so too are those currently suffering.

The sick person's name is also included in the prayer. On one hand, this could be related to the individual's sins and merits. On the other hand, the personalization could also be meant to remind God that God has a relationship with the person. By highlighting the person's individuality we plead with God to uphold God's responsibility to maintain the relationship with the ill. The traditional *Mi Shebeirach* asserts that the person praying will make a contribution to charity on behalf of the sick person and prays that as a reward for this good deed, God will bring healing. The issue of merit leading to reward versus sin and punishment is clear in this prayer. Anne Brener also points out that the assumption of that one will give *tzedakah* empowers the sufferer. It gives them a concrete action they can undergo and reminds them that they still have some agency and control. Suggesting a possible action for those sick to take can change them from feeling like a victim to a fighter.[22]

The Reform movement largely ignored the *Mi Shebeirach*, uncomfortable with the notion of sin and punishment and the assumption that God could cure a sick person in respond to a particular prayer. Rabbi Peter S. Knobel notes that the introduction of Debbie Friedman's version of *Mi Shebeirach* opened the way toward reincorporating this prayer for healing in Reform services. He explains that Friedman's version is particularly powerful due not only to the melody, but the text itself. Rather than specifying people with a sickness, the text calls God to bless "those in need of healing," a more universal category that encompasses many situations. While the text brushes upon the idea of a

[22] Brener, "Prayer and Presence. Jewish Pastoral Care," 135.

cure in calling for a "renewal of body," its emphasis is one wholeness and blessing. Indeed, the first verse asks God to "help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing," the fulfillment of which is imaginable to all, unlike perhaps, a physical cure.[23] One could also interpret the verse as calling upon us to actively support and comfort those in need of healing. We seek from God the courage to do so. Ultimately we know that the power of healing is not solely in our hands, so the second verse reaches out to God to grant a *r'fuah sh'leimah*, a complete healing. Today, numerous composers and liturgists continue to reinterpret the *Mi Shebeirach*, creating new prayers and blessings for healing.

[23] Knobel, "Sources of Healing in Judaism," 10.

Chapter Two: The Context of Prayer

While the text of the prayer contains theological understandings and assumptions, the manner of the prayer, surrounding environment and physical gestures are also a crucial component and communicate the desires and beliefs of the worshipper. The context, including manner, location and time of the prayer contains theological messages about God. The physical gestures either accompanying verbal prayer or in place of it also send a message to God and the sick person about the healing that ought to occur.

Manner of Verbal Prayer

Just as important as the actual text of the prayers is the manner in which the prayer is said. A story in BT *B'rachot* 34b highlights this point:

> They said about R' Chanina ben Dosa that he would pray for the sick and would say: "This one will live and this one will die." They said to him "How do you know?" He answered them: If my prayer is fluent in my mouth that I know it has been received. But if not, then I know my prayer has been rejected.

Fluency is valued above all else in this example. Regardless of the actual meaning of the prayer, if one says it smoothly the prayer will be received. Fluency has an actual effect on God's reception of the prayer and subsequent action. One could argue that fluency comes only with sincerity. When the one praying is deeply invested in the recovery of the sick person and the prayer comes from the heart, then the prayer flows. Perhaps faith that God can heal is also necessary for a fluent prayer, without doubt or hesitancy. This is then a signal to God that the prayer is worthy of heeding. Finally, one can also gain fluency through repetition and memorization. The more one prays for

healing, the more fluent the prayers become. This clearly puts enormous pressure on the one praying.

Fortunately, the rabbis allow for some flexibility in assuring the prayer will be fluent and easy for the person to utter. A conversation arises in BT *Shabbat* 12b over the appropriateness of praying in Aramaic. R. Yochanan notes that one must not request any needs in Aramaic because the ministering angels do not know Aramaic and thus will pay no attention. Yet in the case of someone who is ill, one may pray in Aramaic for the Divine Presence is with the ill person. This story raises a number of questions about God and prayer. There is an assumption that most prayers first go through the ministering angels. If the angels do not understand the language of the prayer, they cannot bring the request to God. However, the circumstances around praying for a person who is ill are different. Since God is with the ill person, God can directly address prayers regarding the ill. We learn from this passage that God knows all languages and thus one can speak to God in Aramaic. Assuming Aramaic is the vernacular for the rabbis and the Jews in the Diaspora at the time, this can be generalized to mean that one can address God in the language in which one feels most comfortable. Speaking in the vernacular makes it much more likely that one's prayer will be more fluent and clear. Ultimately, speaking in the vernacular and with sincerity will cause God to listen to the prayer and bring healing.

Praying to God for healing may be expressed in many ways, including crying out, pleading or questioning. Moses voices his prayer to God for Miriam's healing, "Oh God pray heal her," as a cry. Patricia Karlin-Neumann notes that this is a primal cry. In facing illness, one may feel powerless, in shock, afraid, all leading one to cry out to God for healing, rather than composing a rational, systematic prayer. Moses' prayer is in fact seen

as the paradigm of fluent and sincere prayer, since it comes from a place of raw emotion and concern.[24]

Isaac's prayer to God to heal Rebecca's barrenness is described as a pleading. Genesis 25:21 reads "Isaac pleaded with the Eternal on behalf of his wife, for she was childless, and the Eternal acceded to his entreaty, so his wife Rebecca became pregnant." Rashi focuses on the word pleading, *vayetar,* noting that it means beseeching and increasing. He writes that Isaac importuned much through prayer. Interestingly, this pleading has a clear mirror effect on God. God's responds in the manner in which God was called upon. God's response, *vayeter,* comes from the exact same root as Isaac's pleading, *ayin- tav- resh*. Thus Rashi recognizes that Isaac's pleading was effective; God was prevailed upon and conciliated and persuaded by him. This is a different sort of prayer than Moses' cry. Moses' cry is brief and to the point. It is almost as if he does not have the energy to plead with God, in his emotional state he can only cry out. Isaac's pleading, however, implies a more lengthy conversation with God. While it is also possibly full of emotion, there is a persuasive, demanding aspect to it.

While the text in Genesis 25 states that Isaac pleaded with God, Rebecca also later approaches God. Rebecca's approach involves neither crying out nor pleading. Instead, she questions God. "But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of the Lord" (Genesis 25:22). Rebecca is looking for understanding about the struggle inside her. The text is unclear about her precise motivation. Perhaps she knows her pregnancy is not going normally and wants to know what is wrong. Perhaps she recognizes that bearing twins brings a special destiny and she

[24] Karlin-Neumann, in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 865.

wants to know the fate of her and her children. Perhaps her pain is so dire that she is looking to God to give her a reason for causing so much suffering. For Rebecca, healing comes through knowing and understanding God's actions. Similar to God's reply to Isaac, God also responds to Rebecca's prayer according to the manner in which she asked. Rebecca did not ask for an end to pain or discomfort, she asked for understanding. Thus God responds not by reducing the struggle in her womb, but by giving her a sense of meaning. God explains "Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; One people shall be mightier than the other, And the older shall serve the younger." (Genesis 25:22). Because Rebecca asked for an understanding of her existence, God responds by sharing her fate and that of her children.

Rather than using the terminology of prayer which may call to mind grand and eloquent prayers, Rabbi Levy describes prayer as "talking to God." Talking to God implies a more natural, unintimidating, intimate conversation. It allows one to pour forth one's heart without the pressure or fear of reciting words correctly. Just as one does not need fancy language to talk to God, one also does not need an impressive or proper setting. One can talk to God wherever one is located. For patients who are used to attending services in a formal sacred space, being confined to a hospital room can feel like being far from God. By reframing prayer as "talking to God," a patient can reestablish their relationship with God even while in a hospital bed.[25] This informal communication with God was also a hallmark of the prayer practice of Rabbi Nachman of Bretslov known as *hitbodedut*. He encouraged his follows to speak to God as if talking

[25] Levy, *Talking to God*, 4.

to a good friend, to tell God everything. This outpouring of the heart can lead to relief for the sufferer and sense of connection with God.[26]

Setting

A number of stories about healing prayers include the worshipper ascending to a high place. In the story of Elisha and the Shunamite woman, a high place is already portrayed as valuable even before sickness and the need for healing enter the story. The Shunamite woman prepares a room in her home for Elisha, who she has recognized as a man of God, to encourage him to stop and join them for food. The text clearly states that the room she wants to prepare is part of the upper chamber, "*naaseh na alit kir k'tana*" (II Kings 4:10). A room worthy of a man of God should be as close as possible to God's assumed abode. Seeing as the importance of dwelling close to God is already established, it is no surprise that when the Shunamite woman's son becomes ill and death appears imminent, she brings him to Elisha's room. The text stresses that the room is on an upper story, stating not simply that she laid the child on Elisha's bed but that she "*taal*," went up (II Kings 4:21). Both the location of the room and the fact that it is Elisha's room are important to this story. Just as Elisha, as a man of God, deserves a room closest to God, so too should one in immediate need of God's concern draw as near as possible to the Divine Presence, thought to be above. By bringing her son to the upper chamber, the Shunamite woman is bringing him to God.

The placement of the sick child in Elisha's room is also significant because of Elisha's role. The Shunamite woman places him not only in Elisha's chamber, but

[26] Brener, "Prayer and Presence," 133.

precisely on Elisha's bed. Elisha is seen as having a unique and special relationship to God in his role as prophet. Ralbag notes that by bringing her sick son to Eilsha's room, the Shunamite woman is acknowledging the special merit of Elisha in hopes that this will aid her son's wellbeing. This is a physical manifestation what we saw in the verbal prayer, invoking the merit of our ancestors. In both situations, the one in need of healing relies on the righteousness and relationship to God of others. The physical manifestation of this is also seen under similar circumstances in II Kings 17. When faced with a sick child, Elijah himself takes the child up to his room and lays him on his bed. In this story we see again the importance of the prophet dwelling in the upper chamber and the notion that one in need of healing should be physically brought up close to God and in a place inhabited by one who is already close to God.

This focus on the importance of ascending when praying for healing continues in Talmudic thought. BT *B'rachot* 34b recounts a story of Rabban Gamliel's son falling ill. Rabban Gamliel then calls for R. Chanina to pray for him. Though R. Chanina's ability to know whether or not God has granted his prayer comes from the fluency of his verbal prayer, he does not immediately begin praying. First, he ascends to the attic. Even R. Chanina, known for his relationship to God based on his verbal prayer, instinctively understands the importance of location, particularly a high place.

Location also plays a role in the story of the leper Naaman in II Kings 5. The story begins when Naaman's wife's maid bemoaned the fact that Naaman was not in Samaria, where there was a prophet who could cure him of his leprosy, Elisha. From the start of the story, the proper location is critical in bringing healing. Elisha's power to heal

in the name of God cannot be accessed outside of his location in Samaria. Elisha himself even tells the King of Israel to tell Naaman to come to him (II Kings 5:8).

Yet despite the focus on the importance of proximity to Elisha, the story takes a surprising turn when Naaman finally arrives at his house. The text notes he got as close as he could without being invited in. Naaman stands *petach habayit,* at the threshold of the house. Yet once he is finally where Elisha is, Elisha tells him to go away and bathe in the Jordan. It is the river Jordan which is the location of healing, not close to the prophet as expected. This certainly surprised Naaman as he exclaims in anger "I thought he would come out and stand…and heal the leprosy" (II Kings 5:11). For Naaman, the healing power comes only in close proximity to the prophet himself. Naaman does not see any holiness in the Jordan River and rages on "Are not Amanah and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the rivers of Israel? May I not wash in them and be clean?"

The commentator Malbim is also clearly confused by this. First he interprets Elisha's insistence that Naaman come to him as Elisha showing Naaman that he is cured by the divine power with which the prophet in endowed. However, when Elisha does not even come out to greet Naaman, Malbim explains that Elisha wanted to prevent Naaman from thinking he was cured through natural means or sorcery. Rather, Naaman should learn that by simply following the prophet's order he could be cured. Yet this still leaves the question of why Elisha would have to come to the prophet to learn this lesson. Malbim does in fact bring up this lingering question in his commentary on Naaman's protest against Elisha's command. Malbim understands Naaman as saying that he thought Elisha wanted to see him to direct his prayer to him, as Isaac directed his prayer toward

Rebecca. If Elisha did not want to see him, he could have given him the instructions without Naaman traveling to his house. Malbim relies on the story of Isaac and Rebecca in Genesis 25 as a paradigm of praying for another person. Genesis 25:21 states that Isaac prayed on behalf of Rebecca, yet the literal translation is "in front of his wife." Thus according to Malbim, Naaman assumed Elisha would ask for healing in front of him, due to the precedent of Isaac praying for Rebecca.

While the question of proximity between the one praying for healing and the ill is resolved in this story through Naaman's healing in the river Jordan, away from Elisha, the question still stands for the Talmudic rabbis. In BT *N'darim* 39b it states "R'Acha bar Chanina said: Whoever visits a sick person takes away one sixtieth of his suffering." According to R'Acha bar Chanina, just one's physical presence is enough to bring about a measure of healing. Physical proximity to the sick has power. Presence is important.

In contrast to R. Acha bar Chanina, Patricia Karlin-Neumann raises a potential danger of praying in the presence of the sick person. In looking at the story of Moses praying for Miriam's healing in Numbers 12, she wonders how Miriam reacted to seeing Moses in such distress. Witnessing how one's own illness is causing pain for another could lead the ill person to feel even worse. Additionally, the one who is praying might not feel like they can truly express their darkest fears and worries in front of the sick person. Perhaps at times it is even more appropriate for a person to pray away from the ill person so that his/her own emotional anguish does not upset the one who is sick and s/he can openly and freely pray.[27]

[27] Patricia Karlin-Neumann, in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss. (New York: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), 865.

In looking at all these stories, another critical issue related to location becomes clear. While Hannah goes to the House of the Lord in Shiloh to pray to God, she is the exception. One might anticipate that those seeking God's care might journey to a place designated as holy, yet in none of the other stories is this the case. One can access God no matter where one is located. The theology undergirding this issue assumes an ever-present nature of the one God. Rather than needing to go to the shrine of a particular deity who resides there or call upon a prophet or priest who works there, a sick person can call upon one powerful God in any location. God is accessible in all places.

BT *N'darim* 40a also raises another issue related to the context of prayer. In addition to location, timing is also an important element. According to BT *N'darim* 40a, one should not visit a sick person during the first three hours of day or the last three hours. In the first three hours, the sick person appears calm, so the visitor might not think prayer is necessary. In the last three hours of day, the illness becomes more intense, so the visitor might think the situation is hopeless and not prays. The Talmud structures visits around when the visitor will be most likely to pray. According to the Talmud, the best environment to pray for healing is one in which the visitor will properly understand the need to pray and be motivated to do so.

Physical Actions

Physical actions have varied healing power. First, they can increase or highlight the emotional fervor of the prayer. Second, physical actions can also work together with verbal prayer as an effective means of getting God's attention. Certain acts have healing power when combined with verbal prayer. Finally, a physical action can serve alone as

the instrument of healing. Rather than accompanying prayer, it takes its place as conveying a desire for healing.

The story of Hezekiah's healing includes both verbal prayer and multiple actions that highlight the intensity of his prayer. Before Hezekiah even begins to cry out to God, he immediately turns to the wall (Isaiah 38:2 and II Kings 20:2). The Talmud presents two interpretations of why Hezekiah turns away to face a wall. According to R. Shimon ben Lakish, the "walls" were the walls of Hezekiah's heart, as it is stated in Jeremiah 4:19 "my innards, my innards shudder, the walls of my heart." (BT *B'rachot* 10b). Thus Hezekiah's turning to the wall is a physical manifestation of his turning inward to the deepest part of himself. Before he can pray to God, he must search his own soul so that he's praying to God from a place of true understanding of what he wants and needs from God. R. Levi presents another understanding of "walls." Rather than referring to Hezekiah's heart, the "walls" refer to the Temple walls. R. Levi imagines Hezekiah saying ""If in the merit of the Shunamite woman who made only a single small wall for Elisha, you brought her son back to life, then in the merit of my father's father King Solomon who covered the entire Temple with silver and gold, certainly you should preserve my life." (BT *B'rachot* 10b). According to this understanding, Hezekiah is reminding God of the merit of his ancestors through the physical act of turning to the wall. After Hezekiah turns to the wall, he then cries out to God. Following his prayer, he immediately breaks down into tears. The tears help express Hezekiah's anguish over his illness and intensify his plea to God.

Movement is also a part of R. Chanina ben Dosa's prayer. Despite his focus on fluency, his prayer practice also includes physical action. In BT *B'rachot* 34b, when R.

Yochanan ben Zakkai's son falls ill, R. Yochanan ben Zakkai asks R. Chanina ben Dosa to come pray for him. R. Chanina ben Dosa arrives and before he begins to pray, he lays his head between his knees. Once in this position, he seeks God's mercy to heal the child. For Chanina ben Dosa, this action and position increases the fervor and fluency of his prayer, thus making it more likely he will be healed.

In BT *Ketubot* 104a physical action not only intensifies the verbal prayer, it serves as a prayer to God in itself. The focus of the story is on the verbal prayers of Rabbi's disciples, who continue praying until Rabbi's handmaiden throws down an earthen vessel. However, before they begin their prayers, they declare a public fast. Fasting is not simply an act of physical deprivation, but a physical sign of repentance. By fasting the rabbis are signaling that they are engaging in *heshbon hanefesh* they are searching within themselves for ways to improve their relationship with God and the world. The physical act is a ritual act of prayer. They hope that in return, God will take heed of their pleas.

In two similar stories about Elisha and Elijah, the physical act of stretching oneself over the body of a sick person is also seen as a ritual act of prayer. When Elisha is faced with the dying child of the Shunamite woman, he prays to God. While the text does not recount his verbal prayer, it gives a lengthy account of all the physical actions he engaged in to revive the child.

> And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and he stretched himself upon him; and the flesh of the child waxed warm. Then he returned, and walked in the house once to and fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him; and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. (II Kings 4:34-35)

Similarly, Elijah revives the dying child of the widow with whom he lodges by stretching himself upon the child three times and crying out to God (II Kings 17:21). In trying to understand these situations, Radak first posits that Elisha lay upon the child mouth to mouth so as to direct his prayers toward the child. Radak compares this to Isaac standing in front of Rebecca while praying for her in Genesis 25:21. However, he also attributes both Elisha's and Elijah's actions to contributing to a natural healing. While he does ascribe the healing to a miracle from God, he suggests that they might have stretched himself upon the child to breathe upon him and warm him up. In this way, Elisha and Elijah would help begin to heal the children through natural means while God would have miraculously finished the task. Radak notes "many miracles are performed only after something is done to achieve the same result in a natural way." Ralbag also sees a connection between the physical act and where the healing must occur. Elijah's prayer is that the child's *nefesh* return to *kirbo*. For Ralbag, *kirbo* indicates the child's internal organs, like his heart. The use of the word *kirbo* highlights the body of the child just as Elijah's stretching himself over him calls attention to his body. The place where healing must occur and the ritual act of prayer are connected. The physical action is thus a critical component of the healing process as it communicates to God the need for healing. Prayer and action seem to be explicitly linked in the text, though later rabbinic commentaries separate the two.

The relationship between the verbal prayer and an act that heals is also found in the story of Hezekiah in II Kings 20. Hezekiah turns to the wall, prays to God, cries, and God says God will heal him. Yet the act of healing only occurs when Isaiah places a cake of figs upon Hezekiah's body. Rashi does not believe that figs have any medicinal

healing property in themselves. Rather, putting a cake of figs on healthy flesh would cause it to decay. Thus it is a miracle from God that this cake of figs actually healed wounded flesh. The act then highlights the miraculous nature of God and God's power to heal. However a modern biblical commentator, Prof. Robert L. Cohn, argues that figs were known to have curative properties; the healing was neither magic nor a miracle. Thus he questions why divine intervention was necessary if Hezekiah could be healed through such a simple method. He notes that Hezekiah needed more than basic physical healing. He also needed emotional and psychological healing. Hezekiah was not only concerned with a functioning body, but also with the fate of the city and his role. Hezekiah wanted to not simply remain alive but also live long enough to see the fruition of the city. He is looking for more than mere survival, he wants a fulfilling life. Thus the figs cured his ailment, but God assured Hezekiah that he and the city would prosper.[28] Radak also believes that Hezekiah needs an extra guarantee that he will recover fully. Radak suggests that perhaps Hezekiah worried his recovery would only be temporary and his illness would return. Radak also notes that in II Kings 20, it is Isaiah who tells Hezekiah that he will be healed. Yet perhaps Isaiah was simply trying to comfort him since he saw Hezekiah weeping profusely. This is related to another interpretation of Rashi's that Hezekiah did not understand the miracle of the figs and thought that Isaiah had healed him. He then wants a divinely inspired sign from God that the healing is real. Both these possibilities speak to the need of absolute reassurance that recovery is complete. After illness, even once someone recovers, anxiety still remains that another episode, occurrence, or exacerbation of symptoms could return. A patient might need to

[28] Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings: Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (Collegeville, Minnesota: A Michael Glazier Book by the Liturgical Press, 2000), 143.

hear from a variety of sources, including loved ones as well as professionals, that the illness has finally been overcome.

Interestingly, in the Isaiah 38 version of the story, God does not need to be asked for a sign, but rather provides one without prompting. After reassuring Hezekiah that he will live, God adds "And this is the sign for you from the Lord that the Lord will do the thing that [the Lord] has promised." (Isaiah 38:7). In this version, God understands that Hezekiah needs a sign beyond his own healing that everything will be okay.

In other examples, a physical act leads to healing even without formal verbal prayer. The physical act serves as a ritual act of prayer. In II Kings 5, Naaman goes to visit Elisha to be cured of leprosy. First, Naaman brings "ten talents of silver, six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of clothes." (II Kings 5:5). Rashi notes that Naaman intended all this as a present for the prophet. Rashi understands Naaman as believing that he needs to do some sort of action to show that he's serious and that he trusts in the power of the prophet. The act of bringing a gift will not bring healing, but it serves as a sign of Naaman's intention and desire. The prophet Elisha, however, conceives of a plan for healing that involves only physical action. Elisha tells Naaman to go bathe seven times in the waters of the Jordan. Following this act, Naaman's leprosy will be cured and he will be pure. For Elisha, this ritual action alone has the power to initiate God's healing. However, Malbim suggests a different purpose for the immersion. Malbim suggests that Elisha told Naaman to immerse in the Jordan because cold water normally aggravates lesions. Naaman would recognize God's greatness in his being cured through an unnatural means. In this understanding, the symbolic physical gesture fulfills the purpose of convincing him of God's miraculous abilities.

Interestingly, however, Naaman sees no value in his bathing in the Jordan. Rather, he expects a combination of verbal prayer and symbolic physical gestures from Elisha: "Behold, I thought: He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and recover the leper (II Kings 5:11)." Naaman does not believe that a ritual action on his part will cause God to cure him. He has another idea of how Elisha would heal his leprosy, involving calling upon God and waving his hand. Ralbag presents two interpretations of the "place" over which Naaman expects Elisha to wave his hand. First, perhaps the ritual act has to be related to the area in need of healing. Thus Elisha would wave his hand over the leprous place. Alternatively, perhaps the ritual act has to be related to a holy space. Thus, Elisha would wave his hand toward the place where he worships God, invoking the holiness of that place.

Immersing in water as an action that enacts a person's prayer continues today. Ritualwell.org, a modern resource for creative rituals, prayers and ceremonies, includes numerous examples of how people have used immersing in the *mikveh* as a means to achieve healing. Carol Rose writes how submerging in the *mikveh* physically reminds one of God's unity and wholeness. Just as the water surrounds the one immersing, so too does God's presence surround him/her.[29] Water itself has purifying and cleansing capabilities and in entering a *mikveh* one can imagine washing away the negativity or suffering one has experienced.

[29] Carol Rose, "Kavannah for Mikveh," Ritualwell.org, accessed January 5, 2010, http://www.ritualwell.org/lifecycles/healinghardtimes/primaryobject.2005-07-06.1084273490

In BT *B'rachot* 5b, physical healing comes through the physical touch of another person. In two separate stories, when visiting someone who is ill, both R. Yochanan and R. Chanina tell the sick person to give him his hand. The sick person does so and R. Yochanan and R. Chanina are able to revive him. The related incident is so short and simple that the power of the action can be overlooked. In these stories, a sick person is healed by holding the hand of a friend. The simple act of reaching out to connect with another person brings healing. It reminds the sick person that s/he is not alone. In these stories, reaching out to another person is just as powerful as verbally reaching out to God. Both require a form of surrender to that which is beyond and outside of oneself. Both require an admission that one needs help. Perhaps turning to another person is even more difficult than turning to God. Turning to another person means turning to a peer. It means opening oneself up to another human being who may judge the act of asking for help. Despite this, these stories clearly indicate that reaching out to another person has power. In a third incident in BT *B'rachot* 5b, R.Yochanan enters the dark room of R. Elazar who is sick. R. Yochanan exposes his arm and the room lights up. If one interprets light as insight and understanding, then this action also shows us that it is not only God who can bring clarity and answers to one who is sick.

Liturgy

Throughout the prayer service, Jews move their bodies in ways that express humility, joy, and yearning towards God. The most common, bowing, acknowledges God's power in comparison to our own. Physically enacting devotion to God is seen as a way to intensify and focus on one's verbal prayer experience, similar to how physical

acts expressed an individual's longings and hopes in the various stories above. It is therefore odd that the prayers for our bodies and healing involve no movement. Despite the fact that we are talking about our bodies, we do not engage in any action which would bring this to consciousness. A visceral reminder that we are in fact, embodied, is not a part of our prayers for the body. Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg has noted this disconnect between the prayers and lack of movement. In order to infuse the morning blessings with an awareness of our bodies, she created a sequence of small movements that align with each blessing. She encourages worshippers to "make micro movements to sense the part of the body that is mentioned in each blessing."[30] For example, while reciting the blessing *zokayf k'fufim* one could straighten their back and stand slightly taller, or take a tiny step for the blessing *mitzaday gaver*. In doing so, one becomes aware of the body and God's gift of movement.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky writes that the usual rituals and rhythms of Jewish life may stop speaking to someone who is ill. When one is sick, time takes on a new meaning and even Shabbat is no longer a rest from worry, anxiety or suffering. The daily and weekly cycle may no longer hold meaning or promise if one only sees a one-way road ahead. Time is divided simply into the period before illness, the present illness, and perhaps in the distant future, health once more. Frymer-Kensky argues "We need other rituals to bridge our way to God and help bring us to the point where we can again feel the

[30] Sheila Peltz Weinberg, "Birchot HaShachar in Movement," Class Handout from The Art of Creating Meaningful Worship, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, December 16, 2010. Weinberg is a Reconstructionist rabbi and a founder of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality.

presence of normal human life and engage in communal response o God's presence."[31] She writes about the use of amulets as an ancient healing practice. Though amulets were traditionally thought to have magical healing power, they can also be understood as a "perpetually visible prayer." Rather than relying solely on verbal prayer, a sick person could involve other senses by holding an amulet or viewing it. In this way, a sick person could access God through multiple means and hopefully, feel God's healing presence.[32]

[31] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Constructing a Theology of Healing," in *Healing and Judaism: Monograph Series,* no. 2, ed. Kerry M. Olitzky and Nancy H. Wiener. (New York: National Center for Jewish Healing, 1997), 23.

[32] Ibid, 13.

Chapter Three: Who is Praying and Does it Matter?

Throughout the biblical and Talmudic stories, we see how in addition to the text and context of prayer, the person who is actually praying influences the experience. In some cases, a character prays for the healing of another. The relationship between the one praying and the sick person is a critical element in how one expresses the desire for healing and how the sick person responds to the prayer itself. Additionally, the personal status of the one praying may impact not only how the sick person responds to the prayer, but also how God responds. Personal status also contributes to the urgency, desire, and responsibility one might feel in offering prayer. In other cases, the sick person prays for his/her own healing. Sometimes, the one who is ill must become involved and active in his/her own healing. Indeed, sometimes s/he is the only one who can truly communicate the innermost desires and needs to God. Jewish liturgy contains these multiple means of expressing the need for healing to God and includes both communal and personal prayer within a service.

Praying for the Healing of Others

The Importance of Relationship

R. Ach bar Chanina said Whoever visits a sick person takes away one sixtieth of his suffering (BT *N'darim* 39b). This Talmudic statement asserts that anyone who visits a sick person contributes to his/her healing. The presence of any visitor, regardless of the relationship to the sick person or personal status, has the power to bring healing. However, after this general statement, R. Acha bar Chanina continues and limits this power to one who is a *ben gilo*. The interpretation of *ben gilo* varies. R. Nissim understands this as referring to the visitor and ill person being born under the same

astrological sign. Rashi interprets *ben gilo* as meaning someone of the same age. The underlying theme is that the visitor and the sick person share some aspect of identity. For R. Acha bar Chanina, a visitor who connects with the patient on some level is most capable of taking away an element of suffering. Sharing a similar status or age can aid in empathy. Taken more broadly, a *ben gilo* could be anyone who identifies with the patient and/or his/her suffering. In regards to prayer, having a relationship based on empathy and understanding can help direct the prayers of the visitor to the true needs of the ill person. Rather than asking God for general healing, one may refer specifically to a patient's need for strength to keep fighting or patience while waiting to find out the outcome of a treatment. Additionally, knowing that the person praying on your behalf understands and identifies with you and your needs can also be a source of comfort and support to the ill person.

In addition to sharing a connection and identifying with the sick person, having an established relationship could also contribute to healing. While sick, we tend to withdrawn into ourselves and the narrow world of our illness, being with others can remind us of the wider world and expand our sense of identity. Friends who know us well can pray for a return to the full and lively person we were before being beset by illness, reminding us that we are more than an illness or diagnosis.[33] In the Bible, because Moses is so intimately connected to his sister, Miriam, his prayer for her healing is immediate, intense and fluent. Interestingly however, having a strong relationship might prevent someone from even finding the time to pray. Patricia Karlin-Neumann notes that a caregiver is often caught up in "shouldering the burdens of actions- making the loved one

[33] Frymer-Kensky, "Constructing a Theology of Healing," 10.

comfortable, researching treatment, running interference with physicians, reporting news, calming fears."[34] The one who is potentially most likely to bring forth heartfelt and sincere prayer could be the one who has the least time to do so.

In the story in BT *Ketubot* 104a two people with a strong relationship to the ill person do pray, yet they end up praying for different things. The disciples pray for their rabbi to stay alive and to be healed. Their deep devotion and respect for their teacher prevents them from even imagining life without him. Thus they continue to pray for his healing even when he is in pain and suffering. This may mirror the experience of family members who refuse to imagine life without their sick loved one. For their loved one to regain physical strength and health is their main prayer, no matter the circumstances. In such a situation, the purpose of the prayer becomes muddled. Those close to a patient might be praying for his/her recovery for their own sake, because *they* need the patient to improve, rather than out of concern for the wellbeing of the patient alone.

The rabbi's handmaiden also has a deep connection with him. However, this connection differs from that of the disciple. As his caregiver, she closely observes his difficulty and pain. Every movement causes him further suffering. This awareness allows her to see that prayers for him to remain alive are no longer what he truly needs. She is able to see beyond their relationship and attachment, assess the situation in all its complexity, and determine what would most benefit him.

[34] Karlin-Neumann, in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 864.

Personal Status: The Role of the Prophet and the Servant

Beyond the issue of the relationship between the sick person and the visitor is the personal social status of the visitor. In many of the biblical stories of healing, the prophet serves as the conduit who prays to God. In I Kings 17, when the widow's son falls ill, the widow turns immediately to Elijah. Elijah had previously displayed his power and connection to God by prophesying the miracle of the jar of meal and the cruse of oil lasting long past expected. The widow had previously thought she would die once her food ran out, so Elijah's prophesy was a prophesy of life and health. When faced with the prospect of death again, she assumes Elijah had a role in it. If Elijah could bring life and health, perhaps he was also the cause or instigator of death and suffering. He can use his connection with God for either life or death. Thus she challenges Elijah "What harm have I done you, O man of God, that you should come here to recall my sin and cause the death of my son?" (I Kings 17:18). Interestingly, she does not explicitly ask Elijah to pray to God on behalf of her son. It is Elijah who tells her to give the boy to him and with his own initiative, cries out to God. Elijah himself assumes that since he has a relationship with God, God will answer his prayer. He does not instruct the woman to pray to God but takes it upon himself to serve as the intermediary. In this story, Elijah's high status as prophet enables him to call out to God and bring healing.

Status comes not only by being a prophet, but also by being wise or righteous. In BT *Bava Batra* 116a "R. Pinhas ben Hama expounded: One who has an ill person in his home should go to a wise man that he may ask mercy for him, as it says (Proverbs 16:14), "The anger of a King is like messengers of death, but a wise man will pacify it." According to this Talmudic passage, the response to a person becoming ill is to find

someone who is wise and have him pray for the sick person. The wise person's prayers are most efficacious for God will pay closer attention to the prayers of someone steeped in Torah. This passage has implications for rabbinic pastoral visits today. Often ill congregants want the presence of the clergy, someone who represents Jewish tradition and learning. While the mitzvah of visiting the sick is incumbent on everyone, clergy provide an extra reassuring presence.[35]

In contrast to this story of Elijah, BT *B'rachot* 34b recounts a story where healing comes only because of the lower status of the one who is praying. R. Yochanan ben Zakkai was the teacher of R. Chanina yet when ben Zakkai's son falls ill, he calls upon his student to pray for him. R. Chanina lays his own head between his knees and the child lives. Yochanan ben Zakkai and his wife then discuss the miraculous nature of their son's healing: "R. Yochanan ben Zakkai said: Had ben Zakka [I] stuck his head between his knees all day long, they would not have paid any attention to him. His wife said to him: Is Chanina greater than you? He said to her: No, rather he is like a servant before the king while I am like an important officer." (BT *B'rachot* 34b).

Ben Zakkai indicates that it is Chanina's lowly servant status that causes God to pay attention to him. This is the complete opposite of Elijah's story where his high status as a prophet made him worthy of God's attention. Rashi distinguishes between the role of a servant and an officer. The servant comes and goes freely before the king, while an officer does not regularly come before the king. Extrapolating from the commentary of Rashi, HaKosei to Ein Yaakov and Ben Yehoyada, Rabbi Yosef Widroff in The Art

[35] Joseph S. Ozarowski, *To Walk in God's Ways: Jewish Pastoral Perspectives on Illness and Bereavement* (Landham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1995), 45.

Scroll Commentary offers a couple of possibilities for why ben Zakkai saw Chanina's prayer as more effective than his own. Perhaps praying for healing was seen as not a valuable skill for a leader to possess. Ben Zakkai was too involved in important, communal matters to pray for individuals. He was a leader of the community, not someone who attended to personal needs for its members. Because as a leader he was not expected to pray for individuals, he prayed infrequently. In contrast, because R. Chanina is concerned with individuals, he prays often and thus his prayers are more readily answered. R. Chanina might have a lower social standing in the community, but his active prayer life commands the attention of God. High social status within a community does not automatically guarantee a relationship with God. This interpretation suggests that one can develop a relationship with God through regular, devoted prayer. Unfortunately, it also suggests that praying for healing is not important enough for communal leaders to engage in. Ben Zakkai was not expected to pray for individuals. Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus, president of the CCAR noted that this devaluation of praying for the sick has continued until recent years. She recalled that a rabbinic colleague in attempting to insult another rabbi, snidely remarked "Well, he makes great hospital visits."[36]

An alternative interpretation continues the theme of a person of lower status praying more effectively. Perhaps R. Chanina's lower status leads him to approach God with modesty and humility. He does not automatically expect God to grant his desire and thus prays with devotion and zeal. In contrast, Ben Zakkai's status as a leader in the community turns his prayer into one of dispassionate expectation. He is used to getting

[36] Meeting with Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus, Dec. 16, 2010.

his way and assumes that God will respond to his prayer. This interpretation thus instructs someone praying to approach God with modesty and an awareness of powerlessness in the face of God's awesome power. It serves as a cautionary tale to those with power and status that they cannot assume that this will lead God to answer their prayers. God is not a junior office staffer who jumps at the whim of the high command. Someone who is a junior office staffer him/herself will intuitively understand this and pray with the respect and piety God deserves. [37]

While the two stories of Elijah and R. Chanina set up a clear contrast between the prayer of someone of a higher and lower status, other stories display a complex tension regarding the power of the prayer of a prophet versus a servant. In the story of the Shunamite woman, Elisha prophesies that she will have a son. She gives birth to a son, yet he falls ill. The Shunamite woman's first response is to go to Elisha. She clearly believes he has some power. When Elisha sees her approach, he sends out his servant, Gehazi, to ask after her welfare and that of her husband and son. Despite the fact that her son is dying, she does not answer truthfully to Gehazi and instead says "It is well." (II Kings 4:26). She refuses to engage with Gehazi or share her sorrow and concern with him. In lying to him, she communicates that she does not believe he has any power to change her situation. In contrast, once she reaches Elisha she falls at his feet. Even without her saying anything, Elisha knows that "her soul is bitter" (II Kings 4:27). Yet despite this knowledge and the Shunamite woman's then addressing Elisha, his first response is to send his servant Gehazi to the dying boy. Elisha tells Gehazi to take his staff and lay it upon the child. Why would Elisha not go himself? In attempting to answer

[37] *Talmud Bavli*. The Schottenstein Edition: Art Scroll Series. ed. by Hersch Goldwurm. (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Heritage Foundation, 1993), *B'rachot* 34b.

this question, Malbim assumes that Elisha thought the child was simply in a coma and thus just the presence of his staff would suffice to heal the child. While Malbim believes that Elisha thought his power as a prophet was so great that even his staff could bring healing, the text itself is unclear about Elisha's thought process or intentions. The text is definitive, however, about the Shunamite's woman understanding of Elisha: "The boy's mother said, 'As the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you!' So he arose and followed her." (II Kings 4:30). While Elisha may have thought Gehazi and his staff could heal the boy, the boy's mother knows that Elisha's presence is necessary for healing. She will not leave Elisha until he personally attends to the child. The tension between whether Gehazi and Elisha's staff is enough or Elisha himself is needed is presented in the contrasting reactions of Elisha and the Shunamite woman. In both cases, some aspect of Elisha is required. Elisha seems to believe that his servant can bring about the healing using his staff. Yet the Shunamite woman requires Elisha's full presence. It is Elisha himself who can affect healing.

The question of who brings about God's healing is also pervasive throughout the story of Naaman in II Kings 5. Naaman's journey toward healing begins with the advice of a handmaiden. She laments that Naaman does not reside in Samaria, where there is a prophet who could cure him. Naaman takes her lament seriously and seeks permission from the king of Aram to go to Samaria. However, when the king writes to the king of Israel, the king of Israel interprets it as assuming he himself will bring healing, for the letter reads "Now, when this letter reaches you, know that I have sent my courtier Naaman to you, that you may cure him of his leprosy." (II Kings 5:6). The king knows that he cannot bring healing and fears for his life, convinced that king of Aram is setting

him up to fail. He cries out “Am I God, to deal death or give life, that this fellow writes to me to cure a man of leprosy?” (II Kings 5:7). The story unfolds so that Elisha sweeps in to reassure the king that he, as a man of God, can heal Naaman. He specifically tells the king “Let him come to me, and he will learn that there is a prophet in Israel” (II Kings 5:8). At this point, the scene is set for Elisha to save the king by healing Naaman himself. Yet when Naaman follows Elisha’s orders and arrives at his house, Elisha does not greet him. Rather, he sends a messenger to tell Naaman to immerse in the Jordan River. This strikes both the reader and Naaman as odd. Why is the messenger greeting Naaman and not Elisha himself? Wouldn’t it be more powerful for Elisha to immediately heal him? Naaman clearly expected the prophet to present himself: “’I thought,’ he said, ‘he would surely come out to me.’” (II Kings 5:11). Naaman trusted in the prophet’s power and is thus angry when the prophet does not display his healing ability. For Naaman, the prophet is the one who enacts God’s healing and is thus a necessary presence. Yet Elisha’s actions seem to give all the power to the messenger and Naaman himself. Interestingly, it is ultimately Naaman’s servants who ensure his healing. Naaman stalks away from Elisha’s house, refusing to follow the messenger’s instructions. Yet his servants attempt to reason with Naaman saying “Sir, if the prophet asked you to do something difficult, would you not do it? How much more when he has only said to you, ‘Bathe and be clean.’” (II Kings 5:13). It is this logic that finally convinces Naaman to immerse in the waters of the Jordan.

The story of Naaman highlights the roles of many different people in his life. Yet the story begins and ends with servants, the handmaiden who tells him of the prophet in Samaria and the servants who convince him to follow the prophet’s advice. This

bracketing serves as a reminder that healing can be a process that relies on many different people. Those who make suggestions or encourage us have an important role in recovery. Indeed without them we might neither find nor listen to the people who can instruct us on how to heal ourselves. In this story, servants, messengers and prophets are all instruments of healing, whether or not Naaman realizes it.

Praying for One's Own Healing

While the story of Naaman involves numerous characters, it is Naaman himself who must engage in a ritual action to bring healing. Elisha and the servants have an important role, but healing only comes when Naaman immerses in the Jordan River. While the story's plot initially suggested that either the king of Israel or the prophet Elisha would serve as conduits for healing, ultimately Naaman reaches out to God through his own physical action. Naaman's leprosy can only be cured when he enters the waters. This story points out the importance of personal involvement in the healing process. Naaman cannot expect others to connect with God on his behalf or work for him to be healed. He must get into the water himself.

In addition to the numerous stories in which someone prays for another's health, other stories involve people praying for their own wellbeing. For Hezekiah and Hannah, God heals them after they themselves pray or engage in a ritual act of prayer. Throughout the story of Hannah, her praying for herself, without consulting a prophet or priest, is emphasized. The text points out the exact location of the priest Eli, "sitting on the seat near the doorpost of the temple of the Lord" (I Samuel 1:9). Thus the reader knows that Eli is present and that Hannah must have seen him as she entered the temple, yet the text

continues with Hannah praying herself. The priest Eli is not accustomed to people, especially women, praying in the temple. He sees Hannah moving her lips but no sound coming out, and assumes she must be drunk. Hannah must defend herself, reassuring Eli "Oh no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink but I have been pouring out my heart to the Lord. Do not take your maidservant for a worthless woman; I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and distress." (I Samuel 1:15-16). Fortunately Eli accepts her explanation and blesses her.

Hannah's experience illustrates that often there are communal expectations regarding praying for healing. Eli's outlook leads him to assume that Hannah must be drunk rather than pouring out her heart to God. Her praying for herself is seen as unusual. Yet what ultimately matters most to Eli is that her prayer is sincere. He does not rebuke her for not bringing a sacrifice or not going through proper channels to communicate with God. Once he recognizes that she is truly attempting to reach out to God, he tells her to go in peace and even adds his own prayer that God may answer her.

The story of Rebecca's barrenness and then pregnancy involves both Isaac praying for her and Rebecca praying for herself. When Rebecca is barren, it is Isaac who pleads with God on her behalf. However, when she senses the children struggling in her womb, it is she who goes to inquire of God, asking "If so, why do I exist?" (Genesis 25:22). The nature of Rebecca's inquiry to God gives insight into why she, and not Isaac, prays on this occasion. Rebecca's question is an existential, personal question about the meaning of her existence. Her healing comes not through a medical or physical cure, but through a fuller understanding of life. The intimate and personal nature of her concern lends itself to being dealt with by the one suffering. Just as he prayed for her to bear a

child, Isaac could certainly pray for her questions to be answered, but Rebecca must face them herself.

The importance of praying for one's own healing is clearly stated in *Genesis Rabbah* 53:14 "The prayer of a sick person for his own recovery is better than the prayer of another." According to *Genesis Rabbah*, the prayer of someone personally praying for him/herself is more efficacious than the prayer of another. This gives both great responsibility and opportunity to the one who is ill. *Genesis Rabbah* does not specify a prayer that the sick person ought to say, perhaps understanding that one who is ill must reach out to God in his/her own way, according to his/her own needs. Praying for oneself can allow one to express one's inner most feelings and restore communication with God. Only the patient may truly know what s/he needs from God. The act of reaching out to God can also connect us to what is hidden, deep inside us, that which we might not have even realized until expressing it to God. Yet praying to God is not an end in itself but an inspiration to act, to move forward. Prayer changes us. Levy writes "a hardened heart beats with renewed passion, a dream is revived, a hope is rekindled, a soul starts to believe, a body soon begins to stir." Telling God how we are doing and what we need leads us to new places.[38]

The importance of praying for one's own healing raises questions about whether it is even necessary for another person to pray for a sick person's healing at all. If the sick person's prayer is more efficacious, why should anyone pray for another? A Talmudic passage in BT *B'rachot* 6a addresses this issue and clearly states that outside help is needed for healing. In the passage, R. Yochanan heals R. Chanina but then falls ill

[38] Levy, *Talking to God*, 2-14.

himself. R. Chanina comes and revives him. The Talmud asks why R. Yochanan could not heal himself as he healed R. Chanina. Why does R. Yochanan now need R. Chanina's help? The rabbis answered "A captive cannot release himself from prison." Despite the fact that R. Yochanan knew what to do to heal, he could not do it for himself. This statement compares being sick to being in prison, a confining and limiting space. In prison, one's full self cannot be expressed for one does not have complete freedom. Similarly in illness, the sick person is held captive to the limitations of the illness. The sick person must rely on others because the sick person needs the additional resources and help that s/he cannot access due to the illness. The sick person needs to draw upon the energy and power of those who are well in order to heal. This Talmudic statement argues that ultimately, someone who is sick needs to share in the strength and wellbeing of others to regain it for him/herself. The Talmudic and midrashic statement together provide a paradigm for prayer for healing, both the sick person and others must reach out to God.

Communal and Personal Liturgy

The traditional daily prayers and blessings for the body and for healing vary in whether they are recited communally or privately. The general blessings for the body and soul, *Asher Yatzar* and *Elohai N'shamah*, can be said either communally or privately. When said communally, they function similarly to the *R'faenu* blessing. They remind the worshippers that they all consist of the same elements that make up the human body and soul. All human beings are composed of both physical substance and an indefinable soul. Reciting these prayers out loud highlights the shared processes and experience that we

each face. In contrast, reciting these prayers privately gives the worshipper the opportunity to reflect on how his/her individual body is functioning. Rather than viewing oneself as sharing the common human experience of embodiment and possession of a soul, the worshipper can respond to his/her own bodily and spiritual needs.

The *R'faenu* blessing in the Amidah is said in the first person plural, thus involving the worshipper with all those who are sick. This blessing assumes that we all need healing. Yet the source of this blessing in the Amidah, Jeremiah 17:14, makes this point even clearer by stating it in the first person. The *R'faenu* blessing actually tempers Jeremiah's personal cry to God. Yet despite the fact that this is a communal blessing, it is said quietly and privately. This combination of communal and private reminds the worshipper that s/he is not immune to the possibility of illness. Illness is an inevitable part of life. As part of this blessing, the worshipper can also privately pray for a specific individual. Rather than joining with the whole congregation in praying for all those who are sick, this moment allows the worshipper to concentrate on his/herself or loved one.

Traditionally the *Mi Shebeirach* is said by someone praying on behalf of a sick person in a communal setting. This practice of praying for the healing of others continues even in liberal settings. In the Reform movement, clergy may read a list of those who are ill and often congregants are invited to share names. Yet even when congregants share names it is rare for a congregant to mention his/her own name. However, new interpretations of the *Mi Shebeirach*, such as Debbie Friedman's version, may be broad enough to allow everyone to see themselves included in the prayer, even if their name is not mentioned. Rabbi Peter S. Knobel writes that the power of the prayer is that it may "be experienced as personal, and at the same time it creates community." One of the great

advantages of praying communally for healing is that it raises awareness about those who struggle with pain or disability. This awareness can then allow community members to reach out to each other when they are in need. Knowing that their situation is recognized may encourage those who are ill to come to services. Communal awareness can also lead to action. Knobel describes his previous attempts to convince his fiscally-cautious board about the ethical responsibility of making his synagogue building handicap accessible. It was not until the introduction of the *Mi Shebeirach*, which brought to light the number of congregants struggling with illness and disability that his board decided to fund the building renovation. [39]

Contemporary healing services provide a specific and particular space for those who are ill to pray for their own healing in a communal environment and those who are caregivers to be recognized as needing care and healing as well. The entire service is bathed in the understanding of what it is to be in the presence of sickness. Regular services serve as a bridge between those who are well and God and may not always speak or give support to those facing illness. Healing services are designed specifically to connect the voice of those dealing with illness and God.[40] However, these services are often separate from Shabbat services or occur only occasionally, leaving ill congregants without any regular, consistent space to publically pray for their own healing. Prayer leaders could create this space within a Shabbat service by explicitly inviting those to reflect upon and mention their own need for healing during the *Mi Shebeirach*, bridging the gap between communal and personal prayer.

[39] Knobel, "Sources of Healing in Judaism," 11.
[40] Frymer-Kensky, "Constructing a Theology of Healing," 11-12.

Chapter Four: Our Response to Healing

The experience of being healed is often bracketed first by praying for healing and then by an acknowledgement of the recovery. When God does heal, either physically or spiritually, we each respond in different ways. In the biblical and Talmudic examples, we find characters retelling the story of their illness, acknowledging God's power and praising God, and offering thanks to God both verbally and through actions. Jewish liturgy contains a distinct blessing for one who has emerged from a life-threatening situation, including an illness. The insertion of this blessing into the prayer book highlights the importance of acknowledging one's change in status and gratitude for healing.

Telling the Story

When God heals Hezekiah in Isaiah 38, Hezekiah responds with a long and complex prayer of thanksgiving. In this prayer, he expresses his feelings about his illness, the process of recovery, his understanding of why he was healed, and finally his gratitude for God's healing. Before Hezekiah can move forward, he has to tell the story of his journey from illness to health. Perhaps telling the story is actually the final stage of his healing. Arthur Frank writes about the power of and purpose in telling one's story, in that stories "repair the damage that illness has done to the ill person's sense of where she is in life, and where she may be going."[41] In telling his story, Hezekiah rethinks and reclaims his identity.

[41] Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 53.

Part of Hezekiah's story of illness is his pain in thinking that he is going to die. He laments the possibility of dying before he reaches old age, "I must depart in the middle of my days." (Isaiah 38:10). He also grieves over never seeing God again or dwelling among human beings. Once Hezekiah has recovered, he remembers his deepest fears and anxieties, amazed that he overcame them. He also remembers how he tried to strengthen himself, making himself like a lion, but the illness overpowered him, breaking his bones (Isaiah 38:13). Hezekiah's first response was to try to rely on his own power and strength. Now he knows it was only God who could heal him.

According to BT *B'rachot* 10b, it is only once Hezekiah is healed that the text indicates that he was upset over the merits of others influencing his recovery. In the Talmudic commentary on the story, R. Yehoshua ben Levi understands the verse, "behold the peace, it is bitter for me, a bitterness" (Isaiah 38:17) as referring to the fact that his healing was dependent on others and not on his own merit, as his prayer requested. Sometimes healing comes because of the intervention of others, because they did the right research, made the right decisions, pressured the right people, asked the right questions, or simply cared diligently for us until we recovered. Yet it can be hard to accept that we have recovered due to the positive actions of others. Often, we don't want to give them the credit, and thus feel in debt to them. BT *B'rachot* 10b understands this natural tendency and ascribes it to Hezekiah.

Giving Thanks

Hezekiah ends his prayer to God by giving thanks to God. He promises to offer up music to God as a form of praise. Redak understands this promise to be a token of thanks

to God, as it follows the description of Hezekiah's illness and recovery. He has composed hymns on the occasion of his healing which will be played for God's enjoyment. This act also relates to the natural desire to give something back to one who healed. It is not unusual for those who have recovered from illness to return to worship services or donate money to the hospital which nursed them to recovery. There is a natural inclination to not only say thank you, but to praise those we see as responsible and to perform an act of thanks. Thus Hezekiah responds to God's healing by offering hymns of praise to God.

This same desire to not only verbally but physically express thanks is found in the story of Naaman. Following Naaman's healing, he returns to Elisha and proclaims "Now I know that there is no God in the whole world except Israel! So please accept a gift from your servant." When Elisha refuses, Naaman persists. Naaman desperately wants to give something to Elisha to show his appreciation. Rashi understands this gift as similar to a slave or disciple giving a gift to the master. By giving something to Elisha, Naaman wants to show that he recognizes the superior status of Elisha in addition to the power of God.

Elisha refuses this offer of a gift not once, but twice. His resolve in refusing is evident in II Kings 5: 16 when he states "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will not accept anything." His refusal is so resolute that later rabbinic commentaries propose explanations for why Elisha denied the gifts twice. Rashi explains that Elisha refused because the silver and gold that Naaman offered had been previously used to buy idols. Radak uses the refusal as an example of Elisha's dedication to God. He had performed the act not for worldly gain, but to sanctify God's name. Indeed, it was not even himself who had healed Naaman but God, so he felt he did not deserve any reward. However,

while Elisha refuses the gift, he does not offer an alternative to Naaman. One might assume that Elisha, as a prophet, would direct Naaman to give thanks to God in another way, to worship God or to offer a sacrifice to God. Perhaps Elisha feels that Naaman's recognition of God is enough.

Acknowledgement of God's Power

Yet the story does not end with Elisha's refusing a gift. Naaman is determined to show his devotion to God. He asks for two mule-loads of earth. Rashi understands this as wanting earth from the holy land of Israel for when he returns home. Naaman also swears to never again offer up burnt offering or sacrifice to any god, except Adonai. Following his healing, Naaman resolves to worship only the God who healed him. The experience of healing from leprosy has been so powerful as to cause him to change the object of his worship. While this is not a full conversion, Naaman does dedicate himself to God alone. The fact that Naaman did not formally convert is important for Naaman then asks for forgiveness. He explains "when my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow low in worship there, and he is leaning on my arm so that I must bow low in the temple of Rimmon- when I bow low in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant in this." (II Kings 5:18). Elisha responds "Go in peace." (II Kings 5:19). Rashi explains that since Naaman did not formally convert, he is not obligated to sacrifice his life rather than bow to an idol. Naaman's commitment to God is so strong that he anticipates the time when he will be forced to engage in an action that will be interpreted as loyalty to another god, and asks for forgiveness.

In the story of the Shunamite woman, when the child is revived, Elisha says to the woman "pick up your son." (II Kings 4:36). The Shunamite woman's response is contained in one verse: "She came and fell at his feet and bowed low to the ground; then she picked up her son and left." (II Kings 4:37). The lack of verbal communication in contrast to the symbolic physical gestures is striking. Elisha does not praise God or mention God in any manner. He simply tells the Shunamite woman to pick up her son. In response, she says nothing yet falls at his feet and bows. While she gives no direct verbal acknowledgement or thanks, her actions do indicate a reverence and respect for Elisha's power as a prophet of God. The falling and bowing is reminiscent of the reunion between Jacob and Esau. In Genesis 33:3 Jacob bows low to the ground seven times as he approaches his brother Esau. He then embraces him and falls upon his neck. Jacob's bowing and falling also suggests a submission to Esau or at least an acknowledgement of his power. The dramatic physical action of the Shunamite woman reminds the reader that sometimes there are no words to express one's gratitude or amazement. After witnessing a miracle, words can often seem insufficient in describing our reactions and feelings. We may then rely on our bodies to physically express our emotions.

When Elijah revives the son of the widow in I Kings, the widow interprets the miracle as proof of Elijah's status as prophet. She proclaims "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord is truly in your mouth." (I Kings 17:24). This story seems focused not solely on the power of God, but on the veracity of Elijah's prophetic status. Later commentators notice that the woman only responds to Elijah as a prophet, rather than God. In explaining her statement, Radak suggests that the woman thought Elijah's ability to make the flour and oil last was simply a blessing God provided

because of his merit, rather than one he enacted with his own God-given power. However, to revive a dying child is a miracle only someone in partnership with God could enact. Similarly, Meşudat David proposes that Elijah could have heard about the flour and oil from another prophet, but the healing he clearly enacted based on his own personal relationship with God. This contrast between the two miracles emphasizes the significance of healing. The act of healing is in a category by itself. It is a miracle beyond other miracles that one cannot simply learn about from other prophets. The widow is certain of Elijah's status as man and prophet of God, because only in relationship with God could one perform this sacred act of healing.

When God responds to Isaac's plea for Rebecca to conceive and Rebecca's desire for understanding, neither of them responds. Hannah, in contrast, reacts to God's answering her prayer through both a ritual act and verbal prayer. First, she names her son, for whom she prayed, Samuel, meaning "I asked the Lord for him." (I Samuel 1:20). She directly connects her experience of prayer with God's response. Her tearful prayer will forever be encapsulated in and remembered through the name of her son. Part of her prayer included a vow that if God granted her a son, she would in turn dedicate the son to God. Hannah remains true to her vow and once Samuel is weaned, she brings him back to the House of the Lord in Shiloh to remain there in service to God. Then she, like Hezekiah, continues with a poem of praise and thanksgiving to God. Hannah describes God as capable of reversing the status of men and women: "Men once sated must hire out for bread; Men once hungry hunger no more. While the barren woman bears seven, the mother of many is forlorn." (I Samuel 2:5). Clearly, Hannah has experienced a reversal in

her own status for the good, from a barren woman to a mother. She acknowledges that the power to do this lies with God.

Communal Response

Numbers 12 gives us an example of how the larger community responds to sickness and healing of one of its members. After God commands Miriam to remain isolated for seven days, Moses does not directly respond. There is no indication in the text about how he, the one who prayed so fervently for her healing, felt after hearing that she must remain apart. The text does tell us, however, how the community responded. "The people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted" (Numbers 12:15). The Israelites' response was not to abandon Miriam during her period of despair, but rather to wait until she could rejoin them. Patricia Karlin-Neumann points out that this mirrors the experience of families who put their lives on hold while waiting for a loved one to recover. The regular rhythm of the everyday suddenly stops. John S. Rolland notes that "for acute-onset illness, emotional and practical changes are compressed into a short time, requiring of the family more rapid mobilization of crisis management skills."[42] All attention and concern are directed toward the one who is stricken. In this period, time is suspended until everyone, including the ill loved one, can continue forward. What makes the situation of Miriam and the Israelites unusual is that they have God's word that the illness will only last seven days. They trust God and thus know that their lives will resume again in a specific amount of time. Yet the period of waiting for the recovery is

[42] John S. Rolland, "Chronic Illness and the Family Life Cycle," in *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, and Social Perspectives 3rd Edition*. ed. by Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 494.

still one of anxiety and uncertainty.[43] Once Miriam returns to health after seven days, the community is able to resume their journey: "After that, the people set out from Hazeroth and encamped in the wilderness of Paran." (Numbers 12:16).

Liturgy

Our liturgy contains a public liturgical response to recovery from illness, the blessing *Birkat HaGomeil*. In the Orthodox community, an individual recites "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who bestows good on the unworthy, who has bestowed on me much good." The phrase seems to refer to the idea of merit and reward, suggesting that there are those who receive God's blessing even though they do not deserve it. The congregation responds "Amen. May He who bestowed much good on you continue to bestow on you much good, Selah."[44] The Reform movement's version differs in significant ways. First, the blessing leaves out the phrase "who bestows good on the unworthy" in an attempt to avoid insinuating that there are those unworthy of God's concern. Second, the Reform version puts the prayer in the first-person plural, rather than singular, reading "who has bestowed every goodness upon us."[45] This change is striking, since the origin of the prayer is based on an individual escaping from danger, not a community or group.

The first reference to this prayer is found in BT *B'rachot* 54b which reads "Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: four [types] must give thanks: seafarers, those who go

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[43] Karlin-Neumann, in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 865.

[44] Jonathan Sacks, trans., *The Koren Siddur* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), 162.

[45] Elyse D. Frishman, ed., *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2007), 109.

through the wilderness, one who was ill and recovered, and one who in prison and came out." The inclusion of someone who has recovered from an illness with the other categories helps us understand the experience of being ill. All the categories involve people who have undergone a transition from a place of danger to a place of safety. They were previously at the mercy of forces beyond their control, in situations where they had little power. They had to rely solely on God's goodness to get them through. Indeed, the Talmud previously made the connection between a prisoner and a sick person in BT *B'rachot* 5b, noting that just as a captive cannot release him/herself from prison, so too a sick person cannot heal him/herself. In all cases, those involved were isolated from their community for a period of time and while their survival might have been in question, they are now able to rejoin the community.

The proof text for this obligation to give thanks comes from Psalm 107:17-22 which recounts God's healing a sinner and says "let them praise the Lord for His steadfast love, His wondrous deeds for mankind. Let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices and tell His deeds in joyful song." (Psalm 107:21-22). The Art Scroll siddur explains that in Temple times, one who had been spared from danger would have offered a thanksgiving sacrifice but today we say this blessing.[46] The Koren Siddur also points out that the blessing is reminiscent of Genesis 32:11 when Jacob tells God "I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have so steadfastly shown Your servant."

Psalm 107:32 continues "Let them exalt Him in the congregation of the people, acclaim Him in the assembly of the elders." Thus in BT *B'rachot* 54b the rabbis explain that the blessing of deliverance must be said in the presence of a minyan, which translates

[46] Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1990), 443a-b.

in later generations to mean before a community. While it is clear that the blessing must be said in public, the Talmud continues with an argument over whether the congregation must include or consist entirely of Torah scholars, based on the phrase "the assembly of the elders." Ultimately, the Talmud concludes the disagreement without a full resolution, simply stating it is a difficulty. However the blessing is traditionally recited during the Torah service. For the rabbis, to be alive is to be engaged in Torah study. Those who have recovered are those who are now able to study Torah so it is symbolic to be surrounded by those who also study Torah.

Regardless of the makeup of the congregation, in the contemporary period Ellen Frankel points out that the obligation to stand before the community is psychologically valuable. [47] Trauma of any kind can isolate victims and even the process of recovery can bring up feelings of guilt. Knowing that you have survived from an illness that has taken the lives of so many others can lead to survivor's guilt. The question of "why me?" that originally related to why a person had a disease, can turn into a question of why a person survived. Thus, a physical recovery does not necessarily mean that a sick person has fully returned to his/her previous state or is without emotional or spiritual needs. Therefore, just the act of acknowledging our vulnerability can be an opening to solicit support from the community.[48]

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[47] Ellen Frankel, in *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayer, Modern Commentaries Vol. 4 – Seder K'riat Hatorah (The Torah Service)*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman. (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), 114.

[48] Travis Maxwell and Jann Aldredge-Clanton, "Survivor guilt in cancer patients: a pastoral perspective," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 48:1 (Spring 1994), 26-27.

Conclusion

Exploring the experience of praying for healing, through the biblical and Talmudic stories as well as liturgy, emphasized for me the deep natural desire many have to reach out to God in times of need. The impulse to pray for healing, to cry out to God and to question God spans age, gender, and time period. From biblical and Talmudic characters who trust in folk remedies to contemporary patients who rely on cutting-edge medical treatments, many still turn to God as a source of healing. How one understands God's role and how one turns to God is diverse and varied yet basic questions remain the same: What is the purpose of my suffering? What have I done to deserve this? Are you, God, truly merciful? One main difference between the ancient and modern experience of praying for healing is the type of healing one expects. While the biblical and Talmudic characters expected physical healing, modern patients may or may not attribute this power to God. Yet healing can also come in the form of spiritual uplifting and emotional nourishment.

Many pastoral issues also remain the same from biblical times until today. Empathy is still valuable when praying for another person, yet sometimes the one who is ill can best express his/her needs. Family and community life still pauses when a loved one becomes ill. And those who recover still desire to express thanks and praise. Indeed, this common desire to acknowledge one's recovery, evident in multiple stories, was a surprise to me throughout my research. The urge to pray to God for healing is linked to the urge to thank God for it. Another surprise was the prevalence of symbolic physical gestures and ritual acts that either accompanied or served as prayer. Perhaps the lack of such movement in the liturgy led me to view prayer as verbal, but after exploring the

biblical and Talmudic stories I saw how gestures and actions could also express one's pain and hope.

Thesis Review

In Chapter One, before delving into the topic of prayer, I first explored various understandings of healing. Biblical, Talmudic and liturgical sources generally view healing as synonymous with a physical cure, as shown in the stories of Naaman, Hezekiah, Miriam, etc., as well as the traditional *Mi Shebeirach*. Recovery involves a return to a state of physical wellbeing. Modern commentaries and liturgies, such as Debbie Friedman's *Mi Shebeirach*, broaden the term to include spiritual and emotional wellbeing. Spiritual and emotional wellbeing may at times be even more desirable than a physical cure, leading one to a richer and more fulfilling life even in the face of illness.

The purpose of prayer thus depends on one's understanding of healing. For one seeking spiritual uplifting and emotional support, the Reform prayer book, *Gates of Prayer*, assures worshippers that "prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will."[49] One prays to restore one's soul and receive spiritual nourishment. The biblical and Talmudic stories and liturgical sources mainly assume that prayer is an effective means of enacting a physical cure. This understanding of prayer stems from a belief that God is the source of both illness and healing. If God has the power to bring sickness and disease, God also has the power to bring wellness. Prayer, in effect, reminds God of God's role. This understanding leads to the Talmudic dictum that

[49] Chaim Stern, ed. *Gates of Prayer The New Union Prayerbook: Weekdays, Sabbaths, and Festivals Services and Prayer for Synagogue and Home* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975), 325.

"whoever visits the sick causes the sick person to live and whoever does not visit the sick, causes the sick person to die." (BT *N'darim* 40a). Additionally, the idea of God as compassionate judge also undergirds many of the stories and prayers, particularly Hezekiah's prayer. God judges those who sin by punishing them through illness. Fortunately, the sick person can pray for and receive God's mercy and compassion, thereby abating the illness. Jewish liturgy contains various blessings and prayers related to the body and healing. Interestingly, the liturgy links our physical bodies with our spiritual nature by placing together the prayer for our body, *Asher Yatzar* and the prayer for our soul *Elohai Neshama*, thus signaling that the wellbeing of both is necessary for complete healing. Yet it also maintains hope in a physical recovery in the face of disease and bodily failure.

Chapter Two moved from the text and theological understandings of healing, God, and prayer to the larger experience of prayer. The manner of the prayer, surrounding environment and location, and physical gestures also convey the hopes of the worshipper and his/her relationship to God. Multiple biblical and Talmudic stories involve characters not only praying out loud or in their hearts, but also moving their bodies to communicate with God. In some cases, such as Hezekiah, R. Chanina ben Dosa, and both Elijah and Elisha, physical movement intensifies verbal prayer. For others, such as Naaman and R. Yochanan and R. Chanina, it serves as the prayer itself, as a different mode of reaching out to God. It is noteworthy then, that despite the abundance of physical actions and gestures in relationship to healing within the Bible and Talmud, no movement accompanies our prayers and blessings for the body and healing in the prayer book. While one might expect a prayer highlighting our physical nature to involve

physical expression, this is not the case. Fortunately, modern liturgists, particularly Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg, in noticing this gap have created rituals to connect our physical selves with our prayers for our bodies and our need for healing.

The experience of prayer varies greatly based on who is actually praying and Chapter 3 illustrated and examined this dynamic. Here the importance of the relationship between the one who is praying and the sick person became apparent. When one prays for another's healing, the relationship between the two people influences how one expresses the need and desire for healing to God and how the sick person responds to the prayer. Thus, R. Acha bar Chanina emphasized that the one visiting should be a *ben gilo* ((BT *N'darim* 39b). In addition to the relationship between the two people, the relationship between the one praying and God and the personal status, as servant, prophet, king, etc. of the one reaching out to God impacts how God will receive the prayer. This was apparent in the stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, as well as R. Yochanan ben Zakkai and R. Chanina. Yet Rebecca, Hannah, and Naaman all prayed for their own individual healing. Sometimes this is a necessary component of healing, without personal involvement healing will not occur. Often the one who is sick is the only one who can most clearly express to God his/her true hopes and needs. Jewish liturgy acknowledges these two modes of praying for healing and includes both communal (*Mi Shebeirach*) and personal (*R'faenu*) opportunities for prayer.

Chapter Four explored a critical and interesting aspect of praying for healing that is often overlooked: the praise and gratitude to God that follows recovery. For Hezekiah, Naaman, the Shunamite woman, and Hannah, just as illness provoked a reaching out to God, so too did healing initiate a response. Throughout the biblical and Talmudic stories,

regardless of physical or spiritual healing, each person responds in his/her own way. Characters may retell the story of their journey from sickness to healing, acknowledge God's power for the first time, praise God for God's goodness, or offer thanks to God either verbally or physically. Even the prayer book contains a specific blessing, *Birkat HaGomeil*, for one who survived a life-threatening situation, including illness. The inclusion of an acknowledgement to God within biblical, Talmudic and liturgical sources highlights the common need to respond to a change in status from sick to well and express gratitude for healing.

Further Avenues of Inquiry

This thesis opens up the possibility of exploring new contemporary expressions of healing prayers. In most of the stories, the characters relied on their own spontaneous prayers for healing. While the thesis surveyed the set Jewish liturgy, one could also investigate how to bring spontaneous prayer into a prayer service or to a patient. As noted earlier, the Jewish prayer book lacks movement related to healing. How could one incorporate movement in prayer? Specifically, how could one incorporate movement based on the part of the body that is ill? In developing new means of prayer, one should also examine the theological messages inherent in the prayer. While most modern commentaries focused on spiritual healing versus physical healing, do we lose something in denying or challenging the belief that God has the power to physically cure our bodies? How would a modern Jew maintain this belief in the face of science and medicine?

The Talmud proclaims that God sustains the sick (BT *N'darim* 40a). Thus when faced with illness and the breakdown of the body, we reach out to God to heal. Our prayers may take a variety of forms and present multiple of understandings of God, yet they reflect a universal yearning: hear my prayer, see my tears, and heal me.

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