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Summary

This thesis struggles with the existence of suffering in the world and seeks metaphors offered by the Jewish tradition for dealing with the suffering and illness that plagues or will plague us throughout our life. This thesis attempts to answer the following questions: How will we make sense of and deal with our own sickness? What tools do we have to confront personal suffering? How can we make our suffering sufferable?

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter analyzes texts from the Jewish tradition in an attempt to understand how the Rabbis approached suffering and healing. Texts from the Tanach and various sources in Rabbinic literature, such as the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud, Geonic sources, and the Codes help to shed light on a developing Toraitic and later rabbinic theology regarding the nature of illness, suffering, and healing. The second chapter surveys traditional modern medicine as well as post-modern, mind-body medicine and the ways in which both schools approach health and illness. Finally, the third chapter focuses on Jewish post-modern approaches to suffering and healing. These thinkers deny the notion of religious causality posited by the Rabbis. They approach the issue of health and illness through a paradigm of non-causality, focusing less on the source of our sufferings and more on creating Jewish coping mechanisms for dealing with them.

HEALTH AND ILLNESS: COPING JEWISHLY

Laurie Neuman Rice

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Ordination.

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion
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Advisor: Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The presence of suffering in the world poses a problem for religion insofar as it seems to contradict the notion of an all-powerful, all-knowing, benevolent God. If God is good, God would not want God's creatures to suffer, and if all-powerful and all-knowing, God would be able to prevent their suffering. Some religious philosophies overcome suffering by denying either its importance (Stoicism) or its reality (Spinoza), or by seeking release from existence in the world (Buddhism). Augustine formulated the classic philosophical view of evil which claims that since everything that exists was created by God and must be good, evil is merely the absence of good.[1] Judaism has attempted to cope with the problem of suffering in other ways.

It was the great *Village Voice* writer, Paul Cowan, who said of his own illness (1988): "We are all going to enter the land of the sick at one time in our lives. The question is only when?"[2] How will we make sense of and deal with our own sickness? What tools do we have to confront personal suffering? Rabbi Nancy Flam of The Jewish Healing Center writes:

> Thinking about our illness, suffering and healing and asking "Why?" is an essential cognitive resource, just as important as prayer, which is non-cognitive. The reason is best explained by analogy: It is well known that experiencing

[1] Schwarzschild, Steven S., "Suffering" in Encyclopedia Judaica, CD Rom.
[2] Remembered by Rabbi William Cutter. "Learning and Helping," in Freeman & Abrams, Illness and Health in the Jewish Tradition, 46.

> physical pain without knowing the cause often magnifies the experience of the pain itself. Once we get a diagnosis, particularly if the diagnosis is not life-threatening, it often happens that the physical sensations of pain are more bearable. It is similar with emotional and spiritual suffering. If we can find or develop a framework with which to understand our suffering, then sometimes the suffering itself becomes more bearable.[3]

Like Flam, Rabbi William Cutter, argues that language, particularly metaphor, has a way of lending concrete figuration to the potential emptiness that lies behind every illness.[4] What are the metaphors offered by the Jewish tradition for dealing with the suffering and illness that plagues or will plague us throughout our life? What tools will we have for confronting our illness when our time comes? Victor Frankel, psychiatrist, maintains that the true root of suffering is loss of meaning and purpose in life. Pain and privation can be endured, he says, if it is for a purpose.[5] This paper will ask how we can make our suffering sufferable?

The first chapter of this paper analyzes texts from the Jewish tradition in an attempt to understand how the Rabbis approached suffering and healing. The second chapter looks at traditional modern medicine and its approach to the issue of health and illness. The third chapter surveys writings by contemporary Jewish thinkers in order to determine their understanding of suffering and healing. The rabbis, thinkers, and physicians in the following chapters understand health and

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[3] Flam, Rabbi Nancy. "Healing of Body; Healing of Spirit," Sh'ma, Oct. 3, 1997.
[4] Cutter, Rabbi William. "Learning and Helping," in Illness and Health in the Jewish Tradition by Dr. David Freeman and Rabbi Judith Abrams (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 44.
[5] Byock, Ira. Dying Well (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), 83.

illness through different paradigms. The way in which they perceive suffering and conceive of healing is colored by the paradigm within which they function.

Thus, I begin with a wide spectrum of Jewish texts in order to uncover a theology of illness, suffering, and healing put forth by Jewish tradition. Texts from the Tanach and various sources in Rabbinic literature, such as the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud, Geonic sources, and the Codes will help to shed light on a developing Toraitic and later rabbinic theology regarding the nature of illness, suffering, and, healing.

CHAPTER ONE:
TRADITIONAL JEWISH SOURCES ON SUFFERING AND HEALING

A Theology of Suffering

Our Jewish tradition presents us with four developing theologies on the nature of illness and suffering. A simplified Torah theology, found paradigmatically in Deuteronomy, but retained also in rabbinic theology, is that good is requited with good, and bad with bad. Suffering constitutes punishment for sin: "When a man sees that he is being chastised, let him examine his ways."[6] However, it is difficult to uphold this theory in the face of the suffering of the innocent and the prosperity of the wicked spoken of in the Wisdom literature. Who knows why Job had to suffer as he did, or as the prophet Jeremiah asks, "Why does the way of the evil prosper?"[7] Early rabbinic theology thus offers two additional understandings of why suffering and illness exist. The first states that final justice is meted out in the *olam haba,* the world to come. The second explains that suffering may provide a process of purification, granting us an opportunity to do *teshuvah.* After all, the Psalmist speaks of a suffering as a

[6] B. *Ber.* 5a; B. *San.* 27b
[7] Jer. 19:1

blessing: "Blessed is the man upon whom You place suffering..."[8] Such suffering is known in the Talmud as *yissurin shel ahavah*--divine chastisements of love.

In post-Talmudic times, certain Jewish philosophers developed their own concept of suffering which combined both Jewish and non-Jewish theories. For example, Maimonides adopted an Augustinian viewpoint, stating that while suffering does exist, the particular evils which befall one are for the good of the universe as a whole.[9] And while he rejects the notion that the innocent sometimes suffer in order to be rewarded in *olam haba*, he affirms the conviction that all suffering is punishment for previously committed sins.[10]

All of these theologies share a common understanding of the source for our sufferings: God. God punishes us through illness, or, as some of the traditional texts explain, as an act of divine retribution.[11] Rashi's commentary to Exodus 15:26 speaks of God as the ultimate healer, a God who will not inflict the illnesses of Egypt upon us if we promise to fulfill God's *mitzvot*. Even today, the Deuteronomic theme of reward and punishment remains within the very corpus of our traditional daily liturgy, the *Shema*. Even though the promises and warnings included in this theology are expressed in plural, national terms, the personal has

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[8] Psalm 94:12. The JPS translation writes: "Happy is the man whom You chasten..."
[9] Maimonides, Moses. Guide of the Perplexed. 3:8-25.
[10] Ibid. 24.
[11] B. *Shab.* 32a

always been seen as implied there as well. Indeed Job's friends infer that if Job is suffering, he *must* have done wrong.

God may also cause our illness by simply abandoning us. Deuteronomy 31:14ff contains an interesting statement in which God warns Moses that in the future Israel will be unfaithful, and then, "I will be angry with them and leave them, and hide My face from them, and [Israel] will be devoured, and many evils and troubles will find him, and he will say 'These evils have found me because there is no God in my midst.'"[12] In this paradigm, the metaphor presented to us is God as our "protective shield." When God leaves us, we are vulnerable to destruction. Other traditional texts extend the metaphor by assuring us that God will heal us: "The Lord will strengthen him on his sickbed; whenever he is prostrate You will heal all his illnesses."[13]

Determining how, why and when God's justice is delivered may very well help us to understand theodicy in the universal, but it does not answer the particularistic question that Job and we ask in times of suffering: "Why me?" Even attempting to answer this question demands our going beyond the paradigm of God as sole cause of our pain. According to one reading, the contemporary theologies, both Jewish and secular, envision a God who is not responsible for our suffering, a God who represents a source of hope and comfort. But actually, we find this idea of a limited God earlier. Hints of God's seeming lack of control in

[12] Deut. 31:17
[13] Psalm 41:4

the course of human health and illness are embedded within the texts of our ancient tradition as well. A God who suffers with us, having no ability to relieve our pain through any greater means than the existence of a Divine Presence, the *Shechinah*, which comforts and watches over us, is a prevalent traditional idea.

The Nature of Healing

What does the tradition tell us about how healing happens? What or who, in the eyes of the tradition, is a healer? Classical Jewish texts attribute healing to a variety of sources. Healing can come from the Holy One, from the attention and presence of others, from the study of Torah, from sages and prophets, from prayer, and from the presence of "magical" objects. The fact that a single tradition offers such a variety of explanations for how healing happens suggests that the nature of illness and healing was as grand a mystery to the Sages as it is to us moderns today-- perhaps even more so considering the minimal medical and scientific knowledge of their time.

That the Rabbis even discuss the nature of illness is an admission on their part that sickness happens. Indeed, this is a monumental admission for not only does it point to a weakness in humankind, but, for the Rabbis, it also points to an imperfection in God via God's creation. The Rabbis had to deal with this dilemma, with the paradox of the simultaneous existence of sickness and health. Were the Rabbis correct in their assessment of God's imperfection? If illness

serves a purpose, namely, as a method of divine retribution or a form of *yissurin shel ahavah*, then how is God rendered imperfect in the process? If *yissurin shel ahavah* are intended to offset suffering in the world to come, then sickness actually reinforces God's perfection by furthering a larger plan: suffering in this world eliminates suffering in the world to come. Thus, the Rabbis were able to retain their faith in a perfect God by explaining illness as a necessary and intentional part of God's ultimate plan in creation.

If God is truly perfect, then why would doctors be necessary as healers? The Talmud expressly grants doctors the divine permission to heal, deriving such authorization from a verse in Exodus , "And shall cause him to be thoroughly healed"; healing, then, need not be regarded as "flying in the face of heaven."[14] Calling upon a physician for medical aid is no failure to rely upon God to restore health: "Whoever is in pain, let him go to the physician."[15] Broader scope for the authorization comes from Deuteronomy: "If you chance upon an object lost by your brother, you must restore it to him."[16] The Talmud expands the mitzvah to include rescuing a neighbor from danger, such as drowning or being attacked by an animal -- to "restore" his body as well as his belongings.[17] To Maimonides, this is the biblical source of the mandate to heal; to come to the aid of one who has lost

[14] B. *Ber.* 60a; Ex. 21:19
[15] B. *B. Kama* 46b
[16] Deut. 22:2
[17] B. *San.* 73a

his health and needs restoration.[18] Nachmanides sees a general obligation to save the life of one's fellow in the verse "Let thy brother live with thee (Lev. 25:35)", and he locates the physician's obligation to heal in the words, "Love thy neighbor as thyself (Lev. 19:18)."[19]

Because humans were considered God's instruments, the instrumentality of being a physician was held in high esteem:

> "Honor the physician before need of him. Him also has God apportioned...The skill of a physician shall lift up his head; and he shall stand before nobles... From God, the physician gets wisdom...God brings forth medicines from the earth...By them, the physician soothes pain and the pharmacist makes a remedy."[20]

God's role in healing is intimately immanent. Both the *Tur* and the *Shulchan Aruch*[21] teach that God tends to the sick through doctors. Healing is commanded. It is considered *pikuach nefesh*, the saving of a soul. To be diligent in healing is to

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[18]Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishnah, *Ned.* 4:4. Incidentaly, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra postulates a contradiction between the passage in Deuteronomy and the passage in Exodus. He resolves the difference by finding the latter to refer, as does its context, to man-made wounds, which the perpetrator must undo, and the former passage to refer to "internal wounds," sickness, which is an 'act of God', a manifestation of divine rebuke or punishment, and can only be healed or removed by God.

[19]Feldman, David. Health and Medicine in the Jewish Tradition (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co, 1986), 19.

[20] *Ben Sira.* ch.38. Except for a few cases, such as the praise of medicine and the physician by Ben Sira, medical matters in rabbinic texts are dealt with mainly to illustrate points of ritual, or civil and criminal law.

[21] The *Tur* was written by Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (1270-1340). The *Shulchan Aruch* was written by Rabbi Joseph Caro (Safed; 16th century).

praise God, and one who [can heal but] hesitates is equivalent to one who sheds blood.[22]

The Presence of the *Shechinah*

Lest we think that God's presence at the sickbed is made manifest only through the presence of the physician, the *Shulchan Aruch* teaches that the *Shechinah* dwells above the head of the one who is sick.[23] For this reason, visitors are instructed to cloak themselves and sit on the ground *l'fanav*, "in front of" the sick person.[24] Rashi explains that one behaves in this way when visiting the sick out of awe and reverence for the Divine Presence which has descended to the person's sickbed in support and sustenance.

But God's healing power is manifest in more than the mere presence of the *Shechinah* over the sickbed. The Psalms sing of God's more active healing power in times of suffering: "In suffering You give me relief (Ps. 4:2); "Cast your burden upon God and He will sustain you (Ps. 52:33)." People may cast all of their sufferings upon God and anticipate healing. The Talmud makes it very clear that when we are sick, God aches for us as a parent does for a child: "When a person is in pain, what does the Divine Presence say? 'My head aches. My arm aches.'"[25] R. Hayyim of Volozhin infers from this verse that God's pain over our

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[22] *Tur; Shulchan Aruch; Yoreh Deah,* 336.
[23] *Shulchan Aruch; Yoreh Deah,* 335.
[24] Ibid.
[25] B. *San.* 46a

illness exceeds even our own. The fact that one of God's precious, beloved creatures is suffering, in a world that God meant to be perfect, is a source of divine agony.[26] Rabbi Meir Sendor carries this idea further:

> The Jewish approach to healing involves a self-transcendence, a shift of concern to God, yet God as feeling our pain more intimately than we do, closer to us than we are to ourselves. In this way, we begin the process of re-establishing the experience of health.[27]

Walking in God's Ways

Furthermore, just as doctors serve as instruments of God's healing power, so too, caregivers, in their own compassion for those who need healing mirror microscopically God's own infinite compassion. They thus have much to offer in the way of healing. Caregivers include above all those who visit the sick.

The *mitzvah* of visiting the sick, *bikkur cholim*, is derived from two verses in the Torah, one in which God visits Abraham just after his circumcision[28] and the other from Deuteronomy 13:5, "You shall walk after Adonai your God..," meaning you should follow the principles and ways of the Holy One.[29] The *Bet Yosef* teaches that to visit the sick is a source of great healing for the sick.[30] Visiting the sick allows us to walk in God's ways, to imitate God.

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[26] *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* 2:11
[27] Sendor, Rabbi Meir. "What is Jewish Healing?" Sh'ma 28/538, Oct. 3, 1997.
[28] Genesis 18:1: "And God appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre." (JPS)
[29] For citation of these verses together, see *Beit Yosef*: *Yoreh Deah*: 138.
[30] *Bet Yosef; Yoreh Deah;* 158. (The *Beit Yosef* was written by Rabbi Joseph Caro in 1542.)

> Rabbi Hama son of Rabbi Hanina further said: What is the meaning of the text, "You shall walk after the Lord your God."(Deut.13:5) Is it possible for a human being actually to walk after the *Shechinah*? Has it not been said, "For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire?"(Deut.4:24) The meaning must be that we are to emulate the attributes of the Holy one. As God clothes the naked...so you should clothe the naked. The Holy one visited the sick...so should you also visit the sick...[31]

The *Bet Yosef* cites the Talmud's instructions for visitors to "sweep and sprinkle" (*kibdo v'rivtzo*) the ground in front of the sickbed.[32] The word *kibed* also means "to honor". Perhaps sitting cloaked in front of the patient, as well as sweeping and sprinkling the ground before him, shows more than reverence for the Divine Presence; it also honors the patient for whom performing a mundane task such as sweeping has become impossible. If holy moments are those where God and humans meet, then doctoring, caregiving, and visiting the sick are all acts of holiness. No wonder Jewish tradition portrays the sickbed as a holy place! It is where God's presence, the *Shechinah*, meets human presence in an effort to heal, comfort, and honor the sick. Moreover, visiting the sick grants us the opportunity to become *shutafim shel ha-Kadosh baruch-Hu*, partners with God.

Both Talmud and Codes tell us that the *Shechinah* rests above the head of the sickbed, but we cannot actually see the *Shechinah*, touch her, hear her, feel her in the room. Illness and suffering are therefore times when God's absence is felt most, when people ask themselves, "How could God have allowed this to happen

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[31] B. *Sot.* 14a

[32] B. *Ned.* 40a; *Beit Yosef* 138 commenting on Maimonides' *Torat ha-Adam.*

to me?" Caregivers and visitors, as God's visible representatives, have much to offer in the way of healing. When we visit the sick, thereby imitating the divine holiness of God, the Divine becomes present. When we act as God acts, the Divine presence is manifest.

The masterful physician and medieval codifier Moses Maimonides contextualizes the *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim* within traditional Jewish law. In so doing, he declares the act as being beyond gender and social status, limited only by practical considerations, and endowed with great healing power.[33] He calls it an example of lovingkindness commanded by rabbinic law. Tsvi Blanchard interprets Maimonides' mandate from an interesting dual perspective: "When we visit the sick, we not only share our common vulnerability [as human beings], but we identify with God by being a 'supportive presence,' we are there for the sick person, just as God is there. Thus, in visiting the sick, we become both more human and more God-like."[34]

Maimonides teaches that "visiting the sick, is like lessening their illness."[35] However, according to tradition, it lessens it only by one-sixtieth, the percentage that the Talmud uses to indicate a bare minimum amount-- for example, one-sixtieth is the minimum portion that must be given to the priests from the produce

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[33] *Mishneh Torah*, 14:1
[34] Blanchard, Rabbi Tsvi. *Joining Heaven and Earth: Maimonides and the Laws of Bikkur Holim*.
[35] *Mishneh Torah*, 14:4

of the harvest.[36] But even though visiting can remove only one-sixtieth of one's illness, it is nonetheless important: it does *something*. The measurable affect of our visit may seem minimal in that we may not see physical improvement in the sick person as a result of our visit, but our presence at the sickbed truly matters. As the Talmud puts it: "A visitor takes away a sixtieth of the illness: *yet even so*, visiting is required."[37] Although we may not notice the healing benefits of our presence, the Talmud assures us that our visit counts.

Lest we think that our visit serves only the welfare of the one who is ill, the Talmud suggests that our presence at the sickbed affects our own well-being also. The Talmud quotes a verse from Exodus ("Teach them the way on which they will walk") and draws a parallel between "on which they will walk" and visiting the sick.[38] When we visit the sick, we see ourselves in the face of the one we visit. We may now be playing the role of the healthy visitor, but we see in the sick person a station in life that we, too, will one day occupy. While visiting the sick removes one-sixtieth of the illness for the sick person, it simultaneously grants visitors one-sixtieth worth of insight into the path ahead of them. Better able to understand our own future, we increase our compassion for the one who is presently sick, for we understand that the people we are visiting are at a stage that we will one day find ourselves. By recognizing our common paths, our shared

[36] B. *Ned.* 40a; B. *Pes.* 35b; B. *Beit.* 3b; B. *Chag.* 7a
[37] B. *B. Metzia* 30b
[38] Exodus 18:20; B. *B. Metzia* 30b

destiny, we, as visitors, remove one-sixtieth of the sick person's illness. Simultaneously we prepare ourselves for the road ahead, recognizing that the sick person in front of us will someday be ourselves.

The texts of our tradition establish a framework wherein caregivers and sick people can recognize their common essence. A seeming paradox inherent in the *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim* is that although it is defined as an obligation, and thus separates the visitor from the patient, true fulfillment of the *mitzvah* requires that we "experience" the suffering of the patient.[39] That is why Maimonides categorizes *bikkur holim* as an act of lovingkindness, a commandment which is not only rabbinic, but derived from an injunction found in the Torah that "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."[40] To love your neighbor as yourself means that in order to show love to others, we must first be able to show love to ourselves. With this model in mind, visiting the sick is based on the recognition that one day we, too, may be sick and wish to be visited. Thus, while visiting the sick means sharing the vulnerability and the burden of the one who is sick, it also requires that we recognize our potential to be as vulnerable and burdened in the future.

It is R. Akiba who informs us that one who does not visit the sick is a shedder of blood. But in a charming example of Talmudic logic, R. Dimi explains precisely why one who visits the sick causes the sick person to live.

"Visiting the sick causes life, while not visiting causes

[39] Blanchard. Joining Heaven and Earth: Maimonides and the Laws of Bikkur Holim.
[40] Lev. 19:18

> death. How is this so? Because one who visits the sick prays that the patient will live while one who does not visit prays that the patient should die. Can it possibly be that one who does not visit actually prays that one who is sick should die? No. Rather, one who does not visit prays neither that the sick should live or die."[41]

Rashi sees here the further implication that our very thoughts and words affect the fate of the sick.[42] He concludes, therefore, that the reward to those who visit the sick will be great: "The Lord will preserve him, and keep him alive, and he shall be blessed upon the earth; and you will not deliver him unto the will of his enemies."[43]

Aside from the healing power of the visit from a caregiver or friend, the Talmud speaks of another sort of healing derived from a more personal, physical relationship between a visitor and one who is ill.

> R. Hiyya b. Abba fell ill and R. Johanan went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you. He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him.[44]

Interestingly, none of the later commentators give much attention to this passage. This may be due to the *aggadic* nature of the text, as the post-Talmudic commentators were often more interested in the *halachic* (legal) texts. However,

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[41] Ibid.
[42] Rashi to B. *Ned.* 40a; Rashi, acronym for Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, was an 11th century scholar from Troyes, the most authoritative of biblical and Talmudic commentators.
[43] Psalm 41:3
[44] B. *Ber.* 5b

the fact that this text has been vastly unexplored suggests that even later, post-Talmudic generations of scholars were baffled by the nature of healing and how it happens. In fact, it illustrates two critical points: (1) the possibility that the physical, comforting touch of a healthy friend can greatly enhance the health of one who is ill; and (2) an implied at rejection of *yissurin shel ahavah.*

Janice S. Rous, a teacher of healing through body work, comments on the above Talmudic passage:

> I am struck by the fact that the person who is ill responds... by giving the healer his hand. By this act, he signifies that he is willing to be healed. Through touch, the person who is ill and the healer enter into a dynamic partnership. The work of the healer is not to take on the pain of the other, but to offer an experience of reconnection, thereby 'raising' the person who is ill to a different level of understanding.[45]

Deborah Buckley, a healer, cancer survivor, and volunteer in the *Bikkur Cholim*/Para-Chaplaincy Program of Jewish Family Services of Colorado, understands R. Hiyya's response as a sense of surrender rather than a willingness to be healed. She perceives his answer as a lack of investment in his illness, "a place of equanimity that is a requirement for healing."[46] It is clear that the passage is offering what seems to be a formula for Jewish healing. How that formula is interpreted varies. Whether R. Hiyya's response demonstrates his willingness to be healed or his surrender to illness, the fact that R. Johanan takes his hand

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[45] Rous, Janice S., The Outstretched Arm, a quarterly publication of the National Center for Jewish Healing, New York: Vol. 1, Issue 2, Fall 1998.
[46] Buckley, Deborah., The Outstretched Arm, a quarterly publication of the National Center for Jewish Healing: New York: Vol. 1, Issue 2, Fall 1998.

indicates that the presence of another allows the sick to climb out of the depths of pain and suffering, and reconnect to the 'outside' community by re-entering the world of the healthy. Rabbi Simkha Weintraub expands on Buckley's idea:

> R. Johanan gave R. Hiyya the opportunity to hold hands, to reach back to the one reaching out...joining him in simple "post-verbal" human presence, physically re-forging a link with the community of the "temporarily well" while maintaining a position of autonomy, efficacy, and choice for the one who is suffering.[47]

Indeed, the 'dynamic partnership' entered into by the sick and their visitors/caregivers creates a bridge that leads the sick onto the path of healing.

We saw that the Rabbis understood suffering as *yissurin shel ahavah*, divine chastisements of God's love. But the text from *Berachot* provides a countervailing perspective, especially when suffering happens on a personal level. R. Johanan offers R. Hiyya the opportunity to express something--anything--about how he is dealing with his suffering. When R. Hiyya tells the truth -- he welcomes neither it nor its reward -- R. Johanan does not challenge him, even though his response "contradicts some of the pious notions about suffering that were being articulated in the *yeshiva* academy in those days, such as the idea that sufferings were God's 'chastisements of love.'"[48] Johanan's bodily response matters here. Far from a verbal rebuke, he extends a helping hand.

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[47] Weintraub, Rabbi Simkha Y., The Outsretched Arm, a quarterly publication of the National Center for Jewish Healing: New York, Vol. 1, Issue 2, Fall 1998

[48] Weintraub, Rabbi Simkha Y., The Outsretched Arm, a quarterly publication of the National Center for Jewish Healing: New York, Vol. 1, Issue 2, Fall 1998.

"...And you shall study"

Healing also takes place through the study of Torah. R. Joshua b. Levi studies Torah with those who are ill in order to bring them healing.[49] R. Judah ben Hiyya says, "A drug may be beneficial for one person and not for another, but the Torah is a life-giving medicine for all Israel."[50] What is it about Torah study that alleviates suffering and hastens healing? Certainly it cannot be that Torah study physically strengthens the ill, for we find elsewhere the incredible claim that the study of Torah weakens one's physical strength. Maimonides explains, in relation to the subject of how many times a week a husband is obligated to the conjugal duty, that Torah scholars are obligated only once a week because "the study of Torah weakens their strength."[51] Yet, the Rabbis seem confident nonetheless about the positive affect of Torah study upon illness and even its ability to postpone death: "The Angel of Death cannot approach one who is studying Torah."[52]

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[49] B. *Ket.* 77b
[50] B. *Eruv.* 54a
[51] *Hilchot Ishut*, 14:1.
[52] B. *Sot.* 21a

How then do we explain the rabbinic confidence in Torah, given that it appears alongside the theology of divine retribution for sin? Perhaps, since the Rabbis stipulated that illness is punishment or, euphemistically, a gift from God, it followed that Torah study must be a way of placating God's wrath and beseeching God's mercy.

But why Torah study? What is it about the study of Torah that effects healing? Elsewhere, the Rabbis encouraged the study of Torah as a means of weaponry to fight off Israel's oppressors. A midrash on Isaiah 14:4 ("You shall recite this song of scorn over the king of Babylon: How is the taskmaster vanished, How is oppression ended!") reads: "The people that makes itself weary through intensive study of Torah will not be made victim of an oppressor."[53] The idea that Israel should "beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks"[54] is attributed to both Isaiah and Micah. Disempowered, the exiled Israel's only means of defense was the study of Torah. In this way, Torah is perceived as a life-saving tool. We can draw an analogy between the community of Israel referred to by Isaiah and Micah and disempowered patients who are exiled from their community. Just as exiled Israel sought refuge in Torah, so the sick among us may also find comfort in the Torah's wisdom.

In equating Torah study with health, the Rabbis drew from Proverbs 4:22: "[Words of Torah] are life to those who find them." Similarly, Leviticus 18:5

[53] *Yalkut Isaiah* 415
[54] Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3

assures us that "...by pursuing study man shall live."[55] But why? What is behind the magic of Torah study? Perhaps Torah study was thought to be a means of curing illness because the study of Torah was equal to all of the other obligations that are immeasurable: honoring father and mother, deeds of loving-kindness, making peace between a man and his fellow. Therefore, studying Torah simultaneously fulfilled as many of God's commandments as possible, and God, in return for our obedience, would grant mercy upon us. As Christianity maintains that belief in Jesus Christ offers salvation, so does Judaism believe that Torah provides divine deliverance. In the prayer from the daily liturgy of both morning and evening, *Ahavat Rabbah* and *Ahavat Olam*, we acknowledge that the gift of Torah is God's ultimate act of grace. Therefore, the Rabbis, devoted whole-heartedly to the Torah's salvific power, would believe that the study of Torah effects God's ultimate grace, bringing healing to the sick.

The Talmud attempts to explain why Torah study is the antidote for our ills:

> Our masters taught: "Therefore shall you lay up (*v'samtem*) these My words"(Deut.11:18). The word *samtem* is to be understood as a compound of *sam*, "remedy," and *tam*, "perfect," the Torah being compared to a lifesaving remedy. A parable of a man who gave his son a severe blow and then put a plaster on the sore spot, saying: My son, as long as this plaster is on your sore, you may eat what you like, drink what you like, bathe in hot or cold water, and need not be afraid. But if you remove it, the sore will open up. So, too, the Holy One said to Israel: My children, I created the evil impulse, and I created the Torah as its antidote. If you occupy yourselves with Torah, you will not be delivered into the power

[55] Also, Prov. 4:22: "[Torah is] healing to all his flesh." (JPS)

of the impulse to evil.[56]

The theology of this passage suggests that God created both good and the impulse to evil, and we can use the good [Torah] to battle the affects of evil [illness]. If indeed the Rabbis viewed suffering as punishment for evil created by God, then they would take seriously the idea of Torah study as a remedy, for God repeatedly warns the Israelites to abide by God's Torah in order to avoid punishment [illness]. If the Rabbis saw illness as a form of God's punishment, then the study of Torah would clearly be the most direct means of avoiding God's wrath in the form of suffering.

Personal Healing Powers

We saw above how R. Johanan reached out to R. Hiyya. The Talmud vests other sages and prophets also with special healing powers, some, but not all, of which entail "touch":

> Once the son of R. Gamaliel fell ill. He sent two scholars to R. Hanina b. Dosa to ask him to pray for him. When he saw them, he went up to an upper chamber and prayed for him. When he came down he said to them: Go, the fever has left him.[57]

Later, in the same text:

> R. Hanina b. Dosa went to study Torah with R. Johanan ben Zakkai. The son of R. Johanan ben Zakkai fell ill. He said to him: Hanina my son, pray for him that he may live. He put his head between his knees and prayed for him and

[56] B. *Kid.* 30b
[57] B. *Ber.* 34b

he lived.[58]

R. Hanina b. Dosa's healing powers are not so much magical as they are a result of his piety. The Talmud holds him up as an example of a completely righteous man[59], and describes him as "one for whose sake God shows favor to his entire generation."[60] R. Hanina b. Dosa's prayers were regarded as being specially accepted, and as a result he was frequently requested to pray for the sick and those in trouble.[61] When the wife of Johanan ben Zakkai asked, "Is Hanina greater than you?" he replied, "No! But he is like a servant before the king, and I am like a courtier before the king."[62] A servant is closer, more intimately related to a ruler than a bureaucratic courtier. It is not, therefore, Hanina b. Dosa himself who heals the sick, but God who responds to Hanina's prayers and brings healing because Hanina asks for it.

Hanina echoes tales of Elijah and Elisha and anticipates traditions of healing angels. The prophet Elijah is known for his ability to ward off even the Angel of Death from the young fated to die. The prophet Elisha too is described as a healer.[63] Later rabbinic tradition provides healing angels, especially the angel Raphael, whose name means "God is healing." He is one of the three angels who

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[58] Ibid.
[59] B. *Ber.* 61b
[60] B. *Hag.* 14a
[61] See also B. *Yev.* 121b
[62] B. *Ber.* 34b
[63] Elisha heals Naaman, the Syrian commander, of leprosy (II Kings 5:8-14).

visits Abraham after his circumcision[64], and appears in the talmudic bedtime prayer: "...to my right Michael, and to my left Gabriel; in front of me Uriel, and behind me Raphael, and over my head God's *Shechinah*."

Although the tradition portrays all four of the above mentioned characters as healers, it is ultimately God who heals. Indeed, God's healing comes through specific people who are given the authority to alleviate the suffering of others, whether by their righteousness, their gift of prophecy, or their angelic nature.

Thus far, this section has reinforced the classic theology that it is God who brings about our suffering and God who heals. We move next to the human role of prayer.

"Baruch ata Adonai, Rofei ha-Holim."

Since it is God who heals, Jewish tradition looks positively on the role of prayer, not just by Hanina but by every sufferer. The Torah, Talmud, and later medieval texts all exemplify how prayer can be an efficacious form of healing. The example par excellence from the Torah is Moses' beseeching God on behalf of his sister, Miriam. He cries, "*El na r'fa na lah*--Please God, heal her!"[65] The Talmud, commenting upon this verse, gives instruction on the nature and construction of prayers offered for healing.

> R. Yaakov said in the name of Rav Chisda: One who seeks [Divine] mercy for his friend need not mention his name

[64] B. *Yom. 37a*; B. *B. Metzia* 86
[65] Num. 12:13

> [while praying for him]. For [when Moses prayed for Miriam] it says: *Please God, heal her*, without mentioning Miriam's name.[66]

A later citation by the Maharal of Prague[67] states that this ruling applies only when one is in the presence of the person for whom one is praying, as was the case with Moses and Miriam. Otherwise, one should mention the name of the person for whom one is praying.[68]

The Rabbis attempt to understand why certain prayers seem acceptable to God while others do not. R. Hanina b. Dosa claims that if his prayer comes out fluently, he knows that it will be accepted, but if not, then he knows that it will be rejected.[69] Another text asks:

> Why does one escape death and the other does not? Because one prayed and was answered, and the other prayed and was not answered. Why was the one answered and the other was not? One prayed with his whole heart and was therefore answered.[70]

Finally, one of the most classic texts denoting the efficacy of prayer in matters of life and death is that of Rabbi and his handmaid in M. *Ketubot* 104a. Rabbi is hanging between life and death, all of his devoted students praying feverishly on his behalf. Rabbi's handmaid ascends the roof of Rabbi's house and drops a jar.

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[66] B. *Ber.* 34a

[67] The Maharal was Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1525-1609); philosopher, mathematician, alchemist, Ashkenazi rabbi and founder of the yeshiva in Prague.

[68] The Maharal as cited by *Magen Avraham* 119:1. Cited in Blanchard's Joining Heaven and Earth: Maimonides and the Laws of Bikkur Holim.

[69] B. *Ber.* 34b.

[70] B. *R. H.* 18a

Immediately, "They ceased prayer and the soul of Rabbi departed to its eternal rest." This story supports the notion that our prayers are indeed effective.

Whether or not the fluency or intentionality of one's prayer truly affects its efficacy, the importance of the act of praying is emphasized over and over again in the Codes literature influenced particularly by Nachmanides in his *Torat ha-Adam*[71]. One who visits the sick must pray for the sick in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim*; furthermore, to visit the sick and not pray on their behalf is equivalent to shedding blood. A benediction for the healing of the sick had already been incorporated as the eighth blessing in the daily *Amidah*, and in the Middle Ages the custom arose of invoking a blessing for the sick, the *Mi Sheberach*, during the reading of the Torah.

The Healing Power of the Inanimate

Both Torah and Talmud refer to certain images and inanimate objects imbued with special healing powers. The first of these objects is the *n'chash n'choshet*, "the copper serpent."[72] Following a plague of "seraph-serpents" sent against the people of Israel in the course of their wanderings, God is reported to have sent this therapeutic image, deeming that anyone bitten by a serpent could be healed by looking at it.[73] Despite the legitimacy attributed to the copper serpent

[71] *Tur/Shulchan Aruch*; *Yoreh Deah*; 335
[72] Num. 21:6-10
[73] See I Sam. 5:6, 6:5

in Numbers, the Deuteronomic author records King Hezekiah as smashing it during his reforms, as it had come to be looked upon as idolatrous.[74]

> While the *minhah*, the meal offering, was sacrificed on the altar, the offerer would stare at the snake, hoping to repeat the Mosaic miracle of healing. Thus the sacrifice could in effect have been offered to the snake rather than to Israel's God. Moreover, since the Canaanites regarded the snake as a cultic symbol of renewed life and fertility, it may have become over time a bridge to pagan worship within the Temple itself.[75]

The Mishnah encodes the Deuteronomic antipathy to such images. It labels the copper serpent ineffective and explains its use by transferring the healing power from the object itself to God. In the Mishnah's view, the serpent merely signified to Israel that they should raise their eyes upward and subordinate their hearts to the will of God who then would grant healing.[76] In any event, healing comes from God, not the serpent.

Nor is the serpent the only healing talisman that rabbinic Judaism knows. Abraham was also said to have worn a precious stone around his neck which brought masses flocking to him, for whoever looked upon the stone was healed.[77] The waters of Jericho were also known to have miraculous healing powers. And

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[74] II Kings 18:4. The rabbis supported King Hezekiah's action (B. *Ber.* 10b; B. *Pes.* 56a)

[75] Milgrom, Jacob. "Numbers" in The JPS Torah Commentary (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 460.

[76] M. *R. H.* 3:8

[77] B. *B. Batra* 16b

lastly, the Talmud teaches that the sun will heal the righteous of all ills, and will be a glorious ornament for them.[78]

The inclination to turn to an adjunct or complementary source of healing does not necessarily negate God's role in healing. Still, the plethora of healing objects contained in rabbinic sources requires some explanation. They probably entered Judaism under the influence of Persian and Babylonian magic medicine, replete with amulets, the evil eye, and demons, all recorded in the Talmud. Amulets that made use of inscription to ward off evil spirits stemmed from a belief in the holiness and the power of words. The text of the priestly blessing, for example, was considered effective against the "evil eye," and permutations and combinations of the letters of the different names of God are used even today in pendants that people wear around their neck.

That these amulets and other forms of magic were truly considered efficacious by some cannot be doubted. Medieval attitudes varied considerably. Maimonides, following the precedent of Sherira Gaon and his son Hai, opposed the use of amulets and came out very strongly against the "folly of amulet writers".[79] On the other hand, Nachmanides, a kabbalist, permitted the use of amulets. These early magical traditions thus merged with the doctrines of

[78] B. *Ned.* 8b

[79] Guide, 1:61; Yad, Tefillin 5:4. Quoted in Encyclopedia Judaica, "Amulets", CD Rom.

Kabbalah. For example, *Sefer Yezirah* contains instructions for the preparation of amulets and other charms.[80]

Again, while inanimate objects were once used to ward off illness or alleviate suffering, God was still seen as the final decisor in whether or not one would continue to suffer. All of the objects described above were physical attempts for human beings to control the course of their suffering and, ultimately, their destiny. They were no different in kind than prayer, the study of Torah, visiting the sick, and even doctoring, all of which were ultimately believed to tap the healing power of God in one way or another.

Conclusion

The texts of the Jewish tradition provide us with a variety of ways in which to understand suffering and healing: what they are, where they come from, how they happen, how we can affect them. The Rabbis understood suffering through a paradigm of divine causality. Suffering must derive from any one of several causative elements, all originating from God: divine retribution, *yissurin shel ahavah*, or an opportunity to do *teshuvah.* But just as God causes suffering, so too does God heal. The Jewish tradition is therefore rich in texts that describe the potential of the human role in influencing God to alleviate suffering and promote healing: prayer, Torah study, ***bikkur holim,*** the role of the physician, and

[80] "Amulets," Encyclopedia Judaica, CD Rom.

recognizing the presence of the *Shechinah*. Some of these traditional texts will resurface in the mind of the post-modern Jewish thinkers who are surveyed in Chapter Three. These thinkers deny religious causality, and offer interpretations of the traditional texts and God's role in suffering and healing that differ greatly from the rabbinic model offered here.

Before we turn to the post-modern Jewish thinkers, however, let us turn to traditional modern medicine. The Rabbis looked through a lens of causality. So too is traditional modern medicine focused on causality. Whereas, however, the Rabbis saw illness as a form of God's punishment and health as God's reward, modern medicine view illness and healing through the lens of science, believing that science can explain cause and remedy.

CHAPTER TWO:
A MODERN MEDICAL APPROACH TO SUFFERING AND HEALTH

Introduction

> In our endeavor to understand reality we are somewhat like a man trying to understand the mechanism of a closed watch. He sees the face and the moving hands, even hears its ticking, but he has no way of opening the case. If he is ingenious, he may form some picture of a mechanism which could be responsible for all the things he observes, but he may never be quite sure his picture is the only one which could explain his observations. He will never be able to compare his picture with the real mechanism and he cannot even imagine the possibility of the meaning of such a comparison.[81]
>
> Albert Einstein, 1938

It is not only the Rabbis who searched for the answers behind our suffering and the precarious nature of our health. Traditional modern medicine too set out to master illness and prolong good health, vastly reduce -- or even eliminate -- suffering, all the time working from within the realm of scientific reality. Indeed, traditional modern medicine posits science as the only true explanation of what happens to us. It breaks the human body down into an intricate composite of cells and genes that operate according to certain patterns. Using scientific principles, it provides the knowledge with which researchers can determine the cause of

[81] Einstein, Albert & Infeld, Leopold. The Evolution of Physics (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938), 31.

suffering and produce the drugs that bring us a return to good health. The physicians who practice within the realm of traditional modern medicine are consumed with causality and then, knowing the cause, with assigning the remedy. In this way, these physicians are very similar to the Rabbis. If one is suffering, the Rabbis would attribute such suffering to God and perhaps subscribe a healthy dose of *teshuvah* as a potential remedy. The doctors of traditional modern medicine operate in the same manner. The scientific system is simply more effective than the Rabbis at predicting the cause and selecting a solution.

And yet, for all of its awesomeness and beneficence, science has also limited the possibilities of modern medicine. This chapter will look at those contemporary physicians who are frustrated by the limits of scientific explanation for the mysterious nature of our bodies and our health. They approach suffering as a human experience that cries out for improvement, and search for a new, yet old, way of thinking about and approaching health, illness and healing. Their focus is not simply on the cause of our suffering, but on the nature of health and healing. They search for alternative ways to treat and live with illness, approaching the body as a whole and integrated entity rather than a scientific specimen made up of separate parts.

Dr. Michael Lerner, founder and President of Commonweal, a health and environmental research center in Bolinas, California writes:

> An important distinction is that between disease and illness. The disease is defined biomedically. But the illness is the

> human experience of the disease. There's a similar distinction between pain, which is the physiological phenomenon, and suffering, which is the human experience of pain. And there's an important distinction between curing, which is the scientific effort to change what's happening in the body, and healing, which is the human experience of the effort to recover.[82]

The physicians and thinkers in this chapter differentiate between science and human experience, focusing upon ideas such as "mind/body medicine" and "wholeness". They acknowledge that healing is much more complex than we may have once thought; that there are, in fact, different levels of healing: biological, emotional, mental, and spiritual. The premise behind "mind/body medicine" is that at the very simple biological level, mainstream medicine does not make a wound heal. "It creates the conditions under which the tissue can knit back together. What we bring to the encounter with any life-threatening illness is our healing resources, our healing potential."[83] Thus, our first challenge will be to understand how these contemporaries define health and healing.

Perfect Health

It is easiest to recognize health in its absence. When we are sick or injured, we have no trouble knowing how things should be. We know when a pain should not be there. "Freedom from disease" is a common dictionary definition of health.

[82]Moyers, Bill. Healing and the Mind (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 326.
[83]Dr. Michael Lerner in Moyers. 324.

Since disease comes from an Old French word meaning 'lack of ease,' we are left with a doubly negative sense: health is the absence of an absence of ease.[84]

Contemporary popular thinkers and writers on the subject of health and healing describe health in positive terms. Many point to the root meaning of the word 'health' which is "wholeness." By definition, wholes are complete and perfect; they lack nothing. According to Dr. Andrew Weil, in an ideal whole the components are not only all there, they are there in an arrangement of harmonious integration and balance. Perfection and balance are traditional attributes of wholeness. They also underlie the concept of health.[85] Therefore, Weil defines health as "a dynamic and harmonious equilibrium of all the elements and forces making up and surrounding a human being."[86]

The Rabbis too were privy to this line of thinking. The blessing of *Asher yatzar* in the morning liturgy praises God for fashioning our bodies in wisdom, "combining veins, arteries, and vital organs."[87] We remind ourselves through the recitation of this daily blessing how delicate and complex is the balance of our body and health, such that were one piece to fall out of equilibrium with the rest, "we would not be able to stand before You[God]."[88]

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[84]Weil, Dr. Andrew. Health and Healing (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), 41.
[85]Ibid. 42.
[86]Ibid. 54.
[87]Stern, Chaim, edt.. Gates of Prayer for Shabbat and Weekdays (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1994), 12.
[88]Ibid.

We saw above how the Rabbis struggled with the notion of illness in a world created by a perfect God. God is by definition perfect; we humans are not. We suffer from illness for several reasons: divine retribution, *yissurin shel ahavah*, or to promote *teshuvah*. Weil understands the existence of illness much differently. He agrees that God is by definition perfect, balanced, and in constant equilibrium. Since we were created *b'tzelem Elohim*, "in the image of God," we too are created as such. The difference is that for God, perfect health is a constant, while for humans, constant perfect health is an impossibility.

The biblical text demonstrates Weil's philosophy. We can see the tension between divine perfection and human fallibility played out in the religious practices of the Levitical cult. Ancient cultures tended not to distinguish religion from medicine, and biblical Judaism was no exception. Weil notes that religions that specify roles by which persons approach the ultimate reality, insist that the people who fill those roles reflect that reality's perfection as much as possible.[89] So for example, Leviticus prohibits priests with blemishes from leading worship:

> And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: None of your descendants throughout their generations who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease, or a scab...no man of the descendants of Aaron the priest who has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God, both of the most holy, and of the holy things.[90]

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[89]Weil, 43.
[90]Lev. 21:16-23

In other words, a priest of the holy God must himself be holy, and not just morally, but in his person so as to reflect the perfection of his Creator. We see here an all-important link between the holy and the healthy which, together, constitute the common ground of religion and medicine. No wonder we praise God for the intricate and wondrous balance that is our bodies, for truly, if we wish to stand before a perfect and whole God, we too must be as perfect and whole as possible.

Certain questions arise. Most important, we ought to wonder why God would have created us so that perfect health is impossible. A related but more comprehensive question is, Why is there evil in the world? Indeed, this is the supreme question for all religions and philosophies. The parallelism between illness and evil, and between health and holiness leads Weil to maintain, "Sickness is the manifestation of evil in the body just as health is the manifestation of holiness."[91]

The Bible's answer to Weil is just in part, that evil is inherent in Creation, as the necessary balance to good.

> I am the Lord and there is none else. I form light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil; I am the Lord that does these things.[92]

Only the primordial humans, Adam and Eve, living in the Garden of Eden, do not yet know imperfect health. Until they eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good

[91]Weil, 44.
[92]Isaiah 45:7

and Evil, they do not know suffering. Only after they eat from the Tree does God say to Eve:

> I will greatly increase your suffering and your childbearing;
> in pain shall you bear children.[93]

And to Adam, God says:

> Accursed is the ground because of you; through suffering
> shall you eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and
> thistles shall it sprout for you...By the sweat of your bow
> shall you eat bread...[94]

We see now, perhaps, why God commands Adam and Eve not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Is it possible that God did not want Adam and Eve to know of suffering and imperfect health? Could it be that God desired humans to know no pain or suffering?

The Bible's precise words matter here. Projecting forward the necessary consequences of eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, God predicts, "On the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die."[95] Adam and Eve eat of the fruit anyway, of course, leading to the usual interpretation that God punished humans with suffering and illness as a result of their disobedience. But perhaps there is another way to read this story. Perhaps God was simply warning Adam and Eve of this truth inherent in the natural order of the universe: illness and suffering are intrinsic to creation and life. On this reading, the Genesis narrative

[93]Gen. 3:16
[94]Gen. 3:17-19
[95] Gen. 2:17

teaches us that illness is not an affliction to satisfy God's personal vendettas, or a punishment for our individual actions; rather, illness is an inevitable consequence of the gift of life.

Why, then, did the Rabbis, and for that matter, the authors of the Torah, who knew that Creation brought balance and order out of chaos, not understand that sickness need not be a form of God's punishment? In other words, if evil is the necessary balance to peace, just as darkness is the necessary partner to light, then would not illness also be the logical counter to health? If the Rabbis were aware of this order of things, why did they focus on a Deuteronomic theology of a God who punishes with illness and rewards with health? Perhaps they came to what seemed a logical conclusion that if God rewards, God must also punish. And surely God must reward, for if God does not reward, then to what are we humans held accountable?

We can blame neither the Deuteronomic author or the Rabbis for seeking an explanation for suffering. We can, however, question the specific paradigm of reward and punishment that they selected. We may similarly ask about the contemporary drive for explanations of illness. Scientific medicine works -- of that there can be no doubt. But a solution for specific medical conditions which respond to scientific intervention is not the same as a universal theory of all suffering, including cases that as yet do not respond to medicine as we know it. The question is how we explain illness regardless of the scientific conditions that

causes it. Or what, therefore, we say to someone who is ill whether or not science proves effective in providing a cure. The issue is illness, not disease - healing, not curing.

Dr. Rachel Remen tells the story of a cancer patient at Sloane-Kettering Memorial Hospital in New York. The man's body was riddled with cancer. The chemotherapy was no longer doing anything to eradicate the tumors in his body. Miraculously, eight months after his last chemotherapy treatment, or any other medicinal treatment for that matter, the man began to rebound and the tumors began to shrink. A Grand Rounds was called and doctors from all over the country flew in to examine this man in remission. His sudden recovery was truly unbelievable, but it was not a miracle. No doctor would admit to something as unscientific as a miracle. Even though this man had not been administered any medication or chemotherapy treatments in over eight months, the doctors concluded that the recovery was an indication of the treatments finally taking effect on the body.

It is all a question of paradigms. We have been taught to think about health scientifically. Just as the Rabbis thought in terms of reward and punishment, we think in terms of cause and effect, attributing some tangible reason for our health (exercise, eating right, low stress) and our illness (poor diet, bad genes, too much sun exposure, smoking). The Rabbis, the Deuteronomic historian and traditional medicine approach the issue of suffering through a common paradigm of causality.

That there is a "cause" is not in doubt. But how do we conceptualize illness beyond its cause? How do we enable people to live with it? More and more people are becoming uneasy with the objectified system put forth by traditional modern medicine.

Responding to this need, some doctors who remain scientifically objective regarding cures nonetheless expand their viewpoint to introduce such coexisting notions as "wellness and illness." They recognize subjective states of suffering and wholeness. Their paradigm, therefore, addresses more than objective cures; it addresses the patient's state of being. It is a pragmatic reaction to the traditional, wholly scientific method of doctoring. It does not deny causality, but goes beyond it to ask other questions of illness, not just disease. For example, Weil writes:

> Seeing sickness as a calamity and misfortune directed at oneself for some particular reason is all too easy, but it is not compatible with the view that illness is the necessary complement to health, nor does it help people deal with the practical problems of being sick...sickness is the way to the next relative period of health.[96]

The woman with stomach pains described above may very well be suffering due to a build-up of acid in the large intestine. But what is causing that acid build-up? Is it due to eating the wrong kinds of foods, too much stress, not enough sleep? Lifestyle and mental state are components which are equally important to a persons' health. Some of today's physicians are looking beyond the initial cause of a symptom and treating the whole person, asking questions about lifestyle and

[96] Weil. 54-55.

mental state. The next section will look at contemporary physicians who are returning to a "mind/body" philosophy, seeking a more holistic approach to health and healing, surrendering their textbook knowledge to the unknown mystery that is life.

A Mind/Body Philosophy

Contemporary medicine views health as a harmonious and intricate balance of one's elements and forces. Journalist Bill Moyers interviewed physicians from various fields of medicine who speak of a "mind/body" correlation that incorporates more than just science, connecting us back to the "art" of medicine, to an ancient heritage. Ron Anderson, doctor and chairman of the Board of the Texas Department of Health and Chief Executive Officer of Parkland Hospital in Dallas states:

> In my view, mind/body medicine is really the art of medicine. We've done very well with science in medicine, and I'm very proud of what we've been able to accomplish with that. But we've set aside the art of medicine. You know, years ago, physicians were almost mystical, priest-like people...People intuitively know there's a mind/body connection.[97]

Just as many of us cannot accept the traditional Rabbinic paradigm of reward and punishment to understand our suffering and the precarious nature of our health, so

[97]Moyers. 28.

too doctors like Ron Anderson are challenging the adequacy of science to explain illness.

Dr. Dean Ornish, Assistant Clinical Professor of Medicine and President/Director of the Preventative Medicine Research Institute at the School of Medicine, University of California, San Francisco talks about the human propensity to reduce the complex and mysterious components of life.

> Humans have a hard time dealing with a universe that is infinitely complex and vast, and so we try to reduce it to more manageable proportions. We come up with theories or views of the world...to describe the way that the universe is. For a thousand years the Catholic Church provided the predominant paradigm in Western culture: that the earth is the center of the universe, and everything revolves around it. In the sixteenth century, an Italian philosopher named Bruno came along and said, "Well, I don't know if that's true. I think maybe the earth revolves around the sun." People responded in the way that people often do when their worldview is challenged, and they burned him at the stake. A hundred years later, Galilee came along and said the same thing, and added evidence from his telescope so that people could see for themselves that things were not the way they had thought. And so, in a way, science became the dominant worldview. If we can't measure it, it doesn't exist, and it's not real. But like the telescope, new tools are beginning to show us anomalies in our worldview. To me the anomalies are the most interesting part. But they can also be viewed as threatening.[98]

According to a popular teaching, "We do not see things as they are. We see things as we are." A belief is like a pair of sunglasses. When we wear a belief and look at life through it, it is difficult to convince ourselves that what we see is not what is real. The rabbis believed that God rewarded us for our good deeds and punished

[98]Ibid. 103.

us for our wrongdoings. Through this lens, they understood illness as a punishment. Traditional medicine has consistently viewed illness and healing through the lens of science. But today, many physicians are reacting to the anomalies in the scientific paradigm. As a result, they are widening their worldview and returning to an ancient, more holistic method of healing.

Dr. Michael Lerner explains the wisdom of the ancients:

> I think what is clearly true is that because they didn't have all the technologies, they paid attention to what they had. And what they had was their bodies, the natural world around them, diet, herbs, caring for people, imagery, and belief in God. It's interesting that shamanism, which is the old tradition of healing that comes out of all the great cultures around the world, is remarkably similar in many different parts of the world. Some researchers have suggested that shamanism touched some bedrock of human experience and that the reason it's so similar in different places is that people came to the same conclusions about what was helpful.[99]

Lerner uses the therapeutic application of massage as an example. He notes that to put your hands on another person with healing intent is tremendously comforting. It is a way of expressing and receiving care. But are there forces beyond the surface benefits of massage that we may never understand, which are beyond human rationality? Dr. Lerner notes that massage, the laying on of hands, is part of every great tradition. It is certainly prevalent in the Christian tradition in the

[99]Moyers. 329.

many parables of Jesus and his laying on of hands to bring healing to others.[100] Indeed, it is also part of the Jewish tradition, as seen most clearly in *Berachot* 5b.

As described in chapter one of this paper, R. Hiyya b. Abba falls ill and R. Johanan visits him. R. Johanan asks R. Hiyya, "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" R. Hiyya replies, "Neither they nor their reward." So R. Johanan says to R. Hiyya, "Give me your hand." The Talmud tells us that R. Hiyya gave R. Johanan his hand and R. Johanan "raised him." The Rabbis, like Lerner, had some idea of a healing touch, that the touch of another can help the sick person climb out of the depths of pain and suffering.

Coping and Wholeness

In the modern medical world, much of the willingness to return to earlier methods of healing is motivated by new ways of thinking about illness, disease, and pain. This redefinition and shift in paradigms is integral to the mind/body philosophy. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder and Director of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center promotes meditation for healing purposes. He describes pain in very post-modern terms:

> Pain is something that can be worked with...from a meditative prospective, pain can be a profound experience that you can move into. You don't have to recoil, or run away, or try to suppress it.[101]

[100]Some examples from the Gospels: Matthew 8:2-4; 9:18-26; 9:27-30; Mark 5:35-43; Luke 8:41-55

[101]Moyers. 119.

Kabat-Zinn teaches how we can live with and survive our pain. Just as the modern and post-modern Jewish thinkers offered Jewish coping mechanisms, so do many contemporary physicians offer coping mechanisms for living with our suffering. This is, in fact, the new paradigm for doctors in treating patients. The focus has shifted from simply curing disease and alleviating pain to also offering methods of coping with the present state of one's health.

Kabat-Zinn, along with many other physicians, believes that pain is a natural part of living. These doctors may even argue that just as the world was created out of balance and order, so too is the human body designed to manage varying degrees of health.

> The root in Latin[of medicine] means "to cure," but its deepest root means "to measure." The question is: what does medicine or meditation have to do with measure? It has to do with the platonic notion that every shape, every being, every thing has its right inward measure. A human being has an individual right inward measure, when everything is balanced and physiologically homeostatic--that's the totality of the individual at that point in time. Medicine is the art of restoring right inward measure when it is thrown off balance. Health is a dynamic energy flow that changes over a lifetime. In fact, health and illness very often coexist together. The body is constantly being catabolized, broken down, and built back up.[102]

Just as light and darkness coexist, it is not surprising that health and illness would coexist as well. Practically speaking, we witness this coexistence on a grander scale in the ebb and flow of the life-cycle, such as when one grandparent dies and a grandchild is born soon thereafter.

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[102]Moyers. 129.

The body is constantly striving for wholeness. According to Kabat-Zinn, wholeness is the human body's right inward measure. Part of this mind/body philosophy and the overall key to living with and surviving our suffering is to remember that the part of us that is ill and in pain is also imbued with the Divine. In the book of Genesis, Jacob struggles with a stranger in the night by the river Jabbok.[103] In the end, Jacob wins the struggle, but perhaps Jacob succeeds not by defeating his opponent, but by realizing that the 'other' he is contesting shares the face of God. Thus, Jacob does not overcome his opponent; instead he finds divinity within him. The struggle ends as "the sun rose upon him...and he limped upon his hip."[104] This is the end of the struggle, but not the end of the story. In his woundedness, Jacob becomes whole. Whole, he is renamed. This is what it is to be ill: to wrestle through the long night, injured, and if you prevail until the sun rises, to receive a blessing.[105] Jacob is a an analogy for all people who suffer periods of illness. Jacob struggles through the long night. He is surely wounded, but through his wounding, he is changed. He is renamed, for after his long struggle, he is truly a different person. In the end, Jacob is transformed and continues to journey forward.

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[103] Gen. 32:25-33
[104] Gen. 32:32
[105] This idea was expressed in a less-full version by Arthur Frank, a medical sociologist in Canada who was stricken at age 39 by a heart attach and a year later by cancer. See At the Will of the Body: Reflections on Illness for further insight into Frank and how he came to see that his struggle was not against cancer, but with the nature of life.

Conclusion

The contemporary physicians cited in this chapter are unsatisfied with the objectified scientific paradigm of traditional modern medicine, preferring a less-causative approach to health and illness. In addition to seeking answers of causality, they search for coping mechanisms that can help us live with our suffering and achieve wholeness in spite of it.

The next chapter of this paper focuses on Jewish post-modern approaches to suffering and healing. These thinkers deny the notion of religious causality posited by the Rabbis. Like the physicians surveyed in this chapter, the post-moderns approach the issue of health and illness through a paradigm of non-causality, focusing less on the source of our sufferings and more on creating Jewish coping mechanisms for dealing with them. The question is: Will these post-modern thinkers be able to ignore the traditional notion of God as source of our suffering and healing? How, within their specific paradigm, will they address Rabbinic notions regarding health and illness? What traditional notions will they discard, and which ones will they refine to fit their post-modern sensibilities? These are the questions with which this paper continues.

CHAPTER THREE:
CONTEMPORARY JEWISH SOURCES ON SUFFERING AND HEALING

Introduction

> The more the development [of religion] tends towards the conception of a transcendental unitary god who is universal, the more there arises the problem of how the extraordinary power of such a god may be reconciled with the imperfection of the world that he has created and ruled over.[106]
>
> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*

Victor Frankel's harrowing experience in the concentration camps led him to contend that humanity's essential drive is to make meaning. Frankel's *logotherapy*, for example, focuses on the patient's capacity to suffer, thus finding meaning in that suffering.[107] While the search for meaning is not an explicit topic in the Jewish tradition, the ancients at least implicitly sought meaning in suffering and illness, as did Job. Amongst their conclusions was that suffering and illness comes sometimes in the form of divine retribution and other times as *yissurin shel ahavah*. We, like the ancients, create metaphors in an effort to structure our experiences and thus lend them meaning.[108] When we ask questions like, "Why

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[106] Kraemer, p.3.

[107] Frankel, Victor. Man's Search for Meaning. (New York: Simon and Schuster Trade, 1994).

[108] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), quoted in Hoffman, Larry. "Healing the Sick as an Exercise in Religious Metaphor." (Duisburg: L.A.U.D, 1996), 6.

me? How could this happen?", we struggle to find meaning in our experiences, as if something in meaning itself brings healing.

Rabbi Shira Milgrom explains our modern thirst for meaning in the language of mathematics. She says that axioms, assumptions which are effective in explaining the world we know, stem from our need to explain, to find meaning. An axiom cannot be proven. For example, says Milgrom, the belief in God is an axiom that explains the conundrum of the continued existence of the Jewish people after so many years of persecution. We create axioms in order to understand history, for history is not any specific fact or event, but the connective tissue that ties those events together into an ultimately non-provable narrative.[109]

And so it is with suffering. In our attempt to find meaning in suffering, we create axioms to explain our experiences. However, finding meaning in suffering is no easy task since suffering may well be the phenomenon that most effectively challenges meaning and undermines our sense of order. Therefore, as Rabbi Nancy Flam states, "If we can find or develop a framework with which to understand our suffering, then sometimes the suffering itself becomes more bearable."[110] Or, as Clifford Gertz writes, "The problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering, but how to suffer, how to make of

[109] Rabbi Milgrom serves as spiritual leader of Congregation Kol Ami in White Plains, NY. The above explanation was given at a Torah study one Shabbat morning.

[110] Flam, Rabbi Nancy. "Healing of Body; Healing of Spirit," *Sh'ma*, Oct. 3, 1997.

[suffering]...something bearable, supportable--something, as we say, sufferable."[111]

Rachel Naomi Remen makes the connection between meaning and healing:

> the language of the soul is meaning...often it is meaning that heals us...meaning heals many things that are beyond cure. Finding meaning does not require us to live differently, it requires us to see our lives differently.[112]

Remen's thoughts are echoed by post-modern commentary, much of which looks at suffering and healing quite differently than did the Rabbis. It was the Rabbis who cared most for healing in the literal sense: not healing of soul, but of body.[113] The post-moderns introduce the idea that we can be healed and still be sick. The Rabbis focused on the source of our sufferings, not the meaning behind them. The post-moderns reject the paradigm of objective, religious causality and suggest that meaning can bring us healing, even if it does not bring us a cure.

The goal of this chapter is to survey some of this post-modern thought. It will challenge the Rabbis' idea of a God who is the ultimate source of suffering and simultaneously the sole purveyor also of mercy and of health. Its authors do not ask for the origin of suffering, but they do ask where healing comes from, and then addresses their ultimate concern: "How can we live with and through our

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[111] Kraemer, David. Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.
[112] Remen, Rachel Naomi. Kitchen Table Wisdom (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 28-29.
[113] Hoffman, Larry. "Healing the Sick as an Exercise in Religious Metaphor." (Duisburg: L.A.U.D., 1996), p.3.

suffering?" The post-modern thinker does not reject the traditional sources, as the modern might, but rather returns to the tradition to give meaning to the reality of suffering in a Jewish way. These thinkers will create a new relationship with God based on traditional texts, offering us inventive ways in which to find meaning in suffering and hope for healing.

Prayer

Where does healing come from? If it doesn't come from God, or if healing is an effort entered into in partnership with God, how is healing manifest? Rabbi Nancy Flam contends that prayer is a tool not solely reserved for the healthy on behalf of the sick, but for the sick person as well. "Prayer allows us to engage our capacity to hope. Prayer can be a refuge away from operations, treatments, and procedures. Prayer means community since the same words have been spoken by others who need healing."[114]

Carol Ochs encourages us to find healing through the Psalms. The Psalms invite us to enter into the experience of the psalmist. These are not "polite" utterances or reverential phrases, they are honest, direct communications.[115] Ochs advocates use of the Psalms because the words are given to us. It can be so difficult to find the appropriate words with which to address God. Our own words

[114]Flam, Rabbi Nancy. "Healing of Body, Healing of Spirit," Sh'ma 28/538, Oct. 3, 1997.
[115]Ochs, Carol. "The Waters of Healing: Psalm 42 and Related Texts," Healing and Judaism, eds. Olitsky, Kerry & Wiener, Nancy (New York: HUC-JIR Press).

sometimes sound trite, foolish or incomplete to our own ears. The Psalmist gives us words that directly address God and speak openly of our fears. For Ochs, entering prayer through the Psalms allows us to confront God honestly.

> The phrases we utter in sorrow and anger have meaning because they form part of a larger fabric containing all that we feel: gratitude, fear, hope, despair. The Psalter thus becomes an exercise in emotional honesty.[116]

Tamara M. Green illustrates the use of Psalms to communicate with God in the midst of suffering:

> But the anger that is most difficult to confront comes when I seek spiritual comfort and cannot find it. I do not believe that there is any cosmic reason why I am ill. I do not believe that I am being punished for some moral failure. I do not believe that *Adonai* wishes to chasten me or test my spiritual strength. Yet, there are times when although I am afraid that I cannot summon the will to "hang in there," when I long to know that "though I walk a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me." I feel only that *Adonai* is very far away. It is at those moments that I understand so painfully the angry cry of the psalmist: "How long, *Adonai*, will you ignore me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?...Look at me, answer me, *Adonai Elohai*." Like him, I call out, *"Hineni*, here I am, *Adonai*. Where are You? From where will come my help?"[117]

For Flam, Ochs, and Green the emphasis is less on whether or not God actually responds to prayers for healing, and more on what the act of praying does for the sick person. The psalmist expected that, in return for his honesty, his grief would be healed and his alienation from God would recede By contrast, the importance

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[116]Ibid.

[117] Green, Prof. Tamara M. The Outstretched Arm, a quarterly publication of the National Center for Jewish Healing, New York: Vol. 3, Issue 1, Fall 2000.

of prayer for these women is that it offers a place of comfort and refuge for the sick, not lost as a chance to communicate honestly with God about one's suffering-- whether or not God literally responds as the psalmist hoped. It could even be argued that the sense that alienation from God would recede is implicit in the recitation itself, but it is a subjective alienation that is at stake, not an objective divine answer. Whether by the community on behalf of the sick, or by the sick on their own behalf, prayer connects the sick person to the outside world, turning their struggles for health from individual efforts to communal ones, breaking down social isolation along with isolation from the divine.

The idea that a sick person can and should pray on their own behalf is generally not found in the traditional texts. In fact, the Talmud reports that a "prisoner *cannot* free himself from jail," meaning that patients cannot heal themselves.[118] Moreover, according to Emmanuel, the Talmud only authorizes individual supplications in circumstances where Israel as a whole is in danger, when the Jewish people are generally persecuted and held in contempt, not when a single person takes ill.[119] Why is this so? Levinas explains:

> This is not in the name of any nationalist egoism. The people of Israel, we must remember, are the bearers of the revelation; their role is to manifest the glory of God and His message among all the peoples of the earth.[120]

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[118] B. *Ber.* 5b
[119] Levinas, Emmanuel. "Prayer Without Demand," in The Levinas Reader, edt. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1989), 233.
[120] Ibid.

In other words, individual supplication is permissible provided it does not drag prayer down to a level of interest exclusively concerned with the self.

Is the Talmud, and thereby the Jewish tradition, condemning our human suffering to silence? According to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhin in *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, "No prayer whose basic concern is with one's own unhappiness can be counted as pious."[121] How, then, are our personal sufferings to be understood? For Volozhin, the suffering of any 'I' immediately becomes God's suffering, as it is written in Psalms 91:15: "I will be with him in trouble," and in Isaiah 63:9 which speaks of God suffering in man's affliction. Therefore, we must pray for the suffering of God who suffers through our human suffering.[122] How, then, does praying on behalf of God's suffering alleviate our own?

> Through his orisons, man is elevated and brought closer to this divine suffering which exceeds his own. Confronted with this torture, he finds his own suffering diminished--he can no longer feel it, in comparison with the suffering of God which is so much greater than his own.[123]

Post-modern thinkers would certainly disagree with both Levinas and Volozhin, since they advocate precisely personal prayer by a single such sufferer, regardless of God. A post-modern attitude views prayer as a means of assuming a level of control over our health-- exactly what healthy people take for granted and sick people covet. When the sick articulate their fears and desires, they assume a

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[121] Ibid. 234.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.

role in their own healing process. I have found that praying *with* a patient as opposed to *for* a patient has a very different efficacious quality. Asking patients to articulate what it is that they would like to ask from God, lends additional meaningfulness and intensity to the prayer that follows. When the sick pray on their own behalf, they gain control over a situation in which they feel powerless.

Community

As we saw in Chapter One, traditional sources portray a God who is so involved in our lives that God literally suffers alongside us when we are sick. Since God plays such a primary role in both suffering and healing, the importance of community is not emphasized here. By contrast, post-moderns view community as intricately bound up in a single individual's suffering, so that the larger community not only supports the sick in times of healing, but itself actually suffers as well when one of its members takes ill.

Joseph Ozarowski locates this notion at least implicitly in traditional texts as well.[124] The *Shulchan Aruch* states that one who visits the sick can be a *ben gilo*, translated by Jastrow (following Rashi) as a person of "same age."[125] The Talmud, however, refers to Nebuchadnezzar and Ahasuerus as *ben gilo*, meaning, in this case, that they were of the same mentality, and implying an emotional

[124]Ozarowski, Rabbi Joseph. To Walk in God's Ways (New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1995), 23-4.
[125]*Shulchan Aruch*: *Yoreh Deah*: 335

role in their own healing process. I have found that praying *with* a patient as opposed to *for* a patient has a very different efficacious quality. Asking patients to articulate what it is that they would like to ask from God, lends additional meaningfulness and intensity to the prayer that follows. When the sick pray on their own behalf, they gain control over a situation in which they feel powerless.

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[124]Ozarowski, Rabbi Joseph. To Walk in God's Ways (New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1995), 23-4.
[125]*Shulchan Aruch*: *Yoreh Deah*: 335

connection.[126] (Here, Rashi uses the term *ben mazalo* which Jastrow renders as "of same character.") Rabbi Ozarowski cites a midrash which reads: "God brings *gillin*--groups and circles of friends[127]--into the world. When one of the *gil* dies, the entire *gil* grieves. One member of the group worries about the entire group..."[128] Thus, when a member of the community is sick, the whole community is affected.

Despite Ozarowski's reading, the importance of community is not explicit in the sources. True, we see *talmidim* praying for their masters, but the idea of a larger community praying on behalf of someone who may be virtually unknown is absent. Post-modern authors, on the other hand, are obsessed with community. And we who are part of a religious community take seriously its importance in times of suffering. The increasing popularity of the *MiSheberach* prayer for healing in worship services is a testimonial to this post-modern search for meaning and healing in community. We have therefore greatly expanded the traditional notion of a student praying on behalf of their master.

In one of his last columns for the *Village Voice*, Paul Cowan wrote:

> On September 11, ten days before my 47th birthday, I was diagnosed with leukemia. Until that day, I had assumed that health and sickness were separate, distinct terrains. I've since learned that those boundaries don't really exist. Instead, the world is composed of the sick and the not-yet-sick...They

[126]B. *Meg.* 11a
[127]For this translation, Rabbi Ozarowski follows the translation of Rabbi David Luria.
[128]*Ruth Rabbah* 2:7

are part of the same continuum.[129]

When a community prays on behalf of one of its' ill members, each member of the community is also praying for their own health, knowing that one day they, too, will be in need of healing.

Dr. Laurie Zoloth-Dorfman understands communal support as an obligation that stems from the recognition that every living person is fundamentally bound by the same journey in life. She uses the paradigm of Ruth and Naomi to show how one person gives of themselves for another out of this sense of shared destiny.

> Ruth's ethical gesture, the gesture that makes all that follows possible, is to embrace the angry old woman not out of love or compassion...but out of a sense of recognition that she and Naomi are fundamentally bound. In Levinas' language, Ruth recognizes the self in the other and, as such, recognizes her responsibility not to turn from the vulnerable face of her former mother-in-law. She is not compelled to stay...and yet she sees herself as Naomi, as paired as surely as Adam and Eve were paired, a coupling of similar selves in the darkness of the world.[130]

Through the story of Ruth and Naomi, we realize that one's personal story is part of the collective story of a people in history. It is also a choice at every moment, about gestures that are intimate, fragile, and ordinary all at the same time. "In Levinas' terms, it is the very vulnerability and actuality of the face of the other that

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[129]Cowan, Paul. "In the Land of the Sick," The Village Voice, vol.33, no.20, May 17, 1988.

[130]Zoloth-Dorfman, Dr. Laurie. "The Ethics of Encounter," in Contemporary Jewish Ethics and Morality, edt. Dorff, Elliot & Newman, Louis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 222.

commands us."[131] Zoloth-Dorfman explains that at every moment in our lives, we make choices about how we respond to others. This is what she terms an "Ethics of Encounter."[132]

Zoloth-Dorfman emphasizes hearing the other as much as responding to what is said, since how we respond to one who is ill depends greatly upon our ability to listen to them and hear their needs. For instance, although Ruth and Orpah are daughter-in-laws, Naomi continuously calls them "my daughters." Hearing this, Ruth binds herself to Naomi as a daughter.

Listening carefully to the one who is sick is not just a modern or post-modern notion; rather, it is rooted in the Talmud. The *Berachot* passage that we looked at in Chapter One (Ber. 5b) features Rabbi Eleazar being visited by Rabbi Johanan. The text reads: "He[R. Johanan] noticed that he[R. Eleazar] was lying in a dark room." The word "notice" occurs twice, according to Ozarowski, for emphasis to demonstrate Rabbi Johanan's awareness of Rabbi Eleazar's condition.[133] Indeed, to truly respond to one who is ill, we must hear them and take notice of them.

Despite Ozarowski's reading of Ber. 5b, it nonetheless is true that the idea of any "ethic of encounter" is at best hinted at in traditional sources. The tradition commands us to visit and comfort the sick but only because God did so and we are

[131]Zoloth-Dorfman. p.223.
[132] Ibid.
[133]Ozarowski, Rabbi Joseph. The Outstretched Arm, a quarterly publication of the National Center for Jewish Healing, New York: Vol. 1, Issue 2, Fall 1998.

to imitate God. The post-moderns add a whole new level to this idea by proposing that we not only see ourselves as fulfilling a God-like role, as the tradition suggests, but that we also place ourselves in the role of the sick person, as they are and as we may one day be. As Rachel Remen writes, "Perhaps a willingness to face such shared vulnerability gives us the capacity to repair the world."[134]

Part of a Journey

When we visit with the sick and respond to their needs, we help to remove their feeling of "aloneness". When someone is sick, they become disconnected from the larger community. No longer going to work, running errands, or maintaining a social life, the normal routine of their daily life changes radically. Someone on the "outside" who reminds them that their illness is just one part of the larger story of their lives, can be critical. Here too, traditional sources anticipate post-modern thought. According to the Talmud

> Rav says: He who visits the sick will be delivered from the punishments of Gehenna, for it is written, "Happy is he that considers the poor, the Lord will deliver him in the day of evil. (Ps.41:2)." "The poor"(Heb. *dal*) means none other than the sick, as it is written, "He will cut me off from pining sickness (Heb. *mi-dalah*)(Isa.38:12)."[135]

According to Jastrow, *dal* can mean 'detached', 'open,' 'weak,' 'drawn out,' 'lessened,' or 'lowered.' These terms describe the existential state of patients who

[134] Remen. My Grandfather's Blessings (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000), 105.
[135] B. *Ned.* 40a

are unsure of their fate, because their condition is weakened and their life is open to harm. Visiting the sick connects them to the greater community, strengthens their resolve, and reminds them of who they are in the context of their whole life, not just as a function of the illness which plagues them. In fact, Naomi Mark, Director of Training in the New York City Office of Crisis and Intervention and Stabilization for the Human Resources Administration, suggests thinking about one's illness as a story. Doing so allows the sick person to harmonize this episode of suffering into their larger sense of self, thereby integrating wellness and illness.[136] Thinking of illness as part of the larger story of our lives lets us fight the urge to permit our sickness to define the totality of who we are. Instead, the sickness becomes just a single stage on the grand and colorful spectrum which is our life.

All of the views discussed thus far in this chapter reflect a post-modern outlook on health and illness. As we saw in Chapter Two, modern views on healing moved from the spiritual to the tangible, namely, the reliance on science and medicine to deliver diagnoses and remedies regarding the health of a patient and the prognosis for survival. Sickness and its cure could be explained only by science, and if spontaneous remission occurred without explanation, it was only because science had not yet reached the level of knowing what the explanation was.

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[136] Mark, Naomi. "A Perspective on Jewish Healing," Sh'ma 28/538, Oct. 3, 1997.

With Naomi Mark's suggestion that illness is part of our larger story we pass beyond modernism to post-modernism. Like personal prayer, how we see our illness is a matter of inner subjectivity. Integrating it as a single chapter within the greater whole of our lives grants us some sense of control. Suddenly, our illness is no longer all that we are. Jewish tradition could not have perceived suffering in this way because sickness was God-sent. Any meaning in it had to be related to God, not to a subjective sense of self. If you were sick, you were being punished for sins and invited to do *teshuvah.* The post-moderns propose that illness is not fault-induced, that its source is not divine retribution or *yissurin shel ahavah.* Rather it is an intricate part of the ebb and flow of life, part of the natural order of things.

The Space to Forgive

If tradition emphasizes *teshuvah,* post-moderns direct our attention to forgiveness-- not by God, but by us. To allow forgiveness to occur, they underscore the importance of a safe space, a place to which one can go to heal.

> When we are sick...we have to cope not only with loss, but with the violation of our bodily integrity...we withdraw into ourselves...This gives us the space to be safe, safe to mourn the self we used to be, the body we used to have...safe to lick our wounds and to grieve at the process that is transforming us.[137]

[137]Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. "Constructing a Theology of Healing," in Healing and Judaism, eds. Olitsky, Kerry & Wiener, Nancy (New York: HUC-JIR Press, 1997), 6.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky views this safe space as a place to make a '*heshbon hanefesh*,' an accounting of one's soul, as a beginning of the search for meaning in sickness. It is my experience that even the most "non-religious" Jews, the people who swear that God plays little to no role in their day-to-day lives, find themselves asking classic theological questions during times of suffering: Why am I suffering? What did I do to deserve this pain? They are looking for answers, and, often, seeking forgiveness as well from God, from family members, and from themselves. Indeed, forgiveness is an essential component of any self-reflective healing process, an idea whose roots are grounded in the Jewish tradition.

> R. Alexander said in the name of R. Hiyya b. Abba: A patient does not recover from sickness until all his sins are forgiven, as it is written: "Who forgives all your iniquities; Who heals all your diseases (Psalm 103:3)." R. Hamnuna said: He then returns to the days of his youth, for it is written: "His flesh shall be fresher than a child's; he shall return to the days of his youth (Job 33:25)."[138]

A post-modern reading of this text would say that we ourselves cannot fully heal until we take stock of our lives and offer ourselves forgiveness for those things for which we continue to blame ourselves. We will not find healing until we feel that we truly deserve to heal. To do this, we must forgive ourselves by no longer blaming ourselves for our suffering.

Jewish tradition too suggests that forgiveness is an essential component to healing. In fact, suffering may well be the wake-up call that each of us needs to

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[138]B. *Ned.* 41a

seek forgiveness-- but from God and from others, not from ourselves. According to the Talmud, there was no illness in the world until the time of Jacob.[139] "Then Jacob came and prayed, and illness came into being, as it is written, 'And one told Joseph, Behold, your father is sick.'" Why did Jacob pray? What is the relationship of his prayer to the arrival in the world of illness? According to Rashi, Jacob wanted to assure that he would have ample time to instruct his family before his passing. He knew that it is human nature to procrastinate, especially in the difficult task of apologizing to loved ones for past wrongs. Our own post-modern reading suggests that illness offers us an opportunity for reconciliation with others and with ourselves.[140]

The above text is especially significant because it is one of the few places in rabbinic literature where God is not named as the source of our suffering. The awareness that illness was brought into the world only at human request is something unique. The question then becomes: Why would humans desire to suffer? Is this simply a rabbinic technique to acquit God, or do we possibly believe on some subconscious level that we might reap benefit from and, thus, somehow desire our sufferings? Other than in a Freudian reading, it is hard to believe that we deliberately choose to suffer. However, *expost facto*, we all do fall

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[139]B. *B. Metzia* 87a

[140] We must differentiate between suffering which is expected before death, such as the normal discomfort that may occur as a result of the body shutting down, and an abnormal or even "unfair" sort of suffering such as one might endure due to suffering from any number of diseases. This text refers to the former sort of suffering.

ill sooner or later and illness does offer us opportunities for insight and personal growth that arises only from a state of physical turmoil. The tradition seems to have a notion of some kind of suffering that is reasonable, as opposed to the kind of suffering a ten-year old might undergo after having fallen from a tree to the cement below. When we are suffering, we are weakened, often dependent upon others for even mundane tasks that we thought nothing of in our healthy state.

The idea that we might actually welcome our own suffering is difficult to accept, both for us and for our tradition. Rabbi Eleazar, it will be recalled, said to his visitor that he welcomed neither his pain nor its reward. Post-moderns do not subscribe to a system of "karmic" repercussion, as if our suffering is somehow our own fault, or that we need forgiveness. We hold ourselves responsible no more than we do God. Still, as moderns at least, our first attempt to make sense of disease is to resurrect pre-modern notions of self-blame. The whole point of the post-modern enterprise is to change the conceptual scheme in which we think.

The Bible and Liturgy

The first Creation story establishes for us the order out of which our universe and we, as humans, were created. For there to be day, there must be night. For the earth to exist, there must be sky. Is it possible, then, that for there to be health, there must be illness? Our biblical text certainly does not state such an idea outright, but it also does not support the notion of "perfect health." The

idea of "perfect health" is a concept that modernism, with its advanced age of science and medical technology, introduced as a serious possibility. Anything less than "perfect health" is just that--less. In a metaphor of war, death is viewed as the enemy, and anything that brings about an untimely end to our lives--cancer, heart failure, disease--is seen as an agent of death. An advertisement recently displayed on the subways and trains in New York City pictures the face of a newborn baby with the caption reading: "Life expectancy: 120 years. The Face of Modern Medicine." Indeed, God states in Genesis: "My breath shall not abide in man forever, since he too is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years."[141] Are we to deduce from the biblical text that humans are actually expected to live 120 years, as did Moses? Or is this text in Genesis, like much else in the Bible, a potential symbol for something more theologically profound, in this case, God's way of saying that human life is finite as opposed to God's eternality?

The advent of modern science and medical technology has therefore done us no favor by encouraging us to believe that immortality is within our reach; or even that a life-span of some 120 years is either possible or desirable; or that we deserve "perfect health." To be sure the notion that humans are outside the rule of life that limits mortality for other creations is present already in Genesis where humans were created to "replenish the earth and subdue it," to "have dominion

[141] Genesis 6:3

over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." However, this ideal was to take place in Eden, from which Adam and Eve are abruptly expelled. We do not live in the Garden of Eden; the normal rules that limit life and death now hold for us as well. Yet, the false sense of being uniquely beyond the necessity of sickness persists, a point of view that Barbara Kingsolver addresses in her epic novel *The Poisonwood Bible*,

> As a teenager reading African parasitology books in the medical library, I was boggled by the array of creatures equipped to take root upon a human body. I'm boggled still, but with a finer appreciation for the partnership. Back then I was still a bit appalled that God would set down his barefoot boy and girl dollies into an Eden where, presumably, He had just turned loose elephantiasis and microbes that eat the human cornea. Now I understand, God is not just rooting for the dollies. We and our vermin all blossomed together out of the same humid soil in the Great Rift Valley, and so far no one is really winning. Five million years is a long partnership...if you could for a moment rise up out of your own beloved skin and appraise ant, human and virus as equally resourceful beings, you'd admire the accord they have all struck.[142]

Perhaps the Rabbis too understood that outside the mythical Garden, humans simply cannot dominate all other living things on the planet. We live inextricably in partnership with even the viruses that feed upon us. Thus our liturgy states that God fashioned us with a pure soul, not necessarily with an infallibly pure body. The blessing for restoring our soul, *Elohai Neshamah*,

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[142] Kingsolver, Barbara. The Poisonwood Bible (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 529.

implies that when we go to bed each night, we have no certain reassurance that we will awaken again in the morning.

> *Baruch Ata Adonai, asher b'yado nefesh kol-chai, v'ruach kol-basar-ish.* Blessed is the Eternal, in whose hands are the souls of all the living and the spirits of all flesh.[143]

The sages drew a parallel between death and sleep by saying, expressly, what goes for sleep goes equally for life itself. "Sleep constitutes one-sixtieth of death."[144] In fact, the preceding prayer, *Asher Yatzar*, echoes our awareness of the delicate nature of our bodies. In essence, it acknowledges the possibility of imperfect health that eventually must afflict the finely balanced, yet complicated, network that is our body. Our soul is pure, but our body is not. The *chatimah* of *Asher Yatzar* which evokes God as healer, and our petition for healing in the fifth blessing of the *Amidah*, acknowledges that our bodies will not always work like the well-oiled machine that the body of the *Asher Yatzar* describes.

The text regarding Jacob's prayer and subsequent illness may well be another Rabbinic way of acknowledging that illness does happen, that suffering does exist, and that, even in such a perilous state, we may derive some good. In their own way, then, Rabbis sought to understand suffering no less than we do. With their attachment and commitment to science, the moderns have distanced themselves from the reality of health and illness. In reality, we now see (no less than the Rabbis did) that illness cannot always be overcome, and mortality cannot

[143] The prayer is drawn from B. *Ber.* 60b.
[144] B. *Ber.* 57b

be escaped. Post-moderns, therefore, rethink illness and health, and the dance in which the two engage on the most delicate, biological levels. The postmodern thinker insists that, unable realistically to distance ourselves from sickness, we accept it along with health as a balanced part of life.

God

When we are sick and suffering, feeling connected to our larger community is an important part of healing. But can we connect to God during illness? What does it mean to have a relationship with God when we are sick? The nature of our relationship with God during times of suffering is understood quite differently by the traditional texts and by certain post-modern thinkers. As we saw in Chapter One, the Rabbis envisioned a God who suffers alongside us when we are ill. For many of us, this idea of a God who is sympathetic to our sufferings, even affected by them, remains comforting. However, Tikva Frymer-Kensky rejects the notion of an anthropomorphic God who feels as we do. She argues that we prefer to visualize God suffering alongside us simply because doing so lessens our feelings of alienation. She urges us to recognize that God is just as much wounder as healer, as it is written: "I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal."[145] Similarly God says: "I make well-being and create evil."[146] On this verse, *Exodus Rabbah* comments: "God does everything simultaneously--causes to die and brings life,

[145] Deut. 32:39
[146] Isaiah 45:7

wounds and heals."[147] Indeed, the Jewish tradition portrays a God who is *midat hadin* (God of justice) as well as *midat harachamim* (God of mercy). The Rabbis did not necessarily discount the attribute of *midat ha-din* in God, but focused instead on the heightened characteristic of God's *rachamim* when we are ill. Frymer-Kensky believes that to weigh one over the other is to mislead ourselves into conceiving of a God who does not exist. In other words, the God of our tradition is clearly a God of compassion and justice; an all-compassionate deity is simply a delusion.

Why believe in a God who causes suffering? And how can a God who causes suffering also bring healing? Perhaps we are better off distancing God from both phenomena. Arthur Green warns against theological delusions:

> Too much of religion is lying about the way reality is... *someikh noflim ve'rofei holim*[who lifts the fallen and heals the sick], you know?...and the stumbler remains fallen and the sick die. The dead aren't raised! And here we are. We want to say those things and we reinterpret them like crazy, and reinterpreting is OK--but there comes a time to remind ourselves that no, that's not what we believe. We are not literalists, we are not naive about any of those things.[148]

Green spoke these words in the course of a conversation with author Roger Kamenetz. When Kamenetz asked Green, "What about *matir asurim* ['freer of the captive']?", Green responded, "Yeah, there are moments when God does that.

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[147] *Exodus Rabbah* 28

[148] Green, Arthur in Kamenetz, Roger. Stalking Elijah (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 267.

Moments when God does all of them."[149] Nonetheless, in the end, Green challenges the notion held by Jews for centuries, that God heals the sick, frees the captive, and lifts up the fallen. Who can be sure? In essence, Green is asking, Who can really know God? And if God's ways are unknowable, then we are simply distorting reality to assume that God will heal us when we need healing. Thus Green, like Frymer-Kensky, acknowledges that to depend on God to simply heal when we are in need of healing is to ignore that God is just as much wounder as healer, and that we cannot possibly know how and why God operates as God does. However, both Frymer-Kensky and Green cling to an inchoate notion that God is somehow involved in our sufferings and our joys, so that while we cannot know when either will come, the ultimate source for both is God.

Nancy Flam goes farther still. She denies God's aspect of *midat hadin* insofar as such an aspect implies that God judges us, either by punishing or rewarding. She recalls the Talmudic parable of Elisha ben Abuyah who observes the boy climbing the ladder to send the mother bird away before collecting the eggs from the next. The boy slips and falls to his death, at which point Elisha denounces God as the arbiter of justice. But Flam does not expect justice in this scenario. The boy simply slipped and fell. While Flam denies that the accident is even about justice, however she recognizes the existence of *din*,

> a morally neutral *din*...*din* as the imposition of limits, the correct determination of things, the *din* Cordovera talks about as inherent in all the things insofar as all

[149] Ibid.

things need to remain what they are, to stay within their boundaries.[150]

For Flam, then, *din* is not a matter of God meting out reward and punishment, but an acceptance that all things are limited with a finite capacity for life and health. We are vulnerable to illness and death simply by virtue of who we are. To recite the words "*Dayan ha-Emet* (Arbiter of Truth)" as the response to hearing of a death, affirms "the God given truths of limits and finitude."[151]

While Flam denies the notion of a God as *midat hadin* in the traditional understanding of the term, she accepts a God who is *midat harachamim*. Whereas illness expresses *midat hadin*, the natural course of our finite lives, healing expresses *midat harachamim*. *Rachamim* makes it possible to live within the reality of *din*. After all, the prescribed ways in which we are to imitate God are all examples of *rachamim*: clothe the naked, visit the sick, or comfort the mourner. *Rachamim* can soften the decree, alleviate suffering, and bring healing. In sum, *rachamim* affects the realm of *din*.[152] But it is we humans who bring *rachamin* to one another by visiting the sick and praying for those who are ill.

Flam seems to vindicate God by stating that God's *din* is not personal, but rather an objective part of the universe, built in as part of the natural order. She

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[150] Flam, Rabbi Nancy. "Reflections Toward a Theology of Illness and Healing," Sh'ma 24/475, May 27, 1994. Flam quotes Cordovera from *Pardes Rimonim*, ch.8.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.

quotes Abraham Joshua Heschel: "Justice is a standard, mercy an attitude; justice is detachment, mercy attachment; justice is objective, mercy personal."[153] Frymer-Kensky challenges Flam's vindication, arguing that by letting God off the hook, we are giving up the necessary and valuable view of God as both wounder and healer.

> We give up the certainty of the eschatological hope that someday it will all come out right. The suffering God cannot offer hope that the perfect punishing God offers, the hope that God is perfect and just, and that when God relents, God can make everything good (if not in this world, then in the next.) If God is absent, God can come back... to be healed, we must find a way to let God back to us.[154]

Frymer-Kensky goes even further to say that illness and suffering can result from too much presence of God, not from divine absence. From the strong biblical lesson that God is often present when disaster happens, she concludes that "God may be too much there: God has *paratz*, 'broken through' uncontrollably, beyond our ability to tolerate it."[155] For example, God warns the people at Sinai not to approach the mountain *pen efrotz*, "lest I break through." God is thus the force for order and disorder. Using Hosea's metaphor, Frymer-Kensky describes God as "a lion that comes out of the dark, out of his cave, and snatches away suddenly, and you cannot know when, and you cannot know what to do about it."[156]

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[153] Ibid. Flam quotes Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Prophets.*
[154] Frymer-Kensky, p.10.
[155] Ibid, p.9.
[156] Ibid.

Too much God is thus literally bad for our health. Because God is as much wounder as healer, the presence of God at the sickbed-- precisely what Jewish Tradition celebrates-- may not really be a prescription for healing at all. Instead, Frymer-Kensky suggests that we turn to our friends, family, and the healing power of *bikkur cholim* to help us through our illness. What is most interesting is that neither Frymer-Kensky nor Flam challenge God's seemingly arbitrary distribution of justice and mercy. Flam absolves God of any responsibility for our sufferings, and Frymer-Kensky contends that we should just accept that God is wounder as well as healer, and turn to our family and friends in times of illness instead of a God who has potential to bring destruction into our lives. Neither reading accepts at face value the nature of God as portrayed in tradition; a God who personally causes our suffering for reasons of God's own, such as *yissurin shel ahavah.* Perhaps what places Flam and Frymer-Kensky in the category of post-modern Jewish thinkers is their willingness to consider the traditional categories of both *midat hadin* and *midat harachamim*, wounder and healer, but their parallel insistence that this model be either redefined (Flam) or subverted (Frymer-Kensky).

The Talmud

Critical texts in both the Bavli and Yerushalmi depict various biblical and Talmudic characters challenging God on the issue of suffering in the world. The

story of the death of R. Akiba appears in two places in the Bavli. Both accounts evoke the words "This is the Torah and this its reward?!" In one, it is the ministering angels who exclaim it as they watch R. Akiba's flesh being ripped apart;[157] in the other story, Moses exclaims these words upon seeing R. Akiba's flesh being weighed out in the market stalls.[158] Both the ministering angels and Moses question the justice behind Akiba's suffering.

The two Talmuds differ concerning the proper response to suffering. The most important feature in all of the Yerushalmi's traditions relating to suffering is its condemnation of those who do not accept suffering with graciousness and self-reflection. The major statement of this position is found in the Yerushalmi's version of the story cited above of R. Akiba's torture and execution. The Yerushalmi highlights R. Akiba's piousness in the face of martyrdom. R. Akiba does not protest his suffering but instead accepts it with joy!

The Bavli texts, like those of the Yerushalmi, support the justice of God's system, but explicit justifications of the justice of God's system are sometimes partially undermined by evident ambivalence aboveall.[159] The fact that the text of the Bavli offers no editorial rebuke or protest to the objection suggests that even in rabbinic circles, there were some who felt entitled to hold God accountable, to cry out "Why?!" and expect an answer. The Bavli, unlike the Yerushalmi, does not

[157] B. *Be.* 61a
[158] B. *Men.* 29b
[159] Kraemer. p.158.

condemn those who protest suffering or question God's justice. The Bavli story records that when Moses challenges Akiba's suffering, God in fact answers Moses' cries with the words: "Silence. This is what it occurred to me to do." But David Kramer understands God's response here as a subtle divine admission "that all is quite arbitrary. Still, the questions are good and legitimate, and that is why they are put in the mouth of Moses 'our Rabbi', the greatest of all rabbinic heroes."[160]

In contrast, when the Yerushalmi records the biting question, "This is the Torah and this is its reward?" it condemns the challenge to God and "repeats the challenging question [twice] only to illustrate the abysmal end of one who allows him/herself to voice such a heresy."[161] Perhaps not incidentally, the questioner in the Yerushalmi is none other than Elisha ben Abuyah, the classic apostate of the tradition. The danger of asking, "This is Torah and this its reward?" is that it is akin to asking, "What is the meaning of my suffering?" and such questioning is precisely what led Elisha ben Abuyah astray.

The above Talmudic examples illustrate how divided even the Rabbis were on the propriety of challenging God concerning suffering. From a historical perspective, Kraemer finds it not at all curious that the Bavli is more ambivalent towards justifying the justice of God's system. A people in exile, he says, must see suffering as an essential manifestation of God's justice, if not mercy, but then

[160] Kraemer, David. "When God is Wrong," Sh'ma 26/499, Oct. 13, 1995.
[161] Ibid.

be moved necessarily to question it. And while the Palestinian tradition witnessed great upheavals as well, their texts demonstrate the insignificance attributed to such historical events with emphasis continually placed on the credo that we continue to suffer because we continue to sin. And while such a theology led them to blame themselves, at least in theory for individual suffering, their decision to support the validity of God's system of justice, ensured them of future and final reward. [162] In other words, to accept God as the one who inflicts suffering as a means of meting out justice means that God will also heal. The Rabbis of the Yerushalmi saw that with the bad came ultimate good. But from a post-modern perspective, such as Frymer-Kensky offers, to accept that God delivers rewards means that we must also accept that God is the source of our punishment--precisely what Frymer-Kensky rejects.

The tradition is not unanimous on the question of whether we are invited to question God's seemingly arbitrary nature. And so it is up to us to decide. One option is simply to give up on a relationship with God when confronted with affliction, whether it be personal pain or the pain of a loved one. The suffering of so many during the Holocaust certainly led many people to renounce God. We can, like Flam and Frymer-Kensky, develop theologies regarding suffering that allow us to side-step the traditional notion of a God whose mercy and compassion

[162]Kraemer. Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature. p.113. For more on the historical context of the Bavli and Yerushalmi texts with regard to their understanding of suffering, see Kraemer chps. 7-9.

is as arbitrary as his justice. Or we can, like Arthur Green, accept the whimsical nature of God as sometimes wounder and sometimes healer by not eschewing reality with false assurances that God will always be with us to heal the sick and lift up the fallen, for we know from experience that such is not the case.

The Rabbis understood suffering and health through a paradigm of divine causality. They would have us believe that God's hand is as prevalent in the course of our individual lives as it is in history. God is responsible for our sufferings and our joys, rewarding and punishing us according to our merit and deeds. But our modern sensibilities will not allow us to accept this traditional theology. We find little comfort in it. For us, as post-moderns, a traditional notion of a God who rewards and punishes is simply unacceptable.

The question remaining is this: Is God involved at all? Or are our sufferings, as Flam suggests, simply part of the natural order of the universe that Cordovera describes? If we respond affirmatively to this last question, then we must also ask: Who created the universe and its order? Finally, if God is not involved in our sufferings, then can we rely on God as healer? And if we do, are we simply attributing to God characteristics that provide us with comfort even though they may be invalid and unrealistic? And, as Arthur Green suggests, can we ever know the nature of God anyway?

These questions will always go unanswered because they are beyond natural demonstrative certainty. Nonetheless, since the search for meaning

contributes to the healing process, we ultimately struggle with the decision about how we are to live in relationship with God. The kind of God with whom we live, and to whom we dialogue and pray is going to be a God who acts as a "personal axiom" for each of us, validating the way we best understand why suffering happens and how healing takes place.

Conclusion

The post-modern thinkers surveyed in this chapter are convinced of the Rabbis' false assumptions. They deny the paradigm of objective, religious causality on moral, philosophical and scientific grounds. They are not moderns, however, because they do not abandon the field to the doctors. If they were moderns, they would give up the *Mi Sheberach*, and stop praying for people. These post-modern Jewish thinkers accept scientific causality in its appropriate place, but realize that as non-scientists they themselves have nothing to contribute to that place. Yet they do not think that they have no alternative place of their own from which to act. They are labeled "post-modern" because they expand the medieval causality model by attending to wholeness. Moreover, their expansions are rooted in a re-evaluation of Jewish tradition. They, like so many of us, want to establish a new Jewish paradigm consistent with science but in touch with the texts and theology of our tradition. Thus, these post-modern thinkers are redefining the way in which Judaism understands the nature of suffering and healing by looking

at these issues through a non-causative lens. They are interested not so much in *why* we suffer, but in offering Jewish coping mechanisms that can help us to live with and survive our suffering.

CONCLUSION

Religion exists, in large part, to explain why humans suffer. As suffering is mysterious and even, perhaps, beyond our grasp, all religions attempt to explain, and often justify, it, giving it meaning and purpose. Religions offer a perspective on how the universe, and we within it, functions. In doing so, religions hope to help sufferers feel that far from arbitrary, their suffering is part of a divine plan.

The Judaism of the Torah posits a belief in an all-powerful God of history, a God of goodness and justice who cares for the fate of human beings. If so, the unavoidable question is, Why do the innocent suffer? The incomprehensible suffering that plagues human experience seems to negate this biblical conception of God. The Rabbis knew that these incongruities exist-- so much of Rabbinic literature attempts to reconcile suffering and injustice!

How can we affirm a just God in a world of injustice? Post-modern thinkers respond that God is not the cause of our sufferings, a notion that seems to be incompatible with the basic theology of the Jewish Tradition. Or are there, perhaps, other lenses through which to read the ancient texts so as to satisfy post-modern sensibilities?

Take the text of *Berachot* 5b in which several ill rabbis are visited by their fellow sages. David Kraemer notes that the suffering of these men cannot be punishment, for these sages actively intercede to eliminate the suffering of others.

> If this suffering were understood as God's punishment, there could be no justification for their initiatives. In fact, these masters evidently do not accept that their suffering is the direct will of God at all. But if not the direct will of God, then what is it?[163]

Could the Talmud be suggesting that suffering may come from a source other than God? The Bavli seems ambivalent regarding the justness of God's system. That the Rabbis were unsure themselves regarding its origins is enough to delight the mind of any post-modern thinker!

This is the post-modern dilemma: How to reconcile the Tradition with post-modern notions of how the universe works without undermining and ultimately discarding altogether the basis for our Tradition. The answer lies in a shift of focus from causality to practicality. Post-modern thought engages the Tradition through struggle with established notions of God, suffering, and healing, and develops mechanisms to cope with health and illness within a Jewish framework.

As religion deals with the mystery of good and evil, medicine struggles with the mystery of health and illness. Weil reminds us that "the human intellect fears unpredictability and impotence in the face of a mysterious, possibly hostile

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[163]Kraemer, David. Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 197.

universe."[164] Primitive peoples who were unable to explain or predict eclipses of the sun must have felt sheer terror when their life source suddenly and unaccountably disappeared. Traditional medicine, much like the Rabbis, tries to make sense of observed phenomena, to find patterns and regularities that make for better descriptions and greater control.

Both traditional medicine and the Rabbis search for causality, to know why and how and when. The fascinating component in this relationship is that the very basis of the Rabbis' belief system, namely faith in an all-powerful and all-knowing God, is the very antithesis of the scientific theory upon which traditional medicine hinges itself. One group upholds God as the ultimate truth while the other champions science. Regardless, both the Rabbis and traditional medicine ask the same questions regarding why we suffer and how healing happens. The hope is that by seeking answers to these questions, we will acquire understanding, power, and most important of all, comfort. If science can explain why a certain disease plagues us, we feel comforted. So too, if we can explain why we suffer and when we heal based on a knowledge of how God operates, we feel safer in this universe full of so many unknowns.

But in reality, "medicine can never be a science like physics or chemistry because health and illness are so close to the mysteries at the heart of

[164]Weil, Andrew. Health and Healing (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), 258.

existence."[165] The very root of the word 'science' comes from the Latin verb *scire*, "to know," and intellect can never explain the ultimate mysteries. Like traditional medicine, the Rabbis also tried to explain the ultimate mysteries of the universe. Intellectually, they understood God anthropomorphically, as a super-human, divine force that caused suffering and healing. To say that suffering and healing does not come from God would be considered heresy. To assume that there exists a force in the universe "other" than God, perhaps even more powerful, would be idolatry.

Just as post-modern thinkers have, in a sense, revolutionized the way in which we talk about Judaism, so too has the scientific model of reality changed radically since 1900.[166] Curious and adventurous doctors have experimented with mind-body innovations over the last decade, from biofeedback and hypnotism to visualization and meditation. They, like the post-moderns, are concerned less with causality and more with pragmatic solutions, offering coping mechanisms for living with our suffering. This is, in fact, the new paradigm for some doctors in treating patients. The focus has shifted from solely curing disease and alleviating pain to also offering methods of coping with the present state of one's health.

While the Rabbis have much in common with the practitioners of traditional medicine, and the post-modern Jewish thinkers have much in common with the

[165]Ibid. 257.
[166]Prather, Hugh. "What is Healing," in Healers and Healing, eds. Carlson, Richard & Sheild, Benjamin (Los Angeles: Jeremy Tarcher, Inc. 1989), 12-13.

doctors of mind-body medicine, no paradigm is perfect and there is much that these groups can teach each other. We live in a time when there are more techniques for healing than ever before. The question we must ask is this; What is it, beyond or beneath those techniques, that really fosters the healing process? Hugh Prather, a crisis therapist and minister of The Dispensable Church in Santa Fe, New Mexico, writes:

> It has taken me a half century of divergent experiences to realize that all approaches heal the body in the identical way; the only difference is in how they limit their options.[167]

The search for causality is not a negative pursuit. It adds daily to new cures and even post-modern thought fully appreciates the preferability of curing a disease over living with it. The religious search for divine causality, too, is not wholly negative. An inquiry into the nature of God and how we exist in relation to God may open our minds all the more to the inherent mystery that is God. We may thereby be led to an acceptance of what we cannot know, an acceptance that may bring its own comfort, its own "healing."

Let us return now to the question at the heart of this paper: Are we left with adequate coping mechanisms for dealing with suffering? This paper has tried to understand rabbinic ideology regarding health and illness; then explored how post-modern Jewish thinkers re-think and, sometimes, refute Rabbinic notions; and finally studied how certain post-modern physicians are expanding upon traditional

[167]Ibid.

medical practices in order to better serve those who are suffering from illness. Have any of these four approaches-- the Rabbis, traditional medicine, post-modern Jewish thinkers, and post-modern medicine-- offered us a satisfying way of dealing with pain and illness?

What all four groups have in common is the desire to alleviate suffering and encourage healing. The question is how successful have they been in achieving their goals? We have established that no single group on its own offers a full prescription for living. Traditional medicine could learn from the Rabbis what it means to live in relationship with a mysterious creative force. The Rabbis could have benefited from the scientific affirmation that absolutes can only be confirmed on the basis of valid evidence. The theory that God punishes only the wicked and rewards only the good is invalidated the moment that a righteous person suffers from an incurable disease. We might say that mind/body medicine is the marriage of these two schools of thought, namely the commitment to scientific thought balanced by an admiration for and acceptance of the mystery in human creation and life.

I have never suffered from an illness of any grave severity, so I cannot imagine what it must be like to suffer daily from inexplicable or incurable pain. I do know that none of the four groups discussed in this paper can explain away such pain with any degree of human satisfaction. But each group offers us its own wisdom regarding how we might cope with personal suffering. The Rabbis teach

that, as our Creator, God is a genuine presence with whom we can argue about matters of health that are beyond our control We can pray to this God and receive solace in the same way that we can squeeze the hand of a family member to ease our physical pain.

The post-modern Jewish thinkers offer us a mechanism for coping rooted in the Tradition itself. By returning to the traditional texts we learn how generations who came before us dealt with suffering. We can find solace in their experiences, adding our own stories to theirs.

Traditional medicine brought us the gift of scientific knowledge. Because of the efforts of traditional medicine, we have numerous options for relieving pain and increasing comfort. Contemporary mind/body medicine has reintroduced non-scientific coping mechanisms such as massage and meditation, widening the scope of personal control in our own journeys toward healing.

Epilogue

The span of time between the day that my father was diagnosed with colon cancer and the day that he died as a result of internal bleeding caused by the spreading of that cancer was five weeks. That was eleven years ago. When I recently spoke to my mother about my father's state of mind during those five weeks, she said that he feared dying, that he felt everything was out of control, that

he experienced a great loss of dignity and sense of self, and that there was no time to take stock of his life and all its blessings.

What has the Jewish tradition offered me that would have helped my father in these five weeks? I understand God in a post-modern sense. I acknowledge that God creates, but I see suffering and illness as part of the natural order of things. Goodness and evil exist simultaneously. There cannot be one without the other. True, I could reject God for creating a universe in which good and evil, health and illness exist side by side. But to do so would be to reject all that is good, to reject life. That I cannot do. And so I remind myself that if we thank God for life, then we cannot despise God for suffering which, I believe, is arbitrary.

So what do we do with it? How do we understand the existence of suffering and find comfort in spite of it? There is no prescribed solution. There are only individual attempts at seeking solace Friedrich Nietzshe wrote, "He who has a *why* to live, can bear almost any *how*."[168] Perhaps the key to surviving our suffering is to continually seek meaning in our living. Judaism offers endless ways in which to add meaning to our lives. It may be that the coping mechanisms Judaism offers us for making our suffering sufferable are the greatest gifts we have.

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[168] Byock, Ira. How We Die. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), 83.

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