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Walking with Life

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

ILLNESS

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*But as she breathed her last - for she was dying - she named him Ben-Oni [son of my suffering]; but his father called him Benjamin [son of strength]. And Rachel died.*¹

INTRODUCTION

I thought of this passage as I was called to the room of a woman who had just died in childbirth. The event seemed surreal. Things like this happened in Biblical times, but not today. I felt like an intruder, an observer in the husband's pain. Jacob changed his son's name as a way to turn his suffering into strength. Would this family be able to do the same? It is almost impossible to find meaning at the moment of our anguish. So, at the moment of the loss, I just sat there with them. However, when the husband left the hospital several weeks later with the newborn baby and her older sister, I could tell the children were a comfort for him. They were his connection to their mother. And, with time, I hope, the strength he gained will lead to a process of personal growth.

This experience was made even more poignant, perhaps, by the fact that I was seven months pregnant at the time. I was thinking about the approaching birth of my second child while at the same time reflecting back on the less than perfect delivery of my first child, my son. When he was born, the cord was tied tightly around his neck, restricting his airway. The doctor broke his shoulder in order to deliver him. I had lost a lot of blood, and, barely conscious, was unaware of the dire situation. When they brought me my baby from the NICU the next morning, he was fine, except for his right arm, which lay limp at his side. I was told days later by the pediatrician that there was nothing to do, and it would take up to 3 years to heal properly. At his bris, the community prayed for him, and we give him his name, Benjamin. His (right) arm was quickly healed within a few days.

Both these examples deal with suffering. In doing so, they address the issue of illness- whether physical, spiritual, or emotional. Though illness and suffering can exist without the other, they often walk hand in hand. To begin my exploration on Jewish views of illness, I will start with examining different views on suffering. I will do so because, as a chaplain, my role is to help alleviate suffering, not necessarily cure illness. As a pastoral caregiver, I struggle with the goal of trying to bring strength to those who are suffering while at the same time validating their concerns. My hope is that, eventually, those who suffer, like Jacob, can ultimately transform their suffering into a source of strength. Is that a possible, or even desirable, outcome?

In Biblical times, suffering and illness were thought of as a punishment for one's bad behavior:

If you will not obey me and will not observe all these commandments, if you reject my statutes and your soul hates my rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will visit you with panic, consumption and fever, which wear out the eyes and make the body languish.²

He said, "If you will heed the Lord your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptian, for I the Lord am your healer."³

Though this view of illness may be problematic to many contemporary readers, it is not unusual for people in the midst of their suffering to believe that God must be punishing them. Many of my Jewish patients ask, "Why is God punishing me? What did I do to deserve this?" Perhaps the root of their questioning comes from the Biblical concept of reward and punishment.

¹ Genesis 35:18

² Leviticus 26:14-17

³ Exodus 15:26



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Another perspective understands suffering as a way to be liberated from sin. These sufferings are seen as *yisurin shel ahavah*, loving afflictions.⁴ “God gave suffering the power to dispel the insensitivity in the human being, allowing him to become pure and clear, prepared for the ultimate good at its appointed time.”⁵

The Zohar parallels this concept of suffering. It states, “God gives pain to the righteous in this world in order to make the righteous meritorious for the World to Come.”⁶ In my experience, this concept of suffering is not as widespread as some of the other ideas, but it is somewhat prevalent amongst cancer survivors. Many cancer patients and survivors struggle to find meaning in their illness, and in doing so, they often report that their experience has made them better people.

A further view of suffering is discussed in the Babylonian Talmud.⁷ Rabbi Yohanan is asked, “Do you love suffering?” He responds, “Neither suffering nor its reward.” Using this text as a guideline, does the goal of turning suffering into strength actually minimize the experience of the sufferer? This text expresses what most people feel at the time of suffering: “I don’t care if in the end this experience makes me stronger, I don’t want to suffer!” If that is what people are thinking, there is a risk that in trying to alleviate suffering, we do so at the expense of the sufferer. How is it possible to help the person in pain get beyond the pain without invalidating their feelings?

My own personal perspective is that the ‘purpose’ of suffering is not to help make people strong. Suffering merely exists as a part of living in the physical world. However, if the suffering already exists, it might perhaps be possible for those who are actually suffering to try to make some sense of the experience, and for those around them to be part of lightening the burden of the suffering, given that we cannot eradicate it.

So let us now explore some ways in which the tradition deals with lightening the burden of suffering.

PRAYER

One way is through prayer. The tradition provides us with a specifically worded prayer to be said for the sick, the *mi sheberakh*. If we read it closely, we can discern a number of teachings about illness and suffering:

May the Holy One who blessed our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, bless and heal _____ daughter/son of [mother’s name]. May the Holy One send him/her a complete healing, a healing of body and spirit...

Even on a first reading we can see that Judaism recognizes that illness is more than physical ailment; rather it is suffering that encompasses the whole being. Let us take a closer look at the different parts of the prayer and what they have to teach us.

CONNECTION

May the Holy One who blessed our ancestors...

The prayer starts with a sense of connection. In doing so, there is the recognition that illness can be a very lonely time. “The suffering that is at the core of illness and loss is estrangement.”⁸ Patients in a hospital or a hospice, or even people being nursed at home feel separated from the community, unable to participate in the communal activities that

⁴ Rabbi Myriam Klotz, “Wresting Blessings: A Pastoral Response to Suffering,” in *Jewish Pastoral Care* Dayle Friedman (ed.), Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2001, p. 45

⁵ Moses Hayim Luzatto *Derech HaShem, The Way of God* translated and annotated by Aryeh Kaplan, Feldheim Publishers, Jerusalem and New York 1997, 2:2:5

⁶ *Zohar Vayeshev* 27

⁷ *Babylonian Talmud Berakhot* 5b

⁸ Rabbi Israel Kestenbaum, “The Gift of Healing Relationship: A Theology of Jewish Pastoral Care,” in *Jewish Pastoral Care: A Practical Handbook*, Dayle Friedman (ed.), Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock Vermont, 2001 p. 5



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helped to give their life meaning. They may feel separated from their family, adjusting to a role change. Many times they feel isolated from humanity as a whole, treated as a number, a diagnosis, a patient. They begin to lose their identity, their sense of self. In placing one who suffers in the context of the community, those who are sick can recognize that they are not alone in their anguish.

By connecting the infirm to our ancestors, we help to bring them out of their sense of isolation and assist them in seeing the bigger picture.

BLESSING

*May the Holy One **ble**ss and heal...*

Why doesn't the prayer just ask the Holy One to heal? Why does it ask the Holy One to *ble*ss and heal the one who is sick? This one declaration, *ble*ss, is rich in significance.

In the Torah, to be blessed indicates that a person will be a part in God's plans for the world and humanity. It signifies hope for the future. In Genesis 9:1, we find: "The Holy One blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth.'" To Abram he said, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing."⁹ To Isaac, God says, "I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not fear, for I am with you, and I will bless you and increase your offspring for the sake of my servant Abraham."¹⁰ These "blessings" are promises for the future.

Often when a person is sick, they feel a sense of despair, as if their life has no meaning. Frequently, one of the biggest complaints I hear from patients is not pain, or even the fear of dying. It is the fear of being a burden, of having no purpose to life. By blessing a person who is ill, we are essentially saying that there is meaning to their life and they have made, and will continue to make, a difference to their environment and the people around them.

In addition, a blessing indicates the presence of The Holy One. In the story of Job, we see how God's mere presence can be healing. "Job begins to reach peace when he feels again the presence of God in his life. It is not that God has provided any answers to Job in his suffering...The simple affirmation of God's presence with Job in his suffering is what comforts him."¹¹

The Talmud expresses the belief that the *Shekhinah* is present above the sickbed.¹² God is seen as a loving Presence, helping and sustaining, not punishing, the person who is sick.

COMPASSION

_____ daughter/ son of *[mother's name]*

When saying a prayer for healing, we use the mother's name instead of the father's. The word for womb is *rehem* and the *mi sheberakh* is a petition for compassion, *rahamim*. By saying the person's name, we are shifting the focus to the individual, recognizing that they are worthy of attention. At the same time, we are suggesting that the individual is not alone, but is someone who is loved.

⁹ Genesis 12:2

¹⁰ Genesis 26:23

¹¹ Rabbi Miryam Klotz, *ibid.* p. 41

¹² Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 40a



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UNDERSTANDING

*May God send him/her a complete healing, a healing **of soul and body.***

This prayer conveys the sentiment that illness is all-encompassing. It does not just affect the body, but the soul as well. Our tradition recognizes inherently that the pain and anxiety of illness translate into conflict, fear, emotional distress and anger, all at the same time. A sick person does not only seek healing of the body. Illness sends its tentacles deep into the soul. When we say the *mi sheberakh* we are acknowledging this in a very concrete way.

Finally, prayer by its very essence can help to alleviate suffering. Saying a prayer for someone is a sign of deep caring and concern. Many times I have said the prayer for patients who don't speak English. Upon hearing the Hebrew words, they smile, instantly recognizing my role.

VISITING THE SICK

Another way we can directly help alleviate suffering is through the mitzvah of *bikkur holim*, visiting the sick. This is seen as an act in which we emulate the Holy One:

Rabbi Hama said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: What does it mean, “You shall walk after the Eternal Your God” [Deuteronomy 13:5]? Can a person really walk and follow the presence of the Holy One?...It means to walk after the attributes of the Holy Blessed One... The Holy Blessed One visits the sick, as it says, “And God visited him [Abraham] at the terebinths of Mamre,” [Genesis 18:1], so you, too, should visit the sick.¹³

In our morning prayers, we list *bikkur holim* as one of the most important commandments, one which has no fixed measure. In the Babylonian Talmud¹⁴ Rav says, “A person who visits the sick will be delivered from the punishments of Gehinnom [Hell].” One Talmudic rabbi asserts, “Anyone who visits the sick takes away one-sixtieth of his suffering.”¹⁵ Note that the sources say nothing about curing the person's sickness. Rather, it seems that it is the mere presence of another caring person, of a representative of the community, which does wonders to ease the suffering of those who are sick.

Finally, in addition to the patient's spiritual and emotional needs, we cannot forget their physical pain. Maimonides recognizes that one cannot heal the soul without focusing on the body. He states, “It is impossible for man to understand and comprehend the wisdoms of the world if he is hungry and ailing or if one of his limbs is aching.”¹⁶ Similarly, he states, “Since when the body is healthy and sound one walks in the ways of the Lord, it being impossible to understand or know anything of the knowledge of the Creator when one is sick, it is obligatory upon man to avoid things which are detrimental to the body and acclimate himself to things which heal and fortify it.”¹⁷ Prior to Maimonides, the Talmud also recognized the importance of seeking physical healing. “No wise person should reside in a city that does not possess a physician.”¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Jacob first held tightly to Benjamin, his strength derived from his connection. But it was when he let go that Benjamin really became his strength. I believe this can happen with those who are ill, and I have seen the process over and over again with my patients. With the help of the *mi sheberakh*, visitors, and the doctors' intervention, those who are ill can better let go of their pain. And this, while it might not bring about a physical cure, undoubtedly brings healing.

¹³ *Babylonian Talmud Sotah 14a*

¹⁴ *Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 40a*

¹⁵ *Babylonian Talmud Bava Metz'ia 30b*

¹⁶ *Maimonides Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Deot 3:3*

¹⁷ *ibid.* 4:1

¹⁸ *Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 17b*



ILLNESS – TEXT 1

תלמוד בבלי נדרים לט:ב

תנא: ביקור חולים אין לה שיעור. מאי אין לה שיעור? סבר רב יוסף למימר: אין שיעור למתן שכרה, אמר ליה אביי: וכל מצות מי יש שיעור למתן שכרו? והא תנן: הוי זהיר במצוה קלה כבחמורה, שאין אתה יודע מתן שכרו של מצות. אלא אמר אביי: אפילו גדול אצל קטן. רבא אמר: אפילו מאה פעמים ביום.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *NEDARIM* 39B

It was taught: “There is no limit to *bikkur holim*” [visiting the sick]. “No limit” – what does that mean? Rav Yosef’s view was that it means there is no limit to its reward. Abaye said to him: But who knows how great the reward is for any mitzvah? A Mishnah teaches us, “Be as careful with a small [light] mitzvah as with a big [heavy] one, since you do not know the reward for mitzvot.” Rather [said Abaye], it [“no limit”] must mean that a greater person must go to visit a lesser person. Rava said [“no limit” means]: As many as a hundred times a day.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- How many interpretations of “no limit” are there in this passage?
- What do you understand the difference between “a greater person” and “a lesser person” to be?
- Do you agree with Rava that one should visit the sick up to a hundred times a day?
- Which of the interpretations fits most closely with your own practice, and why?



ILLNESS – TEXT 2

תלמוד בבלי נדרים לט:ב - מ:א

רב חלבּו חלש, נפק אכריו רב כהנא: רב חלבּו באיש, לא איכא דקא אתי. אמר להו: לא כּד הנה מעשה בתלמיד אחד מתלמידי רבי עקיבא שחלה לא נכנסו חכמים לבקרו, ונכנס רבי עקיבא לבקרו? ובשביל שכיבדו וריבצו לפניו חנה. א"ל: רבי, החייתני! יצא רבי עקיבא ודרש: כל מי שאין מבקר חולים - כאילו שופך דמים. כי אתא רב דימי אמר: כל המבקר את החולה - גורם לו שיחיה, וכל שאינו מבקר את החולה - גורם לו שימות. מאי גרמא? אילימא כל המבקר את החולה - מבקש עליו רחמים שיחיה, וכל שאין מבקר את החולה - מבקש עליו רחמים שימות. שימות ס"ד! אלא, כל שאין מבקר חולה - אין מבקש עליו רחמים לא שיחיה ולא שימות.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *NEDARIM* 39B-40A

Rav Helbo became ill. Rav Kahana proclaimed, "Rav Helbo is sick!" but not a single person came. He said to them: Didn't it happen that when one of Rabbi Akiva's students became ill and nobody came to visit, Rabbi Akiva went himself? And because Rabbi Akiva swept and sprinkled the room for him, he lived, and said, "Rabbi, you have made me live!" Rabbi Akiva subsequently taught: Whoever does not visit the sick, it is as if he sheds blood!

When Rav Dimi came [to consider this] he said, "Anyone who visits the sick causes the sick person to live, and anyone who does not visit the sick causes the sick person to die!" Is this tantamount to saying that whoever visits the sick person prays for them to live, but whoever does not is praying for them to die?! To die? Surely not! Rather [it must mean that] whoever does not visit a sick person is not praying for them [either], whether for them to live or to die.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- In what ways, according to these texts, is visiting the sick equivalent to saving a life?
- What is the difference between the two paragraphs?
- What, according to the second paragraph, is the relationship between visiting the sick and prayer?
- Can we pray for a sick person without visiting them, and if so, what does that achieve?



ILLNESS – TEXT 3

תלמוד בבלי נדרים מ:א

אמר רבין אמר רב: מניין שהקב"ה זן את החולה? שנאמר: (תהלים מא) יי' יסעדנו על ערש דוי וגו'.
ואמר רבין אמר רב: מניין שהשכינה שרויה למעלה ממטותו של חולה? שנאמר: יי' יסעדנו על ערש
דוי. תניא נמי הכי: הנכנס לבקר את החולה, לא ישב לא על גבי מטא ולא על ספסל ולא על גבי
כסא, אלא מתעטף ויושב ע"ג קרקע, מפני שהשכינה שרויה למעלה ממטותו של חולה שנאמר: יי'
יסעדנו על ערש דוי.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *NEDARIM* 40A

Ravin taught in Rav's name: How do we know that the Holy Blessing One sustains the sick? From the verse, "God will support him on the bed of languishing." [Psalm 41:4] And Ravin taught in Rav's name, "How do we know that the *Shekhinah* [the Divine Presence] rests above the bed of the sick person? From the verse, "God will support him on the bed of languishing." And it was taught: when visiting a sick person one must not sit on the bed, nor on a bench, nor on a chair, but one should robe oneself [lit. wrap oneself up] and sit on the ground, because the *Shekhinah* rests above the bed of the sick person, as it says: "God will support him on the bed of languishing."

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What does this text say about the role of The Holy One in illness?
- What is "the bed of languishing"?
- What can we learn from the text about appropriate behavior towards those who are sick?
- If you were sick yourself, would this text be a comfort to you? In what ways?



ILLNESS – TEXT 4

תלמוד בבלי ברכות ה:ב

רבי חייא בר אבא חלש, על לגביה רבי יוחנן. אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שְׂכָרוֹ. אמר ליה: הב לי יָדְךָ יְהי ליה גְּדִיה וְאוֹקְמִיה. רבי יוחנן חלש, על לגביה רבי חנינא. אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שְׂכָרוֹ. אמר ליה: הב לי יָדְךָ יְהי ליה גְּדִיה וְאוֹקְמִיה. אמאי? לוקים רבי יוחנן לנפשיה! אמרי: אין חבוש מתיר עצמו מבית האסורים.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *BERAKHOT* 5B

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill, and Rabbi Yohanan went to visit him. He asked him: “Do you love suffering?” He answered: “Neither suffering nor its reward.” He said to him: “Give me your hand.” He did, and he raised him up. Rabbi Yohanan fell ill, and Rabbi Hanina went to visit him. He asked him: “Do you love suffering?” He answered: “Neither suffering nor its reward.” He said to him: “Give me your hand.” He did, and he raised him up. Really? Why could Rabbi Yohanan not raise himself up? They say: A prisoner cannot free himself from jail.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What can we learn from about suffering from this text?
- Why couldn't Rabbi Yohanan raise himself up?
- How does your view of suffering compare with Rabbi Yohanan's?
- What can we learn from this text about dealing with illness?

³ *Mishpetei Uzziel* are the halakhic responsa of Israel's former Chief Rabbi, Ben Zion Chai Uzziel



ILLNESS - TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

PSALM 23

The Lord is my shepherd;
therefore I shall lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside the still waters,
He restores my soul.
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil.
For you are with me.
Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You spread a table in my sight
in the presence of my enemies
You anoint my head with oil
My cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.





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