

EL NA, R'FAH NA LAH,  
HEAL US NOWRABBI ERIC WEISS  
WITH HILLY HABER

There is often a delicate dance woven into the relationship between a belief system and its practitioners. As Reform Jews, we are well acquainted with this. At times, we follow the rhythm and hum of tradition, submitting to thousands of years of practice and belief. Other times, however, we take the lead, introducing nuance and complexity to ostensibly set ways of thinking. Reform Judaism and its adherents revel in this dance—together, we bend, jive, and flow with history and nuance, ancient callings and everyday longings. Conceived of to meet people where they are and committed to offering a nourishing Jewish practice, Reform Judaism offers a Movement based on creativity, egalitarianism, and relevance.

In a world that is constantly changing, however, it can be difficult for a belief system to keep up with the ever-evolving needs of its adherents. True reform, then, relies on people, its clergy and lay leaders, to infuse tradition with new meaning—to allow thousands of years of tradition to speak with urgency and meaning in the twenty-first century.

Successfully taking on and modeling this process is no easy task, but it is possible. In the early 1990s, a group of female Reform rabbis

fundamentally transformed the North American Jewish world. Revitalizing and reconstructing Jewish notions of the self, community, and care, these women birthed, out of their own life experiences, a movement centered on cultivating communal and individual Jewish practices and cultures of healing. Informed by personal narratives of illness, their rabbinic training, and Jewish notions of care, these women translated a liturgical call for healing into a spiritual practice previously missing from mainstream Reform Judaism. Their story, and the development of what has come to be known as the Jewish healing movement, speak to the power of individuals within the Jewish community to create new paradigms of practice and belief out of moments when tradition and liturgy fail to bring comfort in the face of trauma.

An understanding of this perceived failure requires an explanation of the Jewish healing liturgy and practices that then existed. Jewish tradition has long recognized a distinction between the physical experience of illness and recovery and the spiritual and emotional aspects of healing. Embedded in Jewish liturgy, this distinction speaks to the importance of caring not just for our physical health, but also for our mental and spiritual well-being. One example of a liturgical call for healing is the *Mi Shebeirach* prayer. The recitation of this prayer for healing enjoys a place at the core of our Reform liturgical experience. Indeed, the *Mi Shebeirach* and the unique rituals that accompany its recitation have long been fixtures of Reform worship and practice—rabbinic students learn the choreography of saying names aloud, cantors lead the congregation with the sacred notes of our musical tradition, and synagogue offices even have protocols on how to list names for their newsletters and Shabbat programs. All of this is a reflection of the prominent and powerful role the prayer for healing plays in daily practice today.

The dynamic nature of the *Mi Shebeirach* speaks more broadly to the multifaceted and diverse function of liturgy. Liturgy seeks to attach words to feelings or thoughts we cannot quite articulate on our own—offering insights into universal questions that we may not have previously considered; providing a sense of belonging and inclusion in

a wider community; giving communities a common set of assumptions about the world; and offering us a relationship to God that is both communal and personal. Prayer, therefore, works not as a monologue or in a vacuum, but as a dialogue between the worshiper's innermost longings and the liturgical text. In this spirit, Reform tradition recognizes an element of malleability in prayer—empowering its leaders and laypeople to edit, resurrect, enhance, and expand liturgy, allowing our prayers to speak to those who recite them. The central presence of the *Mi Shebeirach* within the Reform canon is an example of how liturgical standards shift to reflect the spiritual yearnings of a people.

Further, prayer has the power to set the stage for conversation between a synagogue and its members. In many synagogues, members understand the inclusion of the *Mi Shebeirach* within the service as an indication of the synagogue's capacity to care. In reading aloud the names of those in need of healing, for example, we bring private struggle into the communal sphere. The public listing of names here implicitly functions as a spiritual and communal contract: we vow to take notice of and care for one another. The *Mi Shebeirach* also embodies a public declaration of individual vulnerability that is then acknowledged by the community and initially responded to through formal prayer. As an articulation of a communal, spiritual contract, the *Mi Shebeirach* allows us to express our highest hopes and dreams for our community—we seek to be a community of carers. In this context Reform Judaism is attractive to those who yearn for a place they feel cared for in the midst of a culture that otherwise can alienate the individual from the community.

The power of the *Mi Shebeirach* to create and inform a practice of care within our communities speaks to the power of liturgy to shape and inform communal notions of care and healing. Liturgy, however, can only take us so far in cultivating communal and individual practices of care. Today, the Reform Jewish conversation around healing that has developed beyond the recitation of the *Mi Shebeirach* owes its progress to the Jewish healing movement.

Coined by Rabbi Nancy Flam, the term “Jewish healing movement” was initially written with a lowercase “m” to acknowledge that while not a formal, structured movement, it represented a significant effort to bring personal pain and suffering into the collective consciousness of our people. Soon after its inception, the Jewish healing movement began to fundamentally shift the ways in which Reform communities spoke about illness. From smaller, more intimate conversations to formal gatherings of larger audiences, dialogues surrounding healing were launched, in an attempt to create communal spaces in which to engage issues of healing and curing, pursuits of wholeness, and structures of spiritual care. These conversations began happening across the country—most notably through liturgical changes, the establishment of synagogue caring communities, and the building of healing centers.

The Jewish healing movement came about through a confluence of factors, beginning in the late 1980s out of Rabbi Rachel Cowan’s personal experience with her husband Paul’s illness, and moving from there to a series of conversations and then formal efforts to construct a foundation to articulate Jewish resources to the service of the community during times of illness, grief, and dying. Other cultural factors in the movement included the then-nascent pandemic of AIDS within our communities, as well as other scourges like breast cancer, while reflecting the unique Jewish-American dual values of individuality and community. The movement also represented a significant shift away from Holocaust-centered Jewish communal identities, tapping into grassroots spiritual care movements popping up across the United States, influenced by, for example, 12-step programs.

The success of the Jewish healing movement in the western United States, in bringing the suffering of the individual to the communal sphere, may indicate a shift in the American Jewish landscape from the East to the West in terms of innovation and creativity within Jewish communities.

As a uniquely American creation, it can be suggested that the Jewish healing movement uses the American value of individuality to inform its construction of and relationship to God, Torah, and Israel. While

many Jewish organizations hold on to rigid understandings of these concepts, the Jewish healing movement allows for the creation of flexible constellations and relationships among these three concepts in the context of individual and collective healing and spirituality. It is this freedom and fluidity that allows the Jewish healing movement to bring the personal into the communal in conversation with God, Torah, and Israel. In this way, the Jewish healing movement offers a new Jewish identity paradigm that melds personal experience to both the individual and communal Jewish spiritual experience.

Rabbi Rachel Cowen's own story of loss and trauma speaks to the ability of personal experience to inform and shape Jewish spirituality. In the early 1980s Rabbi Cowan's husband Paul was diagnosed with leukemia. His diagnosis coincided with the diagnostic rise of AIDS in the United States. The world of treatment they entered was marked by two things: a rise in the broader level of spiritual care for patients and a lack of specifically Jewish practices and conversations around illness. Rachel reflects that during her husband's many hospitalizations the only chaplains sent to her husband's room were Christian, and therefore, they were unable to speak to the spiritual longings of a Jewish couple. Further research revealed an overall lack of Jewish vocabulary and conversation around how we experience illness, how to approach the end of life, how to understand differences between curative efforts, and other efforts to buoy the spirit, assuage spiritual anxiety, and help to frame a response to questions about life beyond a physical reality.

In response to her experiences at her husband's bedside, Rabbi Cowen used her rabbinic thesis to both illuminate the Psalms as a tool for building a spiritual response to illness, and to begin a broader conversation with other Jewish professionals to challenge the status quo in Jewish response to illness.

Rabbi Cowen understood her identity as a woman to be central to her work at this time. She reflects, "From my experience as a woman and as a parent I have an understanding of what it means to nurture and so in leadership positions I prefer collaborative ways of problem

solving and helping people come together. I am good at gathering people together to identify ways to solve a problem.”<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Nancy Flam, co-founder and pioneer of the Jewish healing movement, also highlights the role of her female identity in her work: “I have always felt most alive as a human being through the world of emotions....I am certain that part of the license I have experienced in deeply inhabiting the world of emotions comes from my being female in this culture....I view those who bear witness to deep emotion to be more warrior-like than anything.”<sup>2</sup>

Together with Rabbi Nancy Flam, Rabbi Rachel Cowan, Rabbi Susan Freeman and others revolutionized Jewish notions of care and spiritual healing in America. One primary contribution these rabbis brought to the landscape of Jewish life is the singular healing service. Before their vision, the Jewish community did not have a viable vocabulary or liturgical framework to articulate spiritual yearnings for wholeness. At the time, the Jewish approach to illness was focused primarily on the medical and legal narratives. For example, Jewish life tended to focus on understanding the process of a disease and knowing the best physician for a referral. Efforts were made to ensure that estate plans were in place. While these are vitally important, the Jewish landscape did not attend to the one feature that a faith community is capable of providing: reflection on the spiritual narrative of one’s life in the face of illness. The development of a Jewish healing service provided a foundation of vocabulary, theological frames, and personal experience to speak to deeper explorations such as: How do I live with illness? What happens to me after I die? What spiritual supports do I need as I adjust to a different lifestyle?<sup>3</sup>

While it is reductive and overly simplistic to assign specific gender qualities to how a culture shifts, Rabbi Susan Freeman reflects that “expressing the maternal instinct is a hands-on, very embodied experience. My sense is that a key impetus behind creating Jewish healing centers was a perceived need to create opportunities for support and connection in ways that may be in sync with the kind of intimacy associated with maternal instinct.”<sup>4</sup> Certainly, the notions of Jewish healing

have brought a direct relational aspect to the wider Jewish landscape as a legitimate frame for Jewish identity development.

These women cultivated a soil in the Jewish landscape that encouraged the growth of new vocabulary, new liturgical frameworks, and new relational models for Jewish identity development. Much remains still unexplored in regard to their efforts and the impact they have had on the American Jewish scene. Their work intersects with broader issues that call out for deeper exploration in the areas of gender identity, the elements necessary for cultural change, and how one articulates a communal vision. Ultimately, however, these women have shown us how we change a canon to keep our Jewish life vibrant—how as good dance partners we must demand support and relevance from Jewish tradition.

## NOTES

1. E-mail correspondence with the author, August 26, 2015.
2. E-mail correspondence with the author, March 11, 2015.
3. The history of the Jewish healing service has yet to be fully written; however, an important historical foundation is the healing service developed under the auspices of Rabbi Yoel Kahn while serving Congregation Shaar Zahav and his collaboration with Rabbi Nancy Flam at the first Jewish Healing Center, in San Francisco, California.
4. E-mail correspondence with the author, April 2, 2015.