



CYCLE OF JEWISH TIME AND HEALING
Keynote talk at
National Center for Jewish Healing Conference:
SEASONS FOR HEALING -
DRAWING SPIRITUAL RESOURCES FROM THE JEWISH HOLIDAYS¹
Rabbi Amy Eilberg
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I still remember my first teacher about the role of the Jewish holidays in the healing process. It was 1985, I was fresh out of seminary, a brand new chaplain at a church-related hospital in the Midwest. I was called to visit a Jewish woman on the surgical floor who had just had stomach-stapling surgery to help her to lose weight that was severely endangering her health. I'd been in a course of Clinical Pastoral Education for all of about three months, but already I knew I wasn't supposed to enter the room with an agenda. Still, walking the corridors of the hospital on my way to the surgical floor, I scripted the whole encounter. I imagined what the patient would need to talk about - issues connected to her surgery, disfigurement, body image, shame, life style change, and how I would respond when she did.

When I actually met this patient, I quickly learned that she had a very different agenda in mind. She didn't want to talk about her surgery, her old body or her new one. She wanted to light Hanukah candles. She wanted to bring light into her room. She wanted for someone to hear her pain about having fallen away from Jewish practice, and her longing to reconnect with an eternal source of

¹ This talk draws heavily on material presented in "Sustain Us to Reach this Season: The Jewish Holidays and Healing" by Rabbi Nancy Flam, Rabbi Amy Eilberg and Rabbi Simkha Weintraub, in *The Reconstructionist*, vol. 63, number 2, Spring, 1999. More deeply still, I want to acknowledge that I learned everything I know about a Jewish healing perspective on the holidays from and with my friends, Rabbis Nancy Flam and Simkha Weintraub. I thank them for allowing me to serve today as the mouthpiece for the teachings we have developed together.

meaning, comfort, and connection. I'm quite sure this woman has long since forgotten me, but I believe I will never forget her, for what she taught me about the healing power of the holidays.

In the darkest of times and in the most joyful, the holidays serve as a rich reservoir of healing themes, stories, images and practices, which can buoy our spirits, fill us with joy, invite us to reflect on the great spiritual questions of life, and mirror our own experience - all in concert with the entire Jewish community, wherever they are, around the world and throughout history. Sometimes our holiday observances invite us to momentarily step out of our own particular stories, and to enter the eternal stream of life and meaning that the master Jewish story offers us. At such times, the holidays can offer blessed times of relief and perspective, as we are reminded that we are part of something infinitely larger than our own present experience of suffering. At other times, the holidays can help us to feel less alone, as they speak metaphorically of precisely the themes that animate and afflict our lives, reminding us that Jews around the world and throughout time have struggled with the same painful questions that beset us.

Of course, the holidays can be extremely difficult for those whose pain overwhelms their capacity to see any larger picture of life. And they can be alienating for those who already feel different, isolated, unable to experience themselves as part of the circle of community. I remember the year I stood in the back of my shul, which has particularly wild and wonderful antics on Simchat Torah. I watched in tears, because my husband and I were on the verge of divorce. There was no place I could be but here, in shul, with my community, but there was no place for me amidst all of this joy and frivolity. Not that year. There have been dark times in my life when I could not sing the berachot over Shabbat candles;

if I am in tears, I can speak, but I cannot sing. At such moments, I can only take in the light, trusting that the following week, or the week after that, I will be able to sing again.

So we must enter our conversation about the holidays with care and humility. We who seek to offer Jewish resources to people living with illness, pain and loss, dip into the rich treasures that our tradition offers, hoping that these practices might nourish the spirit, decrease isolation, give a glimpse of spiritual perspective on suffering. Yet we must offer these resources gently, cognizant of the fact that there are times in life when there is no comfort to be had, no resource wise or comforting enough to penetrate our suffering. At such times we can only pray that this time of affliction will pass for this person, and that they may someday know joy again.

SHABBAT

I must begin this survey of Jewish time with Shabbat, the most frequent and most sacred of Jewish holy days. When I contemplate the healing power of Shabbat, so many images come to mind, but none more powerful than the moment of candle-lighting. This is the moment when I turn from the rush and stress of ordinary time to the hush and peace of sacred time. I stand with loved ones - whether physically or in my imagination, bringing in the light, bathed in the rich silence. In those moments, I am at one with Jewish women throughout time, for whom this was a focused moment of personal prayer. The candles speak with silent eloquence of eternity, of light and warmth, of love and continuity.

If I had to name a single healing theme of Shabbat, it would be rest itself. Basic to Shabbat observance is physical rest, as we imitate God by setting aside time to bask in work already done and creation

already completed. And, Shabbat is a teacher about rest for the soul, about the art of accepting things as they are. (I recently learned that the teachers of the Mussar Movement used the term “*menuchat hanefesh*”/ “soul rest” to describe what we would call “equanimity.”) Shabbat gives us a time to practice refraining from manipulating or disturbing the world as it is. Classically, we do not even recite petitionary prayers (except, of course, the prayer for healing, which simply cannot be set aside), so focused are we on savoring what is whole, beautiful and blessed in our lives.

Shabbat teaches us about bringing this contemplative consciousness into the work week as well. Regardless of the work that engages us during the week, we are never more than six days away from an experience of acceptance, of appreciating life as it is, in all of its wonder, grace, and pain. Shabbat blesses every day of our lives with the knowledge that while there are surely times to fight, to struggle, to give everything we have to combat illness, loneliness, and suffering in ourselves and in others, there are times to step back and rest in what we have been given.

THE HIGH HOLY DAYS

Unetaneh Tokef, the prayer that imagines God inscribing in the heavenly book who shall live and who shall die in the year to come, has become for many a riveting and troubling image of the high holy days. I remember one year that the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer found me painfully aware that a friend, a beloved member of our community, who had known much tragedy in her life, was now in the final stages of a long and valiant cancer journey. We were quite sure that our friend would not live to see another Rosh Hashana, and *Unetaneh Tokef* took us deep into our grief. And I remember the year that I listened to the *Unetaneh Tokef* on Rosh Hashanah, having been told that I might have ovarian cancer. I was lucky - by Yom Kippur I had good news. But the words shook me to my core.

Rosh Hashanah, although the start of the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, the Ten Days of Turning or Repentance, is not about sin or penitence. It is about powerlessness, about the mysterious grandeur of the Divine, and about the very small place that we occupy in the universe. Surely, this message can be toxic for people living with illness (and for healthy people as well), when it is understood in a self-deprecating way. But at heart, it is a message of healing, reminding us that we are not God. We are not in charge. Illness happens not because we are sinners but because we are human. There can be relief in this - relief from the exhausting struggle with unanswerable questions, and relief in knowing that I can relax, because the job of Ruler of the Universe is taken - and not by me.

In a sense, Rosh Hashanah invites the whole community into the truth with which sick and grieving people live every day. Rosh Hashanah assaults the denial of the healthy, so that on this day, the ill - beset with clear awareness of mortality - are at one with the whole community, all of us knowing the fundamental uncertainty of life. We are made of dust, as the *Unetaneh Tokef* concludes, and to dust we return; like clay vessels, we can break, like flowers we fade, and like shadows we pass, and like a dream we will someday pass from sight. This is the truth, and there can be comfort in standing in the sacred circle of community affirming it, at the same time committing to savor the fragile gift of life we are given.

So, too, on Yom Kippur we enact a 25-hour period of practice for the experience of dying. Deprived of food, drink, and sexual pleasure, dressed in the white of the shroud, constantly reminded that the gates will soon close, we come face to face with our own mortality.

This confrontation with mortality can lead to a sense of dread, despair, and overwhelming grief. At the same time, this recognition can motivate us to embrace the beauty of our lives, and to make changes so that we live truly, righteously and generously with the time that remains to us.

Many people who live daily in the face of mortality find themselves doing the work of the High Holidays throughout the year: examining their lives, making amends, rearranging priorities, and living with the awareness of the preciousness of each moment. Sometimes, such self-scrutiny can lead to harsh judgments about oneself as one grows in awareness of one's imperfections. It is important for ill and grieving people to make sure that this process of introspection does not lead to self-blame or excessive guilt. The goal of the High Holidays, perhaps like the journey of life itself, is to emerge on the other end as a more righteous and godly person, more conscious of life's fragility and beauty, and more grateful for the blessings of life.

SUKKOT

I moved to Northern California one year after the Loma Prieta earthquake, which had severely shaken the place that I now made my home. The earthquake had taken place on Sukkot, so every night of Sukkot of 1990, our first in California, we listened to stories about the earthquake of the previous year. I heard again and again that while there had been significant property damage in the area where we now lived, not a single Sukkah had been destroyed. Now - when I tell this story skeptics always claim this is apocryphal. But really, this is what I heard.

For me, the Sukkah will forever be inscribed in my awareness as the humble structure that is safer in the face of disaster than the most impressive buildings. Sukkot is a time when we embody the fact of our own vulnerability, and also the time - called *Zeman Simchateinu* - the Time of our Rejoicing - when we celebrate the abundance of blessings in our lives. For those whose lives are touched by serious illness, what gratitude is there to express, what sense of abundance to affirm? And how might the two apparently paradoxical themes of vulnerability and gratitude fit together?

When we experience our vulnerability, we sometimes become more deeply grateful for the blessings that are ours. Some of us are made aware of that vulnerability with an unkind force, with the shock of a new diagnosis, or accident, or violence. Others of us - as yet spared the ravages of illness and loss - need to cultivate a sense of this vulnerability so that we can see the truth of our lives more fully and clearly.

I have often puzzled over the rather perverse fact that many people seem moved to appreciate the blessings in their lives precisely when they are endangered. I remember a woman I cared for many years ago, who suffered from multiple life-threatening chronic illnesses. By her own description, she had lived much of her adult life in a way that placed physical beauty, status, and prestige at the center. By the time she became ill, her relationships were strained and she was quite alone. But in her journey with illness, she had naturally begun to appreciate the little things - the feel of the breeze on her cheek through the open window of her sickroom, the blessing of being strong enough to take a shower, the presence of a loved one. She adopted a practice of calling her dearest loved ones at the end of each day to apologize for any offense she may have committed, aware that she might not live through the night. Not surprisingly, she now found herself surrounded by a circle of loving people.

Of course, not everyone feels this way. Harold Kushner is quoted as saying long ago that his son's tragic death had certainly given him greater wisdom. He would much rather have lived stupidly for the rest of his life, with his son alive and well. In these words, he spoke for many, many people whose lives are changed irrevocably and painfully by serious illness.

Those of us who offer care to the ill and their loved ones must always remember that there are times that one simply cannot be joyful, and to encounter that expectation in one's community can be terribly painful. The sense of being different or an outsider to community may be exacerbated when the whole community is rejoicing while one is unable to join in the celebration. On the other hand, it sometimes happens that these communal cycles and celebrations can pull us out of our particular suffering and help us to join in the collective celebration. When this happens, we may feel moments of gratitude - for the holiday, for our tradition, for our community, for a moment of blessing.

SIMCHAT TORAH

Of all the holidays of the year, Simchat Torah may be the most difficult for a person living with illness or grief. At a time of deep personal suffering, how can one find a place amidst a community reveling in unrestrained joy and noisy chaos? At such times the noise can be deafening, everyone else's laughter depressing, and the high energy isolating. Yet sometimes one can enter a room filled with joyful chaos and, for a time, be carried away from one's personal pain, knowing deeply that we are part of something larger than our own particular experience. There can at times be great relief in this.

So, too, the thematics of the holiday can offer a message of healing. Simchat Torah is the day on which the annual cycle of Torah reading is completed and begun again. This explosion of joy is a festival of seamless ending and beginning. In this ritual, we rejoice that we have come to the end of a cycle of reading the Torah, our people's beloved source of wisdom. And then we immediately begin again. We need never be left in transition, with nothing to rely on or nowhere to stand.

This is a celebration of the never-ending cycles of life - of endings and beginnings, of the steady, predictable passage of time. It is like a contemplation of the ceaseless nature of the tides - dependably flowing in and flowing out. On Simchat Torah, we remember that we have access to an eternal source of divine guidance, an anchor in a world of dizzying and terrifying change. On this festival, we rejoice in the Source of comfort that can never be severed or lost. This is truly reason for joy.

HANUKAH

Those who live with illness or loss often feel that darkness has overwhelmed the light. Hanukah is a festival celebrating light, hope and faith in times of overpowering darkness. The Hanukah ritual is exquisitely designed to nurture our faith and renew our spirit, even when the world around and within lead us toward fear and despair.

Years ago my friend, Rabbi Simkha Weintraub, wrote a Hanukah reflection on a midrash that imagines the terror that Adam and Eve must have felt when night fell for the very first time. They must have wondered whether they would ever see light again. At such times in our own lives, the light of Hanukah metaphorically brings us exactly what we need - a glimpse of the light within us, increasing in radiance with each passing day.

Talmudic arguments do not always make for evocative healing texts. But the most powerful healing image about Hanukah may be the argument between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, about whether Hanukah candles should be lit in ascending or descending order. Beit Shammai's view, that we should light eight candles on the first night, seven on the second, and so on, down to one, would aptly convey the drama of the original Hanukah miracle, moving from an abundance of light, to very little, to the threat that the light would completely go out, and then - the miracle. But, of course, the halacha is according to Beit Hillel. We light first one candle, then two, then three, because the human spirit needs to be nourished by the sight of light increasing. In times of fear and hopelessness, this is exactly what we need.

And of course, Hanukah is about miracles and wonders. Clearly, the notion of miracles is a difficult one for many contemporary Jews. Many of us do not believe in an anthropomorphic God Who intervenes, puppeteer-like, in human affairs, and then is curiously uninvolved at other times of need. We may associate "medical miracles" with the superstitious rhetoric of faith healers or unbelievable promises of some practitioners who seem to advocate a particular magical cure for what ails us.

The Hanukah story invites us to savor the possibility that miracles really do happen. Occasionally, these are the remarkable miracles written of with puzzlement in medical journals. At other times, we may recognize miracles in our own lives - precisely in the midst of hard times - if we think small, and look mindfully and reverently at our lives, moment by moment.

PURIM

Purim, with its hilarious burst of energy, celebrates the sheer surprise and exhilaration of our people's salvation. The Purim story is a tale of a brush with death. We were spared, and we respond with elation and giddiness. This is the car accident that miraculously does not injure the passengers, the tumor that turns out to be benign, the mugger who does not shoot. Extreme anxiety turns into existential relief, and seeks expression. The noise making, excessive drinking, and rowdy behavior express the relief at the heart of the holiday.

These kinds of moments may occur for people living with serious illness. There is the moment when one learns that the treatments have been effective, or that the dreaded screening test has come back negative. For others, relief comes less dramatically, but just as truly: when a friend or family member expresses love and comfort; when tears break through and bring release; when one recognizes that one still has the capacity for joy and meaning. Given the accumulation of stress and worry, it is important to experience moments of relief when one can.

And Purim is about the healing power of laughter. Clearly, for some people, going to a shul exploding with raucous energy would be impossible. Yet for some, Purim can offer what Marx Brothers movies did for Norman Cousins, who healed himself from a serious, degenerative chronic illness by watching comic movies. Perhaps someday we will better understand the biology of laughter's healing power. For now, all of us know our own experience of the cathartic, joyful release that laughter can bring to body and soul. The Jewish people have developed a great ability to laugh in the face of danger. Sometimes, individuals can do the same.

PASSOVER

The themes of healing and liberation are so closely related that virtually every element of the Passover Seder can present itself as a symbol of healing. The Seder is essentially a healing service, moving us symbolically from suffering to release, for our people, and for each of us, in our own lives.

For me, the key line in the Passover Seder has always been the one that enjoins us to take the Passover story personally. "Bechol dor vador hayav adam lir'ot et atsmo ke'ilu hu yatsa miMitsrayim." "In every generation, each of us must see ourselves as if we went out from Egypt." This instruction, of course, is meant to urge us to find ourselves in the Exodus story, to sense that we were slaves in Egypt, and also to find the Passover story in our own personal lives. Even among those blessedly untouched by illness, many Seder leaders ask all participants of the Seder to reflect on how they have personally been brought from constricted places to freedom in the year gone by. When we do this, we are inviting all of our guests to reflect on the course of healing in their own lives.

A few years ago, I had a session with my own spiritual director around Rosh Hodesh Nissan, two weeks before Pesach. I had already invited my guests and compiled a shopping list, but I had not yet had quiet time to ask myself the personal question of what liberation I was seeking, now, in my life.

I soon found myself reflecting on the verse from Psalm 118, "*Min hameitzar karati Yah, anani bamerchav Yah.*" "From the narrow places I have called to You, O God; You have answered me with great abundance." I am still deeply moved, many years later, by a set of hand motions that my daughter's first-grade Judaica teacher had taught the kids when they sang this song. On the words "From the narrow places . . ." one brings one's arms close over the chest, bending the head in a

gesture of constriction. And on the words “You have answered me . . . ,” one opens the arms and torso wide, in a gesture of grateful prayer. Sitting with my Spiritual Director that day, I sat for the better part of an hour praying over that verse, feeling how it moved in my body, coming to know the ways in which I was living in constriction that year, and yearning to be free.

At one point I looked up from my personal musings, and saw that my director was in tears, deeply moved. She had watched the way in which the quiet, sacred hour of spiritual direction time had enabled me to prayerfully enter the image of enslavement and liberation with my whole being. In sitting with that verse, praying it with my whole body, I was opened to possibilities I might not have seen in any other way.

Then, too, the Seder is about the presence of paradox in our lives, and the possibility of living with polar opposites in a way that helps us grow. The Seder relentlessly insists that we move beyond either/or thinking, asking us to dip the karpas, the symbol of rebirth and hope, in the salt water of tears; dipping the bitter herb in the sweet haroset; and holding in our minds both the reality that we were slaves once long ago in Egypt, and that today we are still slaves who will someday be freed. Thus, the Seder conveys a healing message about growing to accept the bitter and the sweet as part of the seamless tapestry of our lives.

SHAVU’OT

Shavu'ot arrives after a long lesson in waiting, in patience, in process. Among the many meanings of the period of Sefirat Ha'Omer (the counting of the 50 days from Passover, the Festival of Freedom, to Shavu'ot, when the Torah was revealed at Mount Sinai), is the sense that revelation - guidance,

wisdom, truth - does not come to us readily, not even as a necessary result of a new experience of freedom. Just as our ancestors endured a long period of wandering in the desert before revelation came, we, too, must - like it or not, cultivate patience, and sometimes take long journeys through deserts of pain, confusion and disorientation, before wisdom will present itself. The ritual of counting encourages us to pay respectful attention to the process that brings us from freedom to revelation.

But Shavu'ot does come, and then we celebrate the festival of revelation, acknowledging that we, as part of the Jewish people, have been given rich sources of wisdom. Revelation means that God/Life/Spirit/The Ground of All Being/ The Great Mystery/A Higher Power is available to offer guidance, truth, and understanding, often through our encounter with our people's sacred texts. To celebrate Torah is to recognize that we do not have to figure everything out on our own: that our ancestors have left us a precious source of Truth that is ours to claim.

Revelation means that the Divine communicates with us - collectively, as a people, and as individuals. Of course, the process of listening for the voice of the Divine in the midst of the din of life, or the terrors of illness, is not always easy. And the ancient sources of Torah often require significant translation before we can recognize their applicability to our own life struggles. But Shavu'ot promises us that Torah is a reservoir of endless wisdom from which we may drink at any time of our lives.

TISH'A B'AV

If Simchat Torah and Purim, days of great joy and frivolity on the Jewish calendar, may be the days that are hardest for people living with illness, pain and grief, then Tish'a B'av may be the easiest. Tish'a B'av, the ninth day of the month of Av, commemorates the destruction of the First Temple (in

586 B.C.E., by the Babylonians) and of the Second Temple (in 70 C.E., by the Romans). As such, Tish'a B'av came to be observed as a day of collective mourning, recalling the loss of Temple – of spiritual home and communal center. In time, as tragedy continued to befall the Jewish people, tradition came to associate many other collective tragedies with this day, until Tish'a B'av became the focal point for communal grieving over all that we have suffered at the hands of other nations.

I can remember years of my own life when the observance of Tish'a B'av came quite naturally. At such times, sitting on the floor of the dimly lit synagogue, observing certain rituals of mourning (e.g. wearing no leather), fasting and hearing the melancholic chant and excruciating words of Lamentations, gave expression not only to my people's collective mourning, but to my own. Much like entering a house of mourning, this was a place where one need not put on a false, social smile. All participants in this ritual are invited to experience the collective grief as their own, and so, too, the collective rituals of mourning may support each of us in our own experiences of loss.

The particular tragedy that is the focus of Tish'a B'av bears further reflection for people living with personal grief and loss. The loss of the Temples is about collective loss of home, loss of center, loss of unity and collective orientation.² While we as a people continued to turn toward Jerusalem – the center of our universe – in prayer, the loss of our spiritual home left us bereft and fragmented. As a people, we have never fully healed from these traumatic experiences.

Some of the harder times in my own life have been when I have lost a home. Grief came with unexpected power when, at the age of 36, I watched my parents move out of the home in which I had

grown up. I had lived in many homes by that time; I had long since created my own adult life. Yet the loss of my childhood home opened up a chasm of grief – for the childhood I had had and the childhood I still longed for; for a sense of center, for the security of a long-loved place to which I could always return.

So, too, when I lost my family home during a divorce process, I experienced a temporary shattering of my sense of who I was and where I belonged in the world. It took a lot of time, help and grace to restore my sense of knowing where I stood, of feeling grounded and oriented in my own life.

These experiences help me understand the profundity of the ritual of Tish’a B’av. It is far more than a commemoration of an historic event – even a series of historical tragedies. It is a day focused on our understanding of our collective burden of losses, and of our longing for a day when fragmentation and disorientation will give way to unity again.

Many years ago, a Christian clergy friend forever changed the way in which I understand the verse in Psalms 90:1: “*Adonai ma’on Ata hayita lanu bedor vador.*” “O God, You have been our Home in every generation.” Can you remember one of those billboards on the side of a highway, advertising an apartment building nearby? “If you lived here, you’d be home now.” My friend said those words, pointing to his heart. If you lived **HERE**, in the heart, not only in day-to-day concerns, but in your essence, in your divine center, you could be home at any time – any time you took a breath, any time you awakened to the reality of being alive.

² My friend Rabbi Alan Lew called my attention to this in his beautiful book, “*This is Real and You*

Loss inevitably disorients us, causing us to lose our moorings, even shattering our sense of who we are. This is the genius of Jewish bereavement ritual, affirming the profundity of our losses, and offering structure, safe space and time devoted to the expression of our grief, the support of community, prayer, and much more. Then, when the excruciating time of acute grieving begins to lighten, Jewish prayer and ritual gently remind us that our true home can never die, never be taken away by external circumstance. As long as we are alive, we can come home, moment by moment, to our center, to the holy place within us.

The holiday cycle brings us a rich tapestry of reflections on core issues in the lives of those living with illness, from mortality and the fragility of life and its abundance, from joy, light, and hope, to relief and laughter, from liberation to wisdom, and back again. In the time-honored forms of Jewish ritual and prayer, we find reflections on themes that speak to the soul, often with particular poignancy when life has brought illness and suffering. In some cases, the holidays affirm in poetic form what those living with illness well know; in others, the holiday practices offer to those in pain a chance to contemplate images of healing. In all, holiday observance can make available rich moments of celebration and connection with the Eternal. May these practices bring comfort to those in need, and may we all be blessed by our people's timeless wisdom.

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Rabbi Amy Eilberg is the Co-Director of the Morei Derekh Program for Training in Jewish Spiritual Direction. She is the first woman ordained as a Conservative Rabbi by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS).

Are Completely Unprepared (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2003).

She was a co-founder of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, where she directed the Center's Jewish Hospice Care Program. She lectures and writes on issues of Jewish spirituality, healing and spiritual direction.

For inquiries about Jewish Spiritual Direction, Rabbi Eilberg can be reached at amy@yedidyacenter.org.

The National Center for Jewish Healing of the JBFCS provides consultation, publications, conferences, and information & referral to Jewish communal organizations and professionals seeking to address the spiritual needs of Jews during times of illness and loss. It assists in the development of Jewish healing programs throughout North America.

For inquiries about Jewish healing, please contact the National Center for Jewish Healing at srosenthal@jbfcs.org or go to www.jhhrn.org.