



## Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe Yom Kippur 5775/2014

It's been a full year in the lives of the 1600 families that are a part of Temple Rodef Shalom: we've welcomed lots of new babies into our community, danced at many B'nai Mitzvah and wedding celebrations, and mourned at funerals. I lost my Omi, my last remaining grandparent. I also got to peek out the window from the staff kitchen to watch my three kids run around in the lower playground, as they all spent their first year in the Temple's preschool. And unbelievably, next year Shoshana will be ready for kindergarten. Like all of you, my wife and I have watched the cycle of life and, for the most part, we have enjoyed it immensely, being at this moment in such a fun stage of our children's lives.

And, like far too many of us, this year we also experienced a difficult period in which the natural and easy progression of life was interrupted by something that challenged us. In March, Jaimee was diagnosed with breast cancer. She is now done with her treatments and is well on the way back to strength. As I look back, I feel incredibly lucky and incredibly blessed: lucky, because her cancer was found early, and the chances are excellent that it will never come back. Blessed, because of how much we have benefited from the support of family, friends and this incredibly nurturing community: the meals that were brought to us during Jaimee's recovery from surgery, the thoughtful visits, gifts, calls, hugs, cards and emails, the donations to charity in her honor, the words of advice and help with child care. It was all so meaningful and important to both of us, and I want to thank this community from deep in my heart. I also feel blessed to have grown and learned from the process of healing that Jaimee – and even I – have gone through and continue to experience. It was at times frightening, painful, exhausting and overwhelming. But it was also an important experience, and one that has forever changed us. Our tradition speaks of two kinds of healing – *R'fuat Haguf*

*and R'fuat Hanefesh*, or the healing of the body and the healing of the spirit – and I have learned firsthand the truth of this duality.

Every family goes through challenges like this, involving illness and the healing that follows it. Like the more expected cycles of life, these experiences are part of our existence. Many of you have had to deal with illness yourselves during this past year, and even more of you have supported another through a difficult process of healing. Some of you have yet to go through this – and may it be a long time before you do. But in a sacred community, we must talk about these experiences. We have to learn from each other and learn how to be there for each other, and we have to seek guidance in Jewish tradition, which has great wisdom to share.

Supporting someone who has an illness can feel just as hard as having it yourself. I remember a sense of helplessness. I wanted to protect this person I loved, but I knew I couldn't. What was left was just to be there. In the beginning of Jaimee's months-long journey came the first emotions that perhaps everyone experiences: the fear of what is to come, the confusion of not understanding what the doctors were telling us, the frustration at what even the doctors didn't know, and, perhaps most of all, the anger at the unfairness of it all. This cancer, that came out of nowhere and was discovered from her very first mammogram, didn't make sense. She was only 37 years old. As a rabbi, I had some experience with these emotions, but as a husband I was in new territory. Was I supposed to reassure? To be positive? Realistic? To convince her of how lucky she actually was? Was I supposed to try to keep her from thinking and feeling too much? Or to wallow along with her in her despair, and in her asking, "Why is this happening to me?"

"Why is this happening to me?" Judaism itself has struggled with this question, and there is no perfect answer, although many have tried. There are some who believe

illness is a punishment for our sins. Others see it as a gift from God, to help us find meaning. And still more say that illness is part of God's plan. I cannot say any of these things. To me, illness is a mystery. As Rabbi Kerry Olitzky writes, "Illness just seems to be part of life's process, an inevitable part of living. We move between sickness and health throughout our lives."<sup>1</sup> I prefer to see God not as the source of sickness, but rather as the source of healing.

In the words of Psalm 118, "*Min hameitzar, karati Yah*. From the depths I called out to God." For most of us, healing cannot begin unless we allow ourselves to cry out. We might feel pressure to be silent and not to complain. But our tradition invites us to call out to God. Rebecca, when she is pregnant with the twins Jacob and Esau, suffers great pain. "*Lamah anochi*," she asks God. "Why me?" The psalmist, too, asks the question, "*Eili Eili, lamah azavtani*, My God, My God, why have you deserted me?" I have sat with many people while they asked this question. What I have learned is that when we ask it, we don't need an answer. What we need is to ask the question and to have someone listen. The many Jewish psalms that cry out in anguish can be a source of healing, not because of an expectation that God will reply, but because they give voice to our pain and help us feel heard. I see God not as our savior but rather our guide, not as our rescuer as much as our support, our partner, our rock. As Rabbi Harold Kushner said, "God's promise was never that life would be fair. God's promise was that we would never have to face life's unfairness alone."<sup>2</sup> In our most famous prayer for times of difficulty, Psalm 23, we say to God, "I will fear no evil, for you are with me." We are less afraid, not because God will save us, but simply because God is with us.

We need to know that others are with us, too. This is one of the reasons we pray for each other. The first Jewish prayer for the healing of another happens in the wilderness. In the midst of a family dispute, Moses' sister Miriam is struck with illness, an affliction on the skin that means she must be separated from the community. The three siblings, Moses, Miriam and Aaron, stand together in shock. They have been

fighting over petty resentments, but her illness brings them back. It unites them in love and concern. Moses turns to God with a short and beautiful prayer. *“El na, refa na lah.* Please, God, please heal her.” And she is healed. I like to believe that it is not Moses’ influence with God that brings Miriam healing. To me, what is most healing for Miriam is that she does not have to pray alone.

Last Shabbat I had a powerful experience. I gathered with a small group of Temple members for our monthly healing service. As the service began, there was slight hesitation in the room. We didn’t all know each other or what it would feel like to pray together. We began by lighting candles for healing. Some lit one for a sick son, mother, or friend, some for themselves. Some had suffered a loss and lit a candle for the person who had died. Some lit candles without any explanation. As we read from the service packet, I could feel the quiet release of emotion in the room. In the prayers we pleaded with God, “Guide our steps. Give us strength.” The readings described our feelings: afraid, drained, helpless, looking for hope. Occasionally a person would pass on their turn to read aloud, allowing themselves space for their emotions. We sang songs. Some wiped away tears. And then, it was over. We stood together, made Kiddush and shared oneg. The smiles returned to people’s faces. No one felt the need to say much about their particular need for healing. The service had done its job and they were ready to chat for a while. These weren’t people who dwelt endlessly on their struggles or cried their way through the day. What united them was their recognition that there was a healing process happening within them. They had sought out a moment to sit with their pain, be with others, and nurture their healing. They were asking God, and their community, to walk with them on their journey.

The choice to open up about one’s diagnosis is not obvious. I respect the decision some people make to keep their illnesses private, because the reaction of a community, however caring, can be overwhelming. For some of us, each time we have to explain our struggle again, our fears and anxieties roar to life. The healing service, at which you can

say however much or little you want, can accommodate that decision. In Jaimee's case, she too was unsure at first about speaking openly about her breast cancer. But when she did, she was rewarded. Beyond the community-wide expression of support and willingness to help, she discovered a whole network within TRS of women who have had breast cancer. She heard their stories, got help with connections, doctors' names and resources, making the process easier and even informing treatment decisions.

Allowing her name to be read during the *Mi Shebeirach* for healing on Friday nights was another big decision. In the end, she wanted to know that people were praying for her. It meant something, she told me, to know that there were lots of different avenues and lines to God, and that the Temple community was helping her to connect.

Healing is a process; it is not an event. To my children, all you need is a kiss – sometimes, a Band-Aid. But we know it takes time. For some it takes weeks, some years, and some are never fully healed. And it is not a steady journey. Healing is so difficult when there are no guarantees, only statistics, educated guesses and estimated times. We wait for tests and consultations, and new information throws it all into question. Jaimee and I found that the healing came in layers, one part and then another, and only after the physical treatments were done could she begin her emotional healing. I have heard people tell me some of the things that keep them going: allowing loved ones in; staying engaged in the lives of other people; holding onto a sense of gratitude; allowing others to give them hope; and, perhaps most of all, patience.

Sometimes, we feel pressure to hide what is hard. We try not to burden others by talking about it. But talking about our healing is part of the process of healing. When you have small children, there are some things you can't avoid talking about. In my house our four-year-old daughter Shoshana plays with the two chemo dolls we bought her, Chloe and Avery – they are basically Barbie dolls without hair, but they do have stylish boots. We got her two because she felt the first one needed a friend. And if you spoke with our twin three-year-olds, Jonah and Aaron, chances are they told you

their Mommy doesn't have any hair, because they're pretty excited about that. It helps to have fun with what could be difficult, whether with children or adults. But there are other conversations when you have to be real, and admit there is something hard going on. We must allow ourselves to talk, and our friends and family must be willing to listen. To remember the moment when an injury or diagnosis came; to relive a conversation with the doctor; to take note of how far the healing has come; to debrief, to reflect, and to question. We need to be ready to listen to our loved ones talk about it over and over if that's what they need, and not to dismiss it or try to move on too soon. Healing is a journey and it cannot be rushed.

On difficult questions of life's journey, I often find myself returning to our forefather Jacob. Jacob has seen a lot of struggle in his life, being separated from his family for 20 years and working for his uncle Laban, who treats him poorly. As he finally journeys on, he undergoes another, more internal, struggle. Sleeping alone on the bank of the Jabbok River, Jacob is attacked by an angel. I think the angel represents something inside of Jacob. The two wrestle for hours, and the angel rips Jacob's hip out of its socket. They continue wrestling until morning, and when dawn comes, it is time for the fight to be over. The angel tells Jacob to let go. But Jacob says to the angel, I won't let go until you bless me. Out of his life of struggle, Jacob seeks to take away a blessing. On the journeys of our illnesses we can take away blessings. Families come closer; we discover things about ourselves; priorities become clearer; we find out we have friends we can count on. None of this ever makes the illness into something good, but there are good things that come out of bad situations. There can be a blessing in the midst of the struggle. We can, we hope, take away a blessing.

I pray that the coming year will be one of wholeness for all of us, including those who have dealt with illness and those who are close to them. I hope that all of us can find healing in this year, no matter what struggles we may face. We pray for healing of the body as well as healing of the spirit, but in some cases we hope for healing of the spirit

even as we may not be able to heal physically. I pray that we will find the wisdom and strength to accept whatever changes we encounter in our healing. And I hope as well that we will find blessing around us; that we take the time that we need to heal; that if we don't heal completely we come closer to health, to acceptance, to the process of understanding in a journey that is very confusing and difficult.

One day in the car with my family, my son Aaron looked at the bruise on his knee. He yelled out, "Look, Mommy, Daddy, my leg is healing! I can feel it healing!" May we be like a child and feel the healing happening. May we know we are part of it, and that God is as well. May we find some sense of prayer and comfort through what can be a rough journey, and as we deal with these most difficult challenges, may the help and the prayers of others be for us a source of strength. *Kein Y'hi Ratzon. May This Be God's Will.*

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<sup>1</sup> Kerry Olitzky, *Jewish Paths toward Healing and Wholeness*, p. 24

<sup>2</sup> Harold Kushner, *Living a Life that Matters*, p. 166