VALLEY BEIT MIDRASH—February 16, 2017

Healing Stories from the Jewish Tradition

Texts assembled by Rabbi Bill Berk

Big Questions:

1. Why do people get sick?
2. Does God heal or does the doctor heal or do you heal yourself?



Texts

Talmud, Bavli, Berachot 5b

רבי חייא בר אבא חלש על לגביה ר' יוחנן א"ל חביבין עליך יסורין א"ל לא הן ולא שכרן א"ל הב לי ידך יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה. ר' יוחנן חלש על לגביה ר' חנינא א"ל חביבין עליך יסורין א"ל לא הן ולא שכרן א"ל הב לי ידך יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה אמאי לוקים ר' יוחנן לנפשיה אמרי אין חבוש מתיר עצמו מבית האסורים רבי אליעזר חלש על לגביה רבי יוחנן חזא דהוה קא גני בבית אפל גלייה לדרעיה ונפל נהורא חזייה דהוה קא בכי ר' אליעזר א"ל אמאי קא בכית אי משום תורה דלא אפשת שנינו אחד המרבה ואחד הממעיט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים ואי משום מזוני לא כל אדם זוכה לשתי שלחנות ואי משום בני דין גרמא דעשיראה ביר א"ל להאי שופרא דבלי בעפרא קא בכינא א"ל על דא ודאי קא בכית ובכו תרוייהו אדהכי והכי א"ל חביבין עליך יסורין א"ל לא הן ולא שכרן א"ל הב לי ידך יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה.

R. Hiyya bar Abba fell ill. R. Johanan went to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Niether they nor their reward.[9] He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he[10] raised him.

R. Johanan once fell ill and R. Hanina 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. Why could not R. Johanan raise himself?[11] — They replied: The prisoner cannot free himself from jail.[12]

R. Eleazar fell ill and R. Johanan went in to visit him. He noticed that he was lying in a dark room,[13] and he bared his arm and light radiated from it.[14] Thereupon he noticed that R. Eleazar was weeping, and he said to him: Why do you weep? Is it because you did not study enough Torah? Surely we learnt: The one who sacrifices much and the one who sacrifices little have the same merit, provided that the heart is directed to heaven.[15] Is it perhaps lack of sustenance? Not everybody has the privilege to enjoy two tables.[16] Is it perhaps because of [the lack of] children? This is the bone of my tenth son! — He replied to him: I am weeping on account of this beauty[17] that is going to rot in the earth. He said to him: On that account you surely have a reason to weep; and they both wept. In the meanwhile 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, and he gave him his hand and he raised him.

Moses' Healing—Zohar, Parsha Vaera 28a

But when Moses told this (God's demand for their freedom) to the Israelites they did not listen to Moses because of crushed spirits (literally: shortness of breath) and because of the harsh slavery (Exodus 6:9). What is crushed spirits? Said Rabbi Judah: They had no rest, no chance to breathe…Come and see—it is written [And Moses spoke before God, saying] *Behold, the Israelities have not heard me—how [in the world] will Pharoah hear me, I who have uncircumcised lips?* (uncircumcised lips=person of impeded speech)

What is this "am of uncircumcised lips"? Was it not written in the beginning [of the story]—I am not a man of words…for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue. The Holy One responded to him: Who gives a person speech? And God said [to Moses] *I will be with your mouth* (Exodus 4:10-12)…Did the Holy One not keep his promise?

However, there is here a secret (inner meaning). Moses was voice (kol) and speech (dibur) was in exile and he was closed [off] from being able to express words and therefore he said: *And how will the Pharoah hear me*?, seeing that my word (speech) is in exile, I being only voice and speech is cut off [from me] because of exile. Therefore the Holy One partnered Aaron with him (Moses).

Come and see—the whole time that speech was in exile, voice departed from him and words were sealed [in] without voice. When Moses came the voice appeared, but it was a voice without speech, for speech was in exile (galut). And the whole time that speech was in exile Moses went as voice without speech until Israel approached Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah. At that moment voice and speech were united and the word was spoken, as it says: *And God spoke all these words* (of the 10 Commandments) (Exodus 20:1). Then Moses was found whole in speech, voice and speech as one in wholeness (unity)…when he went out from exile and joined together voice and speech as one at Mt. Sinai, Moses was made whole and was healed, and it was found then that voice and speech were as one in wholeness.

סוד הוא: משה הקול ודבור שהיא דברו היתה בגלות והיה הוא אטום לפרש דברים ועל...
כן אמר ואיך ישמעני פרעה בעוד שמילה שלי היא בגלות ממנו שהרי אין לי מילה...וכך
הלך עד שקרבו להר סיני וניתנה תורה ובאותו הזמן התחבר הקול בדיבור ואז דיבר
...דיבור...ואז משה נמצא שלם בדיבור

Jewish Healing Wisdom:

Key Concepts*: 1. Don't get stuck. 2. Healing powers in a tzelem elokim. 3. Healing has a moral, spiritual component—it's a sacred obligation. 4. Ceremonies are crucial. 5. Be happy.*

1. Don't Get Stuck:

Albert Einstein: Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving.

Rambam, Mishna Torah, Laws of Mourning 10:1,3

Halacha 1
The Sabbath is counted as one of the days of mourning. Nevertheless, the laws of mourning are not observed on the Sabbath with the exception of private matters, e.g., veiling one's head, marital relations, and washing with hot water. With regard to matters which are revealed to the public, however, the mourning laws are not observed. Instead, one may wear shoes, position his bed upright, and greet everyone.

If the mourner has another garment, he should change it. He should not wear a torn garment on the Sabbath even because of his father and mother. If he does not have a garment to change, he should turn the tear to the other side.

Halacha 3
On the festivals and similarly, Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, we do not observe any of the mourning rites at all. Moreover, whenever anyone buries his dead even a small amount of time before a festival or before Rosh HaShanah or Yom Kippur, the decree requiring him to observe seven days of mourning is nullified.
Passover Hagadah: In every generation a person is required to see him/herself as if he/she went out from Egypt (slavery).

David Hartman on Shabbat:

> You can create Shabbat as another living structure to help you define your identity. When crisis and uncertainty comes—you have the power to create another structure. (That's the lesson one learns by having a serious additional structure that Shabbat gives you.)
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> In the modern world the answer to crisis and uncertainty is therapy. Judaism offers an alternative—leave this world and enter another world of meaning. Don't define yourself [solely] by "six days thou shalt do thy labor." Create another reality. That's why I don't answer the phone on Shabbat. Shabbat gives me a chance to be in a different framework of meaning.
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> On Friday night I become a different human being. I change my dress, my speech, my food, my pace of walking—thus I change my reality. I transcend my previous experience. Shabbat is a chance to think about the meaning of life. Your study and singing on Shabbat helps you feel you are not just a worker. You need alternative structures to give you another sense of who you are. You can thus create another frame of reference—and live in another world of meaning.
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> (Bill's commentary: Practicing the art of Shabbat gives you more and more a sense that you can create something solid that's very different than your regular world. If your regular world collapses or is stressed it helps to have the body/mind/soul memory that you can create something solid that will give your life meaning and purpose. I think of the Holocaust survivors who managed to create new lives and I wonder to what extent their Shabbat experience helped them.)

2. **Healing Powers in a tzelem elokim**:

Dr. Albert Schweizer: Patients carry their own doctor inside. They come to us not knowing that truth. We are at our best when we give the physician who resides within each patient a chance to go to work.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg: Four millennia ago, our forefathers and mothers brought forth on this earth a new religion, proclaiming the presence of a universal loving Creator. We held these truths to be self-evident that all human beings are created in the image of God, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain fundamental dignities, that among these are infinite value, equality and uniqueness. Our tradition taught that the Creation would be filled with life and improved to a state of perfection. Our faith called on all of humanity to join in a covenant with God and a partnership between the generations for tikkun olam (the repair of the world) so that all forms of life would be sustained in their fullest dignity.

(A reflection on tzelem elokim: People who feel small or invisible do not feel like tzelem elokim---how do you know if someone has treated you like a tzelem elohim? You feel larger in their presence.)

Black Elk, Ogalala Sioux Medicine Man: Of course it was not I who cured. It was the power of the outer world, and the visions and ceremonies had only made me like a hole through which the power would come to the two-leggeds. If I thought that I was doing it myself, the hole would close up and no power would come through it.

3. **Moral/Spiritual Component to Healing—It's a Sacred Obligation:**

Rambam Commentary on Mishna Nedarim 4:4): warrant for healing is based on **Deuteronomy 22:1-3**: If you see your fellow's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your fellow…and so too you shall do with anything that your fellow loses and you find: you must not remain indifferent.

> **Aviva Zornberg**: it is in the very nature of holiness to translate pain into strength—even to intuit the strength within the pain, the coherence within the chaos—the importance of spiritual work, the spiritual journey to help people place their disease in context—there may not always be recovery, but there can be healing.
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> **Aviva Zornberg**: Proverbs 14:30—"A calm disposition gives bodily health." Where the spirit is at ease, the body becomes light and free, a dreamlike ethereal nature is restored. The body is integrated, moves with an elan, a 'really substantiated lightness involving the whole being'…only the slightest impulse is needed to activate the lightness that pervades his whole being (reference to Jacob, who, upon lifting up his heel, is lighter, following his dream at Beth El).

4. Ceremonies are crucial.

Healing Ceremonies p.5,6 by Dr. Carl Hammerschlag and Dr. Howard Silverman: Rabbi Larry Kushner describes awesome, yet fleeting moments that often coincide with religious ceremonies marking life's passages, such as Bar or Bat Mitzvah, a wedding, or a funeral. At such times, he says, 'We realize that we are part of something much larger than our daily decisions. With or without our consent, we too are players in a kind of divine scheme. Of course, it is preposterous, and it makes no rational sense, but for just a moment or two it is as if we rise to encounter our destiny: It was not you who sent me here, but God.'

5. Be happy.

Rebbe Nachman of Braslav, Likutei Moharan, B, 24

It is a great mitzvah to be in joy at all times. And to overcome [in order to] distance [oneself] from sadness and black bitterness with all one's strength. The main thing is to work very hard, using all your strength, to only be happy always. It is human nature that we draw ourselves into inner darkness (black bile) and depression, due to things that happen within time. Every person is filled with suffering! That's why we have to force ourselves, with great strength, to be happy always. Give yourself joy however you can, even by being foolish. Yes, it is true that a broken heart is considered very good, but that is only at a special time. You should indeed pick an hour each day to break your heart and to pour out your words to God, as we have taught. But the whole day long you should be in joy. A broken heart can easily lead you to melancholy, more readily than too much joy can lead you to stupidity. Our tendency is more that of brokenheartedness, leading to the dark places. Therefore be happy always. Only in that specially designated times should you allow yourself to have a broken heart.

"מִצְוָה גְּדוֹלָה לִהְיוֹת בְּשִׂמְחָה תָּמִיד, וּלְהִתְגַּבֵּר לְהַרְחִיק הָעַצְבוּת וְהַמָּרָה שְׁחרָה בְּכָל כחוi... וְהַכְּלָל, שֶׁצָּרִיךְ לְהַתְגַּבֵּר מְאד בְּכָל הַכּחוֹת לִהְיוֹת אַךְ שָׂמֵחַ תָּמִיד. כִּי טֶבַע הָאָדָם-לִמְשׁךְ עַצְמוֹ לְמָרָה שְׁחרָה וְעַצְבוּת מֵחֲמַת פְּגָעֵי וּמְקָרֵי הַזְּמַן, וְכָל אָדָם מָלֵא יִסּוּרִים, עַל- כֵּן צָרִיךְ לְהַכְרִיחַ אֶת עַצְמוֹ בְּכחַ גָּדוֹל לִהְיוֹת בְּשִׂמְחָה תָּמִיד".

ולשמח את עצמו בכל אשר יוכל, ואפילו במילים דשטותא. אף שגם לב נשבר הוא טוב מאד, עכ"ז הוא רק באיזו שעה, וראוי לקבוע לו איזה שעה ביום, לשבר לבו ולפרש שיחתו לפניו ית, כמובא אצלינו. אבל כל היום כולו צריך להיות בשמחה. כי מלב נשבר בקל יכולין לבא למרה שחורה, יותר כאשר יכולין ליכשל ע"י שמחה ח"ו לבא לאיזה חוללות ח"ו. כי זה קרוב יותר לבא מלב נשבר למרה שחורה. על כן צריך שיהי בשמחה תמיד, רק בשעה מיוחדת יהי לו לב נשבר.