

JEWISH HEALING AND THE JEWISH FAMILY SERVICE FIELD

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Jewish Healing Centers across the country offer spiritual counseling that draws on Jewish tradition and support groups for Jews living with serious illness and loss. Some centers are departments of Jewish family service agencies, and some are free-standing programs affiliated with other agencies. All address questions about the relevance of Judaism and spiritual care in the lives of their clients.

Although Jewish "renewal" or Jewish "renaissance" has caught the interest of some, there are deeper questions about the relevance of the Jewish community and its traditions that increasingly capture the attention of Jews living with serious illness and loss. Throughout North America, Jews across the religious spectrum, from the most observant to the most unaffiliated, recognize their spiritual questions and yearnings at moments of ill health. Many are bringing these questions and yearnings to the attention of the organized Jewish community just at the time when the Jewish Family Service (JFS) field is reevaluating its commitment to and role in the Jewish community. This confluence has generated an historic opportunity to renew the relevance of the "J" in the JFS field.

Tom Z., aged 35, an upwardly mobile investment banker, was facing a difficult choice: His top-notch oncologists were offering him a high-risk, experimental, and potentially debilitating treatment, with no guarantees of slowing, let alone arresting, his cancer. His loving immediate and extended Jewish family were lobbying, subtly or vociferously, for him to "go for it." Tom began his participation in a Jewish Healing Center Support Group by explaining that he was there "to see what texts from the ancient Jewish tradition and what members of the Jewish community have to say to him" in making this complex life decision.

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Miriam W., aged 27, an energetic and accomplished AIDS social worker at a large medical center, was rapidly burning out—from the combined pressures of constantly witnessing intense suffering and death, from the extreme demands and stifling limitations of managed health care, bureaucratic paperwork, hospital politics, and more. In a Jewish Healing Center Support Group for health care professionals, Miriam explored Jewish approaches to suffering and healing, prayers for strength and guidance, perspectives on the human relationship of patients and healers, and stories and parables to share with patients—and contributed her views and voice to the ongoing Jewish dialogue about these and other matters. She gained insight, wisdom, strength, and reassurance from the seven colleagues in the room and from the many shared texts, and continues with the group independently as a mutual support network.

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Sheila H., aged 58, recently buried her mother after a long illness. Now her husband, Jack, has been diagnosed with cancer, and though Sheila joined the medical center's support group for spouses, it focused on very practical issues and lacked a deeper sense of community, value base, tradition, and transcendence. During the

initial crisis stage of her husband's illness, she participated in a drop-in support hour for family members of seriously ill individuals. Later, she joined a time-limited, closed group that provided her with information about community resources for caregivers, moral and spiritual support, and an opportunity to share both her struggles and her strengths with other Jews.

JEWISH HEALING CENTERS

In cities around the United States and Canada, local JFS agencies are developing new services and programs to serve the needs of people like Sheila, Miriam, and Tom. Many are establishing departments or programs referred to as Jewish Healing Centers. Others are forming partnerships and affiliations with free-standing Jewish Healing Centers developed by hospitals, area Boards of Rabbis, Federations, and even synagogues.

Nearly all of these healing centers sponsor a unique kind of Jewish support group for various populations: the seriously ill, family members of people who are ill, and health care professionals who work with these people. Co-led by a mental health professional and a rabbi, these groups offer the expected forms of support—practical information and psychological insight—integrated with tools, guidance, and inspiration drawn from both the Jewish tradition and peers in the Jewish community.

Although each group is unique, many explore these common issues:

- What meaning can Judaism help me find in this illness?
- Why do good people suffer? Was I *so* bad to deserve this?
- Do Jews believe in miracles?
- What is the soul?
- What do Jews believe about the afterlife?
- What does Judaism have to say about the patient-physician relationship? About life support and deciding to end one's life?
- Am I being punished?
- Does prayer work? Will God hear my prayers? What is the *right* prayer?

Generally, groups of 8 to 12 people meet for six to eight sessions. They begin with participants sharing both their "illness story" and their "Jewish story." Some groups decide from week to week on an agenda; others allow foci to emerge more freely and organically. Many begin meetings with a ritual, perhaps a wordless melody or a simple hand-washing or a blessing; others are more secular and open with updates from group members. However, all the groups seek to infuse the lives of participants with strength, solace, and support, both from text and context, from living fellow-travelers and from the living traditions of Judaism.

Invariably, these groups have been praised for their concrete helpfulness, as well as their provision of intangible benefits. Supporting various parts of the system—reaching out to both designated patients and oft-ignored care providers—they challenge the anomie and isolation of contemporary life and draw people closer to one another and to the riches of a vast and evolving Jewish treasury of stories, prayers, ethical teaching, poetry, music, and more. They have linked community members with institutions that heretofore were inaccessible or at least not utilized, including synagogues, Jewish Community Centers (JCCs), JFS agencies, and diverse Jewish organizations.

The Jewish Family & Children's Services (JFCS) of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin & Sonoma Counties, which helped launch the first Jewish Healing Center in 1991, has provided enthusiastic support to the development of this new modality. Spiritual support groups are co-led by the three staff rabbis of "Ruach Ami: Bay Area Jewish Healing Center," and there has been a steady referral process between the two agencies, particularly for clients in programs for persons with disabilities and HIV-AIDS, as well as for seniors. Its Bereavement Center works in tandem with the Jewish Healing Center.

The JFCS not only provides clinical professionals but also offers screening, publicity, space, and administrative support to Ruach Ami. It also recently co-sponsored with Ruach Ami a conference on Judaism and Healing for

Health Care Professionals. Joint training in spiritual support has also been conducted at JFCS staff meetings and staff retreats. While funding for Ruach Ami has been broad based, with support from the former Jewish hospital, Mount Zion, it is also a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco.

The Jewish Healing Center of Orange County, California, recently inaugurated a program under the auspices of the Jewish Family Service of Orange County. Initiated with a grant from the Community Foundation of the Jewish Federation, the program provides assistance to Jews recovering from major illness. Co-sponsored by a local synagogue and the Board of Rabbis, the program offers support groups, information and referral, county-wide chaplaincy, religious services and prayer groups, and *bikkur cholim* (visiting the sick) programming in area acute-care hospitals. Home visitation programming is being considered.

Also on the West Coast, the Jewish Healing Center at Metivta is a free-standing program supported by the Los Angeles Jewish Federation. Affiliated with the local Jewish hospital and other Jewish agencies, its director is currently on leave from her position at the Los Angeles JFS agency. A recent conference on Jewish healing and spiritual support groups also involved staff of the JFS branch in the San Fernando Valley.

Two years ago in Denver, Jewish Family Service of Colorado inaugurated what is considered by some to be state-of-the-art programming in Jewish para-chaplaincy. With a grant from the local Jewish Federation and other groups, the program trains, supports, and provides in-service meetings for screened volunteers. A cooperative venture of Jewish Family Service, the Synagogue Council of Greater Denver, the Rocky Mountain Rabbinical Council, and Rose Medical Center Chaplaincy Service, this *bikkur cholim* program provides supervised visitors to hospital and nursing home residents in the Denver area.

The Las Vegas Jewish Family Services is considering the development of a Jewish heal-

ing program, and in Phoenix, the Shalom Center for Healing is already in place. Currently housed at Temple Chai in North Phoenix, this program offers liturgical services of hope and comfort (healing services), education programs, *bikkur cholim* programming, a resource library, life transition support groups, and wellness programs through the innovative use of a synagogue nurse. In Tucson, Jewish Family Services is considering a series of training programs for their staff on Jewish healing.

In Kansas City, the Jewish Community Chaplaincy Project has been created by the local Federation, JFS agency, rabbinical association, and Jewish health care institutions. It provides a full continuum of programming, including support for the spiritual, mental, and physical well-being of Jewish community members during times of profound health changes. Similarly, in the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, the two JFS agencies have formed the Twin Cities Jewish Healing and Hospice Project. With funding from the Minneapolis Federation for Jewish Service and the St. Paul United Jewish Fund and Council, and in association with the Hadassah Nurses Association and the Minnesota Rabbinical Association, the program is focusing on *bikkur cholim* training and the development of hospice resources for Jewish patients and their families in the two cities.

JFS agencies in upstate New York, Baltimore, Florida, Texas, Ohio, and Virginia are also examining, studying, or developing programming designed to serve the emotional and spiritual needs of Jews living with serious illness and loss.

JEWISH SPIRITUAL COUNSELING

Ira S., aged 37, a handsome, successful attorney, was the only child of parents now in their seventies who were survivors of the Holocaust who had also lived through heart disease and breast cancer. Recently, while on vacation, Ira's mother was injured so severely in an accident that she was now near death. Distraught, despairing, and furious, Ira called his JFS agency for help, and the sensitive, re-

sourceful intake worker picked up that his concerns were religious and spiritual in nature. She connected him with the local Jewish Healing Center for time-limited counseling, including the use of psalms, stories, and prayer. Four meetings and many phone calls saw Ira through his mother's last weeks of life in the hospital and his initial stages of bereavement, whereupon he was successfully referred to a JFS therapist for ongoing treatment and support.

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Mona K., aged 58, and her son Jonathan, aged 32, lost their husband and father to a sudden heart attack one year ago and were now facing Jonathan's heavy drinking, as well as Mona's loneliness and assorted familial strains and challenges. Somewhat dubious and critical of psychotherapy and psychotherapists, they came to the Jewish Healing Center for spiritual counseling. It centered around the need for committed involvement in a treatment program and offered personal and individualized support for both mother and son, striking a new balance in their relationship. Prayers, parable, and guidance from traditional Jewish texts cemented the structure of their "spiritual treatment plan," which emphasized integrating responsibility to self, to others, and to God.

Alongside individual, couples, family, and group psychotherapy, JFS agencies have begun to offer Jewish spiritual counseling in conjunction with Jewish Healing Center programs. Generally time-limited and always integrated with other JFS services, this type of counseling presents a unique opportunity to "respond Jewishly to Jews' Jewish challenges."

Jewish spiritual counseling draws on Jewish tradition, Jewish communal resources, and the unique resources of the individual Jew to attain deeper, more peaceful, and integrated living and higher, more fulfilling life

experience. It integrates the most enduring elements of ancient rabbinic practice and teachings and medieval Jewish guidance, *Hasidic* approaches, and tools from crisis intervention and short-term therapy. Generally it entails a Jewish spiritual assessment and the design and implementation of a holistic Jewish spiritual treatment plan, which coordinates with and supports both medical care and psychosocial services. Central to Jewish spiritual counseling is the strengthening of ties to the contemporary Jewish community through its extant structures.

Jewish spiritual counseling is neither a competitor with nor a substitute for traditional psychosocial supports. It is rather a critical component of an individual Jew's confrontation with loss, suffering, and disruption, which addresses questions of meaning, purpose, belief, and faith in an authentically Jewish framework and with professionally responsible supervision and guidance.

Spiritual counseling is a central component of the program sponsored in New York by the Jewish Board of Family & Children's Service (JBFCS). Counseling is provided away from the central office complex in a graceful brownstone near Manhattan's Central Park, which offers a living room atmosphere for support groups. This counseling fits neatly with the broader mandate of the growing Jewish component of JBFCS, which is to broaden its service to the Jewish community of New York as a result of recent strategic planning initiatives.

These Jewish healing programs from across the country are all touching questions about the relevance of Judaism and spiritual care in the lives of their clients and potential clients. In so doing, they are also touching deep questions about the relevance of Judaism in the life of the Jewish Family Service agency itself.