

# Healing of Body, Healing of Spirit: Finding Wholeness in Challenging Times

Sermon preached by

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Congregation Ohav Shalom, Albany, NY

at Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church, August 6, 2017

Good morning. I am honored to be here with you. 6 years ago, I spoke from this pulpit, and I must tell you, in preparing for this morning, I began with the same struggle I had last time—it was all about spelling! I thought I had finally mastered the spelling for Rensselaerville, as I successfully did for the Huyck preserve, which has nothing to do with h-i-k-e. But no such luck. Even the spell check in my computer cannot seem to get it right. Nevertheless, I made my way thru this challenge; and I thank Reverend Lusak and this community for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you this morning on healing.

Is there a path to healing? is your theme for this summer. My answer is: yes, there can *always* be a path to healing. But let me first define what *I* mean by healing. Or, what I do not mean. I do *not* mean that we can always fix things, I do *not* mean we can completely cure every disease or problem, be it personal or communal, physical or spiritual.

I draw my understanding of healing from the Hebrew words: *refuah shelemah*. A healing that is shalem, that is whole—from the same root as the word shalom, peace, which also derives from the word: wholeness. Wholeness does *not* mean perfection; it means peace, acceptance, understanding, oneness. That sense of well-being and completeness is what I mean by healing. We feel the oneness of the world and ourselves, a feeling of unity. How do we move towards that sense? I believe that we move towards healing through connection.

You know, in our culture, we speak a lot about being connected – we are connected to the internet, the source of all information; we are connected to other people through social media and our devices—but often what we have is hyper-connectivity rather than inter-connectedness. What we need are the deeper lines of connection that bring us to wholeness.

I have learned much about the power of connection from my experiences with the traditional Jewish prayer for healing, known as the mi-sheberach. This is a prayer that I am privileged to chant several times a week in my community at worship services, as well as at

hospital bedsides, and even over the phone when I reach out to someone who is ill. I believe this prayer contains many of the deepest lessons we need to learn about healing;

As a former English major (part of why spelling issues really get to me) and as a rabbi who loves to study text, I look closely at the words of prayers; and this morning I would like to share with you some thoughts on the elements of the Jewish healing prayer and what they can teach us about wholeness and connection. and btw, while this prayer refers most specifically to personal illness, the lessons it embodies apply to *any* challenges to our sense of wholeness, any times of brokenness, not only personal, but social and communal as well.

These are the words translated from Hebrew to English: (I will fill in the personal part with a fictitious name.)

May the One who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless and heal Barbara the daughter of Sarah. May the Holy One of Blessing be filled with compassion towards her, giving her strength, and wholeness, sending her *refuah shelema*, healing of spirit and healing of body, together with all others who face illness.

I witnessed the power of this prayer many years ago when I served as a hospital chaplain at Albany med Ctr. There, I often visited with people who told me they were not religious, and that they really did not connect with prayer. Many said they found the whole notion of praying for healing irrational or futile. Yet, being polite, almost everyone would ‘allow’ me to pray with them, basically the prayer I just shared with you. Friends, so many people were overwhelmed. The depth of people’s responses amazed me. And amazed them, as well. Often, there were tears. I recall one very elderly woman who was nearing the end of her life. She lay in bed, peaceful and controlled. As we prayed, she cried quietly and spoke with gratitude of all the blessings she had known.

And I will never forget the sad man, who sat stiffly in his chair and begrudgingly agreed to have a healing prayer. When I was done, he told me the story of a horrific tragedy in his life—the accidental deaths of his 2 children—and how he has struggled with faith ever since. For the remainder of his hospital stay, he accepted prayer and continued to talk. Those are 2 of many examples of how the healing prayer seemed to open people’s hearts, seemed to bring a bit of...healing!

Now I realize that people may have opened up because they were in a vulnerable place but still I wondered: What is it about this prayer that evokes powerful feelings in so many people? My answer: If we look closely at the words, we see that this prayer is all about multiple lines of connection, and therein lie its teachings about healing. Our times of brokenness, of fear, of

struggle, of illness, are times of *dis*-connection—dis-connection from ourselves, dis-connection from our loved ones, from our communities, from our values, dis-connection from God. Please look with me at these connections reflected in these few lines of spiritual literature.

First, the most basic connection: with ourselves. Before we can connect with anyone or anything *outside* of ourselves, we must be connected with who we are. This may sound simple, or simplistic, but all too often we are so distracted by the external noise around us, or so consumed by our pain, that we become disconnected from ourselves.

For me to heal, there must first be a ‘me.’ And that ‘me’, the prayer says, is made up of both spirit and body: Nefesh and guf. To be whole we must care for both aspects of ourselves – soul and body, the whole person.

In this prayer, we call an individual by name. That may not seem unusual to you, depending on your faith tradition; for Jews, it *is* unusual. Most of our prayers are anonymous. Except here, when we pray for healing: we name the person: Barbara. We also call her by her mother’s name, Barbara the daughter of Sarah. What could be more primal, what connects us more to who we are than recalling our mothers. It is not surprising that many times it is just at the moment when we recite a mother’s name, that the tears come. A mother conjures up our connection to life itself, and also our yearning to be fed, held, loved.

Invoking our mothers also connects us to our history. It means: I have been on a journey to become who I am, I have grown, I have succeeded and failed, I have struggled, suffered losses, and I have achieved and celebrated. To recall all of that is healing. it reminds us: I am more than just this one moment of pain or challenge. I have a story. *And* I am not alone. I come from a mother, and that leads to...I am part of a family.

In the prayer, we recite the names of ancestors – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, a family with a capital F. I think of this as a connection back and forward through time. God, we say, You are the One who blessed Abraham and Sarah, now bless my cousin who is ill. Whoever our ancestors are, every one of us is connected to an immediate family, an extended family, and a family that goes back through the ages to the beginning of time. Each of us is connected to a history, a nationality. I personally feel embraced by the knowledge that I am part of a rich, ancient Jewish tradition; a part of the Jewish people, and also a citizen of this great country, which I still hold dear. These—my connections to myself and to my families with small and capital F’s reflect my story, and also my beliefs and values, my ideals *and* my challenges. All of these connect me to something greater than myself.

Which brings us to the ultimate greater connection—to God. For some of us, and for most of us at some time, a prayer for healing is a prayer for divine intervention: “God, do something!” At our times of deepest pain or fear, we cry out that way. “Help me, God!” Now many of us, including myself, may not believe that there is literally a being out there who will decide to cure my family member of cancer, or not; or who will prevent injustice in society or deadly behavior on the world stage. Much as I do not imagine a heavenly being choosing to support the victory of one sports team over another. When we pray on those matters, we do not necessarily expect a divine fix, although we certainly may wish with all our hearts for a cure, or a reprieve, or... a miracle. On a deeper level, though, we pray to connect with something larger than ourselves. Prayer gives us the sense that, to quote Rev. Scott McLellan, we are “enveloped in loving arms that are strong and eternal.” Reaching up and out to the divine is healing precisely because it is connection.

In the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, for example, we do not pray for a fix, and the psalm does not offer one. On the contrary, it acknowledges that each of us will walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Our solace is that we are connected: “I will fear no evil” because You are with me. I am not alone. Connection is the antidote to our deepest fear—aloneness. And so even the most skeptical among us may find ourselves reaching up to connect in prayer during difficult times.

Finally, our prayer also reaches out for the essential connection of community. We say, bless this person who is ill, together with all others who are in need of healing. The ancient Jewish rules of prayer state that one must never pray for one individual without also mentioning “all the ill” “all who are in need of healing;” that is a mandated part of the formula. Heal Barbara, God, together with all others who are in need of healing. And so, we learn healing is about one person at a time, but is never *only* about one person, because every person is connected to each and every other person.

That is both a gift and a responsibility. The gift is that none of us is alone. We know that illness, and all forms of suffering, can be isolating. Out of ignorance or discomfort, we isolate those who have a life-threatening or terminal illness, or mental illness, people with dementia and other frailties, and their caregivers; to face illness in our culture can be a very lonely experience. We may feel as though we are the only ones—it is happening to us alone. When we pray for an individual ***together with all others in need of healing***, we are all reminded that our individual, lonely experience is part of the human condition, illness and struggle come to everyone, I am not alone or unique, I am part of the community of the ill which is really the human community. We all belong to it.

We draw those in need of healing from isolation into a communal embrace. That is the gift.

Then there is the responsibility. Evoking community gives us a mandate to connect with those in need, and to bring healing into the world.

Each of us will have suffering or struggle; there are times that individuals near and dear to us will be in need of healing; and we know that there is a great deal of brokenness in the world; you do not need me to spell out the details. As members of the human community, our task is to offer healing. One Jewish term for this task you may know—*tikkun olam*—repair of the world.

Each of us has different skills and resources to offer towards that repair, and it is up to each of us to find what we have to offer. Healing can come from the actions we take towards one person; towards our family, our community, or society at large. You of this church bring healing into the world as you bring together representatives of different faith communities, so that every summer Sunday morning people of diverse groups come together, learn and listen to one another with respect.

“Only connect” wrote EM Forster in his magnificent novel, “Howard’s End”. That is the beginning of healing, and the path to wholeness. Only connect.

Each of us has something to contribute to healing, and all of our gifts begin with connection. We connect with our true and full selves and our values, we connect with our histories, with our families—large and small f’s, with our communities, with something that is greater than the sum of our parts, with God.

I conclude with the chanting of a contemporary, abbreviated version of the Jewish healing prayer by composer Debbie Friedman:

*Mi shebeirach avoteinu M'kor hab'racha l'imoteinu \*

Bless those in need of healing

*with r'fuah sh'leimah,*

The renewal of body, the renewal of spirit,

And let us say, Amen