

Rabbi Amy Eilberg Remarks

SUH JEWISH CHAPLAINCY 10TH ANNIVERSARY May 23, 2010

It gives me so much joy to be here today for this wonderful celebration. It is a joy, of course, to celebrate my friend Bruce's many gifts – his boundless, joyful, open-hearted energy, his gift as a spiritual presence with people in pain, his brilliance as a teacher, and his creative vision as a program builder. And of course it is always a joy to celebrate my dear friend Carol, once again rejoicing in the remarkable work she does in the world, remembering that we met right here at Stanford Hospital, initiating a very precious friendship that has already spanned 20 years. It is a joy for me to see how all of you – collectively – staff, volunteers, board members, donors, and community supporters - have developed the Jewish Chaplaincy at Stanford into such a rich and substantial presence in the hospital and in the community, far beyond what I envisioned when I was here twenty years ago. Let there be no doubt: the Jewish Chaplaincy is the fruit of ALL of your efforts, each in your own way.

Being here is deeply evocative for me. I remember many people I worked with here some twenty years ago – people I served and worked with, challenging nights on call, and rich experiences in CPE here at Stanford Hospital. Oddly, one of the images that is most present for me today is the simple memory of walking in the door of the hospital – by the garden, near the cafeteria – at the start of each day. One would think – there is nothing particularly remarkable about walking in the door of one's workplace – why does this memory hold so much power? Because to cross the threshold of the hospital is to walk from one reality into another.

In the world outside the hospital, we generally assume that we are in control, that we are masters of our lives, that we are in charge of how our experiences will unfold from moment to moment, from day to day. At the door to the hospital one leaves these illusions behind. Step into the hospital and one enters a different reality – one moves, as Rachel Naomi Remen puts it so beautifully, from the land of mastery to the land of mystery. In the hospital, even just inside the front door, the fragility of life, the truth of human vulnerability, and the preciousness of each moment, are vividly on display. Many of us who work with the ill do it for just this reason – because, as the Book of Proverbs tells us, it is better to spend time in the house of mourning than in the house of merriment. Here, in what a previous employer of mine called a temple of healing, there is wisdom to be found. If we walk consciously through our days here, we can bring a measure of that wisdom back into our lives outside the hospital.

Walking into the hospital, denial falls away and I am reminded that I and everyone I will ever love will become ill and eventually die – sooner or later, in more gentle or more difficult ways. We – those of us with name badges and those with ID bracelets, wheelchairs or face masks – all of us are trying our best to live our finite days the very best way that we can, all of us walking over a very narrow bridge. So perhaps this is why I treasure the otherwise prosaic memory of walking in the front door of the hospital, because I was so often aware that as I crossed that threshold, I was invited to leave behind the rushed and thoughtless way in which I too often lived outside. Once inside, I was called to live with greater clarity, with more gratitude, and with more compassion.

Of course, the hospital can also be a place of terrible loneliness, in which people have a profound need to be accompanied through the territory of suffering, to feel less alone. So the Jewish chaplain enters that door each day to come to work, or each week as a volunteer, ready to perform the mitzvah of *bikkur holim*, being present to the ill, which Maimonides says is an expression of the over-arching mitzvah, “*Ve’ahavta le’rei’a’cha kamocho*,” “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Contrary to the natural way of living outside the hospital, in which we instinctively recoil from pain and struggle to avoid it, here we intentionally place ourselves in the realm of suffering in order to reach out to another, to bring the balm of human presence to aching souls, to imitate God’s role as Source of love and healing. As Jewish chaplains – or as volunteers – we also draw on the wisdom of Jewish tradition to bring comfort and connection, and we invite a Jewish patient or staff member experiencing isolation back into the embracing circle of Jewish community.

As Jewish chaplains and volunteers, we bring the beauty of Jewish ritual – the light and taste of Shabbat, the primal call of the shofar, the radiant hopefulness of Hanukkah, the rich sweetness of Pesach – to help transform the bleak landscape of illness. All of us who do or have done this work – or support it – or have been on the receiving end of it – know those graced moments when a chaplain’s gift of a ritual object, offering of a piece of Jewish text, or mesmerizing chant of a Jewish prayer, moves the patient’s mind and heart out of the terrain of pain and fear, into the realm of meaning, connection and possibility. We have seen the way in which a Jewish chaplain’s visit reminds the patient of his or her full humanity, unshaken by illness or injury, and embodies the patient’s connection to the whole circle of our people – past, present and future, and to the whole human family, all of us struggling with the challenges of living a finite life in a human body.

And the Jewish chaplain often has the privilege of invoking God’s presence in the hospital. We know that it is a rare person who maintains a strident atheism in the midst of a health crisis. So times of illness can be an “*eit ratson*,” a time of grace, when prayer

has its greatest potency – to open hearts, to generate hope, to release blocked tears, and to restore perspective and gratitude.

This, perhaps, is the meaning of the Talmudic teaching that God is to be found at the bedside of the one who is ill. In Tractate Nedarim, we find the following:

Rabin said in the name of Rav: From where do we know that the Blessed Holy One sustains the sick? As it says, ‘God will support you on your bed of illness.’ (“Adonai yis’adenu al eres devai”)(Psalm 41:4) Rabin also said in the name of Rav: From where do we know that the Shechinah (Divine Presence) rests above the bed of the one who is ill? From the verse ‘God will support you on your bed of illness.’ (Psalm 41:4) (Babylonian Talmud *Nedarim* 40a)

At times of our lives when our cognitive minds are in charge, we have many questions to ask about this text: Who is this God? Did God send this illness or have the power to take it away? Do I believe in a personal God at all? Yet paradoxically, at times of great pain, we may feel our heart’s yearning for closeness and protection more keenly, and so be more open to a sense of the sacred, a sense of presence, a sense of hopefulness, in response to our cries and prayers. At such times, we may feel closer to the Mystery than at ordinary times of life, as if the Power of Love itself is very near.

My dear friend Rabbi Nancy Flam, whom many of you know as the founder of the Jewish Healing Center and matriarch of the Jewish healing movement, many years ago authored an exquisite interpretation of an otherwise puzzling piece of Jewish law governing visits to the ill. As many of you know, the codes of Jewish law give very specific instructions about how to conduct oneself – and how not to conduct oneself – in practicing the mitzvah of bikkur holim. Among other instructions, the Shulkhan Arukh tells us that when we stand at the bedside, we are not to stand at the head of the bed. Why not? On the simplest level, since the laws of bikkur holim are all about empathy for the patient’s experience, we want to position ourselves in a way that is most comfortable for the patient, and a position that would add neck strain or indignity to the patient’s woes is therefore forbidden. But more deeply, Nancy suggests, we are not to stand at the head of the bed because that space is already taken. The Shekhinah stands at the head of the bed. This means that as chaplains, volunteers, supporters of Jewish chaplaincy, we must surely do all that is ours to do – and we must remember that there is another presence here, far more powerful than we. In fact, as a student of mine once reflected as I taught this text, since the Shekhinah is at the head of the bed, we may think of the visitor as a mirror, reflecting the image of the divine, so that the person who is ill, looking into the face of the visitor, sees God reflected there.

I am sure that many of us have seen the face of God reflected in Bruce or Devora, in chaplaincy volunteers like Jane Stepak, in community leaders like Shelly Lewis, in co-creators of the chaplaincy program like Carol Winograd. (Please forgive me for naming only these people – they are only examples – the ones I know best.) And most of us, I daresay, have tasted the keen sense of holiness that surrounds the whole subject of spiritual care for the ill – otherwise we wouldn't be here today, wanting to be part of this sacred celebration. Many of us have come back to this place again and again, out of our desire to somehow partner with God in the work of healing, to offer compassionate presence as an expression of our desire to live holy lives, and to receive what this sacred work paradoxically can give to us.

Finally, Jewish chaplaincy offers to the Jewish community at large a reminder of the needs of the ill, of Jewish teachings about illness and wellness and living and dying, and about the obligations of Jewish communities worthy of the name. The existence of the Jewish Chaplaincy program challenges the community to pierce its own denial about the fragility of human life, and to rise to the responsibility to serve the needs of the ill and their loved ones among us. Jewish chaplaincy helps our community to live up to its own obligations and to stay in touch with what is most important – in Jewish teaching and in human life.

In closing, I am drawn back to a story told by my colleague Rabbi Phil Pohl. He was called to the bedside of a childhood friend, a young man who lay gravely ill in the ICU, attached to multiple IVs and monitors. Phil began his conversation with his friend, hoping to listen, perhaps to offer comfort by his presence. To his surprise, his old friend, not a particularly observant Jew, asked Phil if he would help him to put on tephillin. Phil was startled, but willing. He excused himself and went to get a pair of tephillin. Back at his friend's bedside, Phil began, gently and tenderly, to wrap the tephillin strap down his friend's arm. It was not an easy thing to do, to find spaces for the tephillin strap, without disturbing all the tubes threaded into his friend's body. Phil did the best he could to wind the tephillin strap around his friend's arm, and then he stepped back.

For a moment, Phil saw that his friend had two kinds of nourishment flowing into his body. Medical science provided the physical nutrition of food and medicine. The tephillin conveyed spiritual sustenance, connecting the young man to a power larger than his illness, filling him with the nourishment of mitzvah, of Torah, of connection to community and to the Divine.

Jewish chaplaincy - all Jewish healing work – brings nourishment to the spirit at times of illness and pain. Jewish chaplains bring the wisdom of Torah, the richness of Jewish

ritual, connection to community, and most importantly, the presence of a caring human being, as an existential lifeline to Jews in the hospital. Yet unlike catheters and lines, which bring life-giving fluids to the body in just one direction, the lines of spiritual nourishment bless both “giver” and “recipient,” both caregiver and patient, united in moments of seeking God’s presence.

I congratulate the Jewish Chaplaincy for ten magnificent years of serving the spiritual needs of Jewish patients, families, staff and students at Stanford Medical Center. May you be blessed with many more years of rich opportunities to engage in this sacred work, and may the work bring you boundless blessing, as you have brought to so many.