

Yom Kippur 5770/2009

## Un-Punishing Miriam: A Theology of Healing

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We have heard a lot of personal stories over these holy days, as part of our effort to connect *Panim el Panim*, face to face. On Rosh Hashanah eve we heard our president Jean King Applebaum's story of how she came to love and serve Mount Zion. At the cemetery last Sunday, those gathered shared memories of their loved ones. Last night we heard stories about congregants' experiences in health care.

I have another story this morning. This one is about healing. Aaron was a man I knew some years back at the Sholom Home. 80-years old, and living in the nursing home against his wishes, Aaron believed that God was punishing him for a dark period he experienced as a young man. It was a time when the sudden death of his beloved left him overcome with grief, and, as he put it, he "lost four years of his life."

Aaron never told me what happened during those dark years, and it doesn't really matter. What matters is he was convinced that he was being punished and nothing I said could dissuade him. And believe me, I tried hard to dissuade him. He would know, he said, when God forgave him, but for now he was being punished with illness, loneliness, and what he experienced as incarceration in the nursing home. Aaron found meaning in the belief that he was being punished. His suffering had a purpose; it was his *Teshuva* for some colossal sin.

The human spirit moves us to seek meaning in life, and especially in suffering. The thought of senseless suffering is unbearable. So we ask "why me?" We have to find an answer, or risk succumbing to despair. Aaron, like many people, found his answer in divine retribution. As painful as that was, it enabled him to cope, and even to hope. But it was a harsh and judgmental answer, and I believe there are more merciful ones to be found.

Aaron is not unique in the way he understood his suffering; it is familiar to many, and has been around for a very long time. It is as old as the Biblical Aaron, who also saw illness as punishment in chapter 12 of the book of Numbers. In this story, Aaron and Miriam conspired together to slander their brother Moses. God got angry and came to the Tent of Meeting to reprimand them. Aaron then noticed that his sister was afflicted with scales. Aaron implored Moses to intercede with God to forgive them. Moses responded with one of the few personal prayers in Torah: *El Na R'fa Na La*, "Please God, please heal her."

The traditional interpretation of this story is that Miriam was punished with leprosy because of her sin of slandering Moses. The sages use a word play to connect *Metzora*, Leprosy, to *Motzi shem Ra*, gossip. We know that our sages consider gossip a very serious transgression. But in this case, I think the correlation between the sin and the affliction is misguided.

First, the cause and effect relationship between the slander and the leprosy is never explicitly stated in the text. Second, if Miriam and Aaron were both guilty, why was only Miriam punished? Some have suggested that she, being a woman, was the instigator. *Not*.

Finally, in response to Aaron's plea, Moses prayed to God not for forgiveness, but for healing.

While the traditional interpretation is likely to discourage gossiping, it unfortunately leads us down a rocky theological path. I cannot believe that God punishes people with illness, because I have seen too many good people in too much pain. But this same story can offer us a different model for understanding our suffering.

Any time someone gets sick, it is concurrent with other events in their life. Miriam fell ill just after she and Aaron slighted Moses. Trying to understand his sister's illness, Aaron attributed it to their offense. Feeling guilty both for hurting his brother, and for his own wellness, Aaron begged Moses to ask God for forgiveness, hoping that this would cure Miriam. And Moses did pray. Consider again his words: "*El na rfa na la*, "Please God, please heal her." Moses did not ask for God's forgiveness but for *healing*.

Moses seems to have understood what Aaron, and generations of interpreters seem to have missed: That Miriam's suffering was not *caused* by the sin, but coincidental with it; that the illness was not the result of the family conflict, but rather an opportunity for reconciliation. Moses understood that it was not God's job to forgive Miriam, but his own, and demonstrated his forgiveness by praying for her rather than bearing a grudge.

I believe that illness is random; that nature is amoral; that is, without any moral component, good or bad. God created a self-sustaining world and gave it the laws of nature. God created humanity and gave us free will. In both these acts, God was voluntarily self-limiting. The theology of a puppet-master God who controls everything negates both natural law and human free will in this world. We can't have it both ways.

The Talmud says: If a man steals seeds and plants them, *Din Hu* - justice would require – that they don't sprout. But, *Olam K'minhago Nobeg* – the natural world follows its own course – blind to moral law. (AZ 45a) Sometimes things happen that even God does not like. The Talmud teaches that God suffers these things right along with us, and weeps for our pain.

I believe that God has chosen to let our world run on its own: actions have reactions, deeds have consequences, and some things just happen by chance. If I chain smoke and get emphysema, this is a consequence of my actions, *not a punishment from God*. If I work hard to take **good** care of my body, and am afflicted with cancer, it is an accident of nature, *not a punishment from God*. I disagree with my home-insurance company which thinks tornadoes and such are "Acts of God" – I say they, too, are accidents of nature. It is only in the World to Come, say our sages, that God ultimately will step in and mete out divine justice.

So, if illness is random, how then do we find meaning in it? How do we avoid despair? Call to mind the famous book by Rabbi Harold Kushner about bad things happening to good people. What is its title? Chances are, you are thinking, "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People." But in fact, the book is called "*When* Bad Things Happen to Good People." A small detail with tremendous significance.

The question "Why?" is one we are quick to ask, but really cannot answer. As I have said, in my

opinion, there really is no reason why. *Which is not to say there is no meaning* If we ask different questions, we will find more merciful answers. Instead of "why me?" we might ask "What now?" "Where can this lead me?" "How can I grow from this?" "How can I find healing for myself or others?"

Miriam's illness led Aaron to examine his deeds and reconcile with his brother. I wish they could have reconciled without adding the burden of shame to Miriam's suffering. Illness can be an opportunity for us to repair breaches in relationships, release old grudges, speak words of love or forgiveness. It can bring us to a greater appreciation of life and its value. We can search our lives and our souls for *other* hidden wounds and seek to heal them. We can learn to reach out and heal others.

In this way, illness or suffering can lead us to *Teshuva*, not to abate punishment, but to *return*, to our truest selves, to our loved ones and to God. I want to be very clear that I am *not* suggesting that God deliberately sends the illness to make us search our souls.

That is why we have Yom Kippur. I assert again that illness comes most often as an accident of nature, sometimes a consequence of choices, but never as a punishing act of God.

Where, then, does God fit in? What is the point of praying? We pray because it helps. It helps connect us; lessening our isolation. It gives us hope, and hope itself is healing. Prayer comforts us, and maybe it even comforts God. Does God answer our prayers? Yes, and no. It depends what we are expecting in response. God is not a vendor, acting on a fee for service basis. There is a Yiddish saying that God always answers our prayers, but sometimes the answer is "No." Then again, it may be that the answers are coming in different forms than we expect.

For most of our lives, our purpose in life comes from what we do: our jobs, taking care of our homes and our kids, participating in things we enjoy. But illness or old age often eliminate these sources of meaning. When we can no longer find meaning in doing, we must then find it in being. This I believe, is the essence of *Refuat HaNefesh*: healing of spirit comes from finding meaning in being. Rabbi Akiva said, "God showed us a great love by creating us in the divine image, and an even greater love by letting us know it." Healing comes when just by being human, we let the divine in us shine.

Spirituality has been defined as *a capacity for transcending our physical realities in order to love and be loved in our communities, give meaning to our existence, and cope with the exigencies of life*. I would say this is also a definition of healing. When we can transcend the physical realities of illness, love and be loved, remain in community, exist meaningfully, and cope, God is answering our prayers.

Jewish ritual can also be an answer to our prayers. Think about lighting Shabbat Candles. It is an opportunity to pause and reflect, a meditative moment to bask in warmth and light, to connect with God and our heritage, with family and friends, with nurturing mothers and grandmothers who lit before us. It sets apart a moment of *Kedusha* - holiness, ushering in the extra soul we are said to receive on Shabbat. It opens a window onto *Olam Haba*, offering a glimpse of paradise. The Shabbat lights remind us of Creation, the most positive force in the universe. For those who light every week, it provides continuity and stability, at times when things may be changing much too fast. For those who

don't, it can be a new ritual of comfort. After lighting, we wish one another Shabbat Shalom, itself a prayer for wholeness and peace.

At the end of Shabbat, *Havdallah* is another fertile healing ritual. Its symbols are the braided candle, sweet-smelling spices, and wine; we will experience it this evening after the *Tekiah Gedolah*. *Havdalah* separates the sacred from the mundane. The concept of separation can be helpful to people trying to overcome addictions, exit harmful relationships, break with past troubles. The *Havdalah* candle symbolizes insight, knowledge, understanding; the braided wicks uniting in one flame represent the weaving together of the disparate elements of our lives into an integrated whole. The spices are smelling salts for the soul; the sweet wine soothes us as we bid Shabbat goodbye, and as we navigate the difficult separations and distinctions in our lives.

Imagine also the healing potential of giving *Tzedakkah*, of hanging a *Mezuzah*, blessing our children, sweeping out *Hametz*.

This afternoon at 2:00 we will have a Healing Service, inspired by the calls of the Shofar. I urge you to attend even if you have been lucky enough not to be touched by illness or loss. As we search our souls on these days of awe, we can all use a little extra comfort.

When we are suffering and reach out to God, the people we encounter are an answer to our prayers. Rabbi Menacham Mendel said, "Human beings are God's language." Medical personnel, and clergy, family, friends, and community; these are all messengers of God, coming to heal us. When they are with us, God is with us. We turn to the medical people to heal our bodies; healing of spirit comes from all those who stand by us so we don't feel alone.

When Job was suddenly afflicted and sought God, the Bible tells us his friends came, "every one from his own place...to mourn with him and to comfort him." (Job 1:11). The Talmud teaches that a visitor can take away part of a sick person's pain, and enough love might eradicate it entirely (Nedarim). Reaching out to one another in genuine caring can enable meaning to rise out of the chaos. *Bikkur Holim*, visiting the sick, is one of those *Mitzvot She'ain Labem Shi'ur*, whose value is boundless.

It is not easy to be God's messenger. It is scary to come so close to illness and suffering. Many people deal with this fear by doing just the opposite of what is healing. We see the ill as objects needing fixing rather than persons needing healing. They become "the cardiac arrest in room three," or "my four o'clock co-dependent." Family and friends talk around the patient in the hospital bed instead of truly being with them. It is so important to be wholly present with someone who is suffering, to engage with them *Panim El Panim*, face to face.

When we can get past the fear and be really present, the ways to act as God's messengers of healing are, like the Mitzvah itself, without limit. *Ain Labem Shi'ur*. At best they arise out of our own particular needs for healing, and our own particular gifts as healers. Miriam's leprosy became an opportunity for the family members to heal their breach.

We can bring comfort to the aging by listening to their stories of the past, to the young by coaxing out their dreams for the future. To the Alzheimer's patient, for whom there is neither past nor future, we can bring joy to the present moment, with a smile, a song, a hug. When someone cares, listens, holds our hand, we are reminded that we are still human, created in the image of God, loveable, and valuable. This gives life meaning and hope, even in the midst of suffering. This is God answering our prayers.

I pray that in the coming year, 5770, we will all be healthy and happy. But if illness or suffering come our way, I pray that we can find healing in loved ones, in community, in rituals, in God reflected in our own being. May we take to heart the words we say about *Teshuvah*, not so that God might rescind our punishment, but so that we can make the spiritual repairs that are needed to bring healing to our own troubled souls, to our loved ones, our community and our world.

*Ken Y'hi Ratzon*, May it be God's will.