

The Power to Heal

Miriam is punished in the *parashah* this week with a horrible disease. After speaking out against Moses, God shouts at her and she is stricken with *tzaraat*, a scaly affection of the skin. Moses literally shouts at God, displaying his own distress while begging for her to be healed.¹ He utters the shortest and most poignant prayer for healing in the Jewish tradition: *אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ*, “God, please, I beg you, heal her” (Num. 12:13).

Now, *tzaraat* is not foreign to Moses. He himself was afflicted by the disease when he first met God (Ex. 4:6), and he and Aaron have received extensive instructions on how to treat its patients. If anyone should be able to handle this situation, it's Moses, the world's most experienced expert on this particular disease.

And yet, he prays for healing.

Perhaps he recalls that it was God who removed his own *tzaraat* when it covered his skin. Perhaps he remembers the first event to befall the Hebrews after their escape from Egypt, the miraculous transformation of bitter water to sweet and God's self-declaration, *אֲנִי יְהוָה רַפָּאֵךְ*, “I, the Eternal, am your healer” (Ex. 15:26). Or perhaps he insists that it was not Miriam's fault for getting sick – even though it appears to be a punishment – and he wants to hold God accountable for making his sister ill.

Whatever his motivation, Moses prays. And God does not listen. “But the Eternal said to Moses, ‘If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted’” (Num. 12:14). Miriam heals in seven days' time, though we don't know if it was God or simply the passage of time that made her well. We are left with an uneasy feeling – the story shows the power of God to assign sickness and also a frightening reluctance to take it away.

God's intransigence reminds us of another heartbreaking episode in the Torah. Later, in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses will plead once again with the Eternal, begging God to allow him to just to glimpse the Promised Land. *וְלֹא שָׁמַע*, but God didn't listen. “Enough!” God said. “Never speak to me again of this!” (Deut. 3:26). This treatment seems profoundly unfair. How could God treat Moses this way?

¹ See Ibn Ezra's commentary to Num. 12:13: *זה יורה שהיה בצער על אחותו*, “This teaches that [Moses] was in distress over his sister.”

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These stories might make us angry. They might make us sad or disappointed or, at the very least, curious. Why does the Torah show us a God with so much power and so much caprice?

One answer – profoundly unsatisfying and also profoundly true – is that these stories perfectly describe the world as it is. We see every day in our communities and inevitably in our own lives people struggling with hardships they do not deserve. To put it bluntly: Life isn't fair. Even Moses, our most honored and revered prophet, declared in this very story to be עָנָו מְאֹד מְכַל הָאָדָם, "Very humble – more than any other person" (Num. 12:3), doesn't get a fair shake. So how could we expect anything better for ourselves?

But that's not the end of the story, not for Miriam and not for us.

Miriam is forced to leave the camp as prescribed by the rules given earlier by God. And, we are told, "the people did not march on until Miriam was gathered back" (Num. 12:15). So too when, later, Aaron suddenly dies: "All the house of Israel mourned for Aaron thirty days" (Num. 20:29) – just as they will pause to mourn when Moses himself dies on the border of the Promised Land (Deut. 34:8). In all these cases, the community comes together in mutual aid and support. It is the touch of human kindness, not a miracle from above, that brings comfort at a time of distress. These Torah stories teach us something about the world: Bad things will happen, seemingly at random, seemingly unfair. And when they do, we need to be there for one another. God teaches the tribes how to be a community, and our sacred stories affirm that we cannot rely on divine intervention to accomplish what we on earth can do for ourselves.

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So let's return to the divine power of healing.

Judaism teaches us to trust in doctors while also teaching that they do not invent their own power to heal. The mysteries of the human body remind us to be humble. As we know, medicine doesn't work the same every time, disease doesn't follow a predictable playbook, and many of the reasons behind effective treatment elude our greatest minds. These basic truths are borne out in a classic Talmudic dispute:

Rav Acha taught: When you go in for [an operation] say: "May it be Your will, O Eternal my God, that this operation may be a cure for me, and may You heal me, for You are a faithful healing God, and Your healing is sure since human beings have no power to heal even though they practice it."

But Abaye countered: That is not appropriate to say, for the Torah itself says that one person can “Cause [another] to be thoroughly healed” (Exodus 21:19). And from this we learn that the healer has authority to heal.²

So Rav Acha says only God can heal while Abaye teaches human beings can do it. The Talmud, of course, puts them together, urging us to see a doctor’s healing powers emerging from a source greater than human hands. That’s why Jacob Zahalon (1630-1693), a 17th-century rabbi and doctor, said in his physician’s prayer, “I am but clay in the Potter’s hand, in the hand of the Creator of all things, and as the instrument through which You [God] cure Your creatures.”³ In other words, humans and the divine are partners in the sacred act of healing.

If this is true, then there is a power beyond us that is, in some way, related to healing, health, and wellbeing. When we sing Mi Shebeirach, our congregation joins Jews around the world and across the centuries in affirming and revering the mystery that animates our being. Our own beliefs about the source of healing will certainly vary, but we join together in asserting that our communal expression of encouragement and hope brings some respite and relief.

And when we pray for ourselves and those we love, we may keep in mind these words reflection attributed to Margaret Torrie (1912-1999), the founder of Britain’s first support organization for widows and their children.

Healing is both an exercise and an understanding.
It is not of the will;
It is a wisdom and a deeper knowledge
 of the daily swing of life and death.
In all creation, there is defeat to overcome
and acceptance of living to be established.
And, always,
 there must be hope...

It is not hope of *healing*
that informs the coming moment and gives it reason.
Rather: the hope which is each person’s breath:
 the certainty of love – and of loving

Death may live in the living,

² Berachot 60a.

³ Quoted in Byron Sherwin’s *Jewish Ethics for the Twenty-First Century: Living in the Image of God* (Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 22.

and healing rise in the dying,
for whom the natural end
is part of the gathering
and of the harvest to be expected

To know healing
is to know
that all life is one.⁴

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May we find healing for ourselves and those we love. May we find hope in the potential of human ingenuity and careful practice of medicine. And may we find life—inner and outer—in the physical and spiritual health we cultivate with strength we draw from one another.

⁴ This adaption is modified slightly from a version found in several Reform healing services, such as the *Weekday Service of Healing*, compiled by Rabbi Daniel Komito Gottlieb and Cantor Lisa L. Levine for the UAHC Biennial in 1999. The original poem can be found here: <http://web.cs.ucla.edu/~klinger/intention.html>.