

The Renewal of Spirit

Yom Kippur Morning – October 8, 2011
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
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Every Jewish book of prayer is like an archaeological dig. In any prayer book, you can discover many different layers of prayers stacked one upon the other. Some prayers originate in the Torah, the earliest written record of the Jewish people's encounter with God. The Shema, the V'ahavta, and the Mi Chamocha are all direct verses from Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Other layers of the prayer book come from later periods of Jewish history. Two thousand years ago, the sages who lived in Palestine and Babylonia composed such well-known prayers as the Amidah and the Kaddish. Still other layers of prayers come from more recent periods, dating back "only" a few centuries. L'cha Dodi, recited on Shabbat evening, was composed in the 16th century by Shlomo HaLevi Alkabetz in the town of Safed. It should come as no surprise that among the most recent layers in our mahzor, is a prayer for the State of Israel that was composed only fifty or sixty years ago.

However, there is one prayer that has taken hold in the hearts and minds of our congregation that is even more contemporary. It has become essential to our worship as a community even though it was not included in the Gates of Repentance, the Reform mahzor we hold in our hands. We know it is essential for us, so we printed it in the written program distributed throughout our congregation. Of course this prayer is the Mi Sheberach, the prayer for healing.

Now in truth, the Mi Sheberach prayer has been around for a very long time. We can find formulations of this prayer in ancient sources. We can even say that Moses was the first Jew to recite a Mi Sheberach as we discover in Torah in the 12th chapter of the Book of Numbers. Upon seeing his sister, Miriam, stricken with white scales, Moses calls out to God: *El Na Refa Na La - O God please heal her*. Moses was a Ba'al T'filah, a master of prayer. He could lay on a sermon that could last for hours, yet he also knew when to keep his words short and direct. So upon discovering that his sister was critically ill, he cried out these five words *El Na Refa Na La*, please God heal Miriam of her affliction.

Throughout the centuries, we find various formulations of the Mi Sheberach. According to Professor Bill Cutter "There are Mi Sheberach

prayers for every kind of illness and almost every kind of relationship. There are Mi Sheberach blessings for everyone in the community but slanderers, gossips, and schlemiels are excluded.” (William Cutter, *Sh’ma*, June 2011)

As a youngster growing-up in a classically Reform congregation, I never heard a recitation of the Mi Sheberach. Reform Judaism at that time did not believe in a God who responds to personal petition. Asking God to heal someone would be an act of theurgy, of trying to magically urge God to take action on behalf of a human being. In classical Reform, it was perfectly fine to recite the historical examples of such healers as Moses. However, it simply was not kosher for Reform Jews to believe in a God who heals human beings.

I first encountered the Mi Sheberach prayer during my junior year in college, when I lived in Israel and studied at the Hebrew University. During that glorious year in which my Jewish horizons were vastly broadened, I prayed in a wide variety of shuls. After all, in Jerusalem, every neighborhood had its own synagogue and I made it a point to explore and pray in many different settings. It was in Orthodox synagogues that I first encountered the expression of a Mi Sheberach. The Gabbai, a representative of the synagogue, customarily recited this prayer after a man had received an aliyah, an honor of reciting the Torah blessings. The Mi Sheberach would ask God to bless and protect the Oleh, “to protect him and rescue him from every trouble and distress, from every plague and illness,” and it concluded “may God send blessing and success to the honoree in his every endeavor” (ArtScroll Siddur, pg. 443).

By the way, in some Orthodox synagogues even to this day, certain honors are auctioned off, with the thought that the end result of raising tzedakah for the shul justifies the means. To have an aliyah on Yom Kippur is considered a very big honor, worthy of a sizable donation – especially if it is the maftir, the concluding portion of the Torah reading. Maybe we should bring back this old form of fund raising. I think it would be a splendid idea if our Mar-Win BBYO teenagers, who had the honor of the maftir aliyah, agreed to donate their allowances for the coming year for the benefit of Temple Beth Torah!

OK. So maybe TBT won’t go old school and we won’t sell High Holy Day honors to the highest bidder. Neither will we guarantee that seats by the Eastern Wall come at a higher price. Nor will people who sit on the blue seats nearer the bimah pay for extra comfort as compared to those who sit in economy class, I mean, who are seated in the back of the Social Hall.

But I digress. To return to our topic at hand, nowhere is there mention of a Mi Sheberach in our Reform Mahzor, the Gates of Repentance, published 33 years ago, nor in the Gates of Prayer, the blue Union Prayer book utilized by most Reform congregations. But I remember well, when I was a rabbi in the early 1990’s, congregants began asking me to include in a prayer for healing in our Shabbat service. Their specific request was for a

Mi Sheberach that was not formulated solely in Hebrew, rather it was a blend of Hebrew and English. This Mi Sheberach contains a reference not only to the patriarchs of the Jewish people, but to our foremothers as well. Nowhere in this newly formulated Mi Sheberach is there a reference to God as Eloheinu or Adonai. Instead these masculine terms are jettisoned, referring instead to God as M'kor Habracha, the source of blessing. This newly formulated Mi Sheberach links us not only to our ancestors, but it roots us in the present, asking God to help us to live with courage, no matter what difficulty we might face, and to not only endure but to make our lives a bracha, a blessing. The last verse of this newly created Mi Sheberach emphasizes that a Refuah Shleimah can take place on two levels. It asks God to send a refuat haguf, a curing of bodily ills and it also prays for refuat hanefesh, a healing of spirit. This newly created Mi Sheberach concludes by asking everyone who recites this prayer, whether singing or listening, to respond together by saying "Amen."

I am, of course, referring to the Mi Sheberach prayer composed by Debbie Friedman and Rabbi Drorah Setel. This beautiful Mi Sheberach has taken root in the hearts of Jews around the world. Debbie Friedman, who sadly died at a far too young age this past year, was a brilliant liturgist and composer, an incandescent songwriter and song leader, who changed the way Reform Jews pray. Her many compositions, Mi Sheberach, Lechi Lach, Shema Koleinu, and so many more have sunk deeply into the collective soul of Liberal Jews around the world. Truly her passing is a great loss for our people and the prayers, songs, and good deeds she did will live on as enduring blessings.

But I want to go deeper with you for a moment in contemplating this Mi Sheberach. Why has it taken its place as a central part of our worship service? There is no single answer to this question. But to me, a primary reason is that this prayer is so very personal and rooted in human experience. When someone we care about is sick, there is nothing more primary than wanting our loved one to get better. *El Na Refa Na La* worked for Moses. But few of us are fluent in Hebrew. I would even venture to say that Debbie's Mi Sheberach, set to music, exceeds in aesthetic beauty the words proclaimed by Moshe Rabeinu.

Even for those who do not speak Hebrew, we can understand the intent of this prayer. The very effect of singing the Mi Sheberach strengthens us; it gives us courage even at times when our loved ones or we face a devastating disease.

When contemplating the actual content of the Mi Sheberach, it is perfectly fair to ask the question, Does God send healing to those who are sick? I am certain that every rabbi has had to confront this question, not only once, but many times. My teacher, Rabbi Nancy Flam, tells the story of her friend, Rebekah, who was diagnosed with breast cancer. Rabbi Flam states, "Having entered 'crisis mode' Rebekah was no longer able to 'do' her

regular life: working as a high powered psychiatrist or taking charge of her household's management.....The shock of her diagnosis propelled Rebekah to examine her life, ..to seek a theological framework to understand her illness. She refused to believe that God actually sent her this disease with the intent of helping her reorder her life; she didn't believe that God worked that way" (Mahzor: Challenge and Change, pages 72-73). So what place did God hold in Rebekah's universe? Was God absent? Or present? Was God a deliverer of physical punishment or a source of healing? The answer is not readily clear.

Another of my colleagues, Rabbi Julie Pelc, speaks about a devastating illness she faced in her own life. While in rabbinic school, at the age of 26, a brain aneurysm ruptured in her cerebellum. She writes, "In addition to the open-cranial brain surgery and five weeks in the hospital and rehab, there were countless outpatient therapies and doctors working tirelessly to nudge me in the direction of healing. There were also rabbis, ministers, chaplains, friends, and family praying for my recovery. My rabbinic school classmates held healing services around my hospital bed; friends placed notes in the Wailing Wall for me; and the silent prayers of my worried family circled me like a protective salve."

Rabbi Pelc goes on to state, "People tell me quite frequently that I am a 'miracle,' which makes me shudder. Though I appreciate the sentiment, the theological implications are abhorrent to me. Were I to accept that I am worthy of being a 'miracle,' I would also have to accept that the vast majority of young adults who die instantly of aneurysms are not. I do not want to be a miracle. I cannot believe in a God who would deliberately select individuals based on an unknown criteria and 'allow' them to survive calamities any more than I can believe in a God who would deliberately select individuals to suffer" (Sh'ma, June 2011)

Does God send illness as a form of punishment? Can God miraculously heal someone who is on the verge of death? Do our prayers change the course of nature? Can our petitions, our pleas, move God from the throne of judgment, *Kisay HaDin*, to the throne of mercy, *Kisay HaRachamim*?

These are all valid and probing questions. Our Jewish tradition offers a multitude of responses to the question of suffering and to God's role in human affairs. Our liberal tradition enables us to question whether God hears our prayers and acts in response. These questions deserve our attention and discussion and study.

But here, in the context of our service, I will offer the following affirmation. Praying that our loved one be healed is never an invalid prayer, what we call in Jewish tradition a bracha l'vatla. Prayers of the heart that are recited sincerely are not the expressions of a superstitious belief in a Divine parent up above who can perform miracles. Our communal offering of the Mi Sheberach orients us toward hope, which is an attribute at the root of being a Jew. Offering a Mi Sheberach undergirds our communal

strength. It offers us the assurance that we are not isolated in the pain we feel when we are diseased; nor are we alone in our anguish when someone we love is seriously ill. When we are sick, by reciting or singing the Mi Sheberach, we activate within ourselves the divine spark of Being, animating our better selves, transcending the pain we might feel, and enabling us to endure our suffering. By reciting or singing the Mi Sheberach on behalf of our loved ones, we ideally share within our community the intimate knowledge that someone is ill and is need of assistance. Our help can come by performing the mitzvah of bikkur cholim, visiting the sick. Our assistance can take the form of providing a meal. We can provide aid by making contact with someone who is sick, whether by phone or by sending an email or a mailing a card and letting that person know you care.

At the core of Debbie Friedman's Mi Sheberach is the hope that someone who is ill receives a Refuat Haguf, a cure for his or her disease. We can hope for a cure, we can certainly even pray for a cure. But I share Rabbi Pelc's theological reservations about whether God acts in this manner. Yet I absolutely believe that the Mi Sheberach can bring healing. A Mi Sheberach can bring a Refuat Hanefesh, a healing of one's spirit. Healing is something distinct from curing. A healing of spirit means that one views illness within a larger context of life and death. One no longer sees oneself as a victim, but instead a person whose spirit is healed remains a full human being. Healing suggests that a sick person transcends the very fact of being sick. As one patient put it, "I am not a cancer patient. I am a human being who has cancer." Healing is the process by which one comes to terms with the meaning of one's existence; and possibly in the face of an incurable disease, comes to accept one's own mortality. It has often been remarked that when nearing the end of life, when a patient comes to accept this reality, he or she experiences a rich sense of peacefulness. Of course there are tears and the ache of farewell expressed by those who are left behind. When a soul is healed and at peace, when death does come, it can be a powerful and sacred experience. The soul returns to God from whence it came; it is only the body, the earthly husk that is left behind.

Yom Kippur is a day that is obsessed with confronting the central truth of our lives. We are all mortal. We are all destined some day to die. Though we face a decree that we shall depart this earth, we pray that *teshuvah, u'tefilah, u'tzedakah, ma'avirin et roah hagezarah* – that asking others to forgive us, by offering our sincere prayers to God, and by performing righteous deeds, we can overcome our failings and deepen and enrich our lives. We come to this day of worship on Yom Kippur to find meaning in our existence; to celebrate joyous times within our congregation and to communally bear the responsibility of caring for the sick and easing suffering in our world. We seek on this most sacred day of the year, a strengthening of our spirit, a renewed sense of purpose, a desire to live with meaning. Though we fast and repent and beat our chests and confess our

sins, on this day there also is a palpable sense of joy. For we are overcoming our customary need to eat and drink, we are exceeding our limited conceptions of our bodies, and striving together to cleanse our souls and discover the transcendent.

Yom Kippur is a challenging day, without a doubt. But I dare say that today is time for rejoicing. May we find healing on this Day of Atonement. May our souls be nourished by the wisdom of our tradition. May we show compassion for our neighbors, our congregants, and our friends. May we renew love within our families, happiness within our congregation. O God, may we be blessed in this New Year, and we pray to You, O Source of blessing, that You help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing.

And let us say, Amen.