

Bridges to Wholeness

Jewish Family Services and Jewish Healing

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What are Jewish Healing Centers? How do they reflect the communities in which they are located? What impact do the Jewish Family Service agencies (JFS) in which they reside have on them, and what impact do they have on their host agencies? What are the resources that support and/or hinder their development? What might be the future of Jewish Healing Centers within JFS? This article addresses these issues, using the Jewish Healing Network of Chicago (administered by Jewish Child and Family Services) and the National Center for Jewish Healing, a program of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, as examples.

Louise is widowed unexpectedly in her sixties. She joins a time-limited bereavement group offered at the local JFS. She and the other widows share their losses and struggles of being alone and dealing with family and friends. They read and exchange Jewish spiritual books on bereavement and enjoy an evening of Torah study with the rabbi/chaplain. The rabbi helps Louise understand the purpose and meaning of an upcoming unveiling. At the conclusion of the group Louise shares her plans to join a synagogue and find an ongoing supportive Jewish community.

This is an example of Jewish healing, defined by Rabbi Amy Eilberg, a founder of the Jewish healing movement, as “the use of Jewish tradition and community to achieve a sense of spiritual wholeness, comfort, or perspective in the face of illness, pain, or loss” (Flam, Offel, & Eilberg, 1996/

97). Jewish Healing Centers have emerged over the past 15 years as an important component of the Jewish community's response to those struggling with illness and loss. More than 30 Healing Centers have been started or sustained, mostly within Jewish Family Service agencies because of their similar missions. Healing Centers offer important opportunities for growth and outreach, as reflected in the work of the National Center for Jewish Healing and in many regional Healing Centers, including the Jewish Healing Network of Chicago (administered by Jewish Child and Family Services).

The earliest articles about Jewish healing appeared in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* in 1996/97 (Hirsch & Weintaub, 1996/97) and in the Association of Jewish

Family and Children's Agencies' newsletter in 1998. In recent years there has been an increase in the publication of spiritual materials, including those by Jewish Light Publishing and the National Center for Jewish Healing. New publications include prayers and psalms for modern health situations (including surgery, miscarriage, and hospice) and essays integrating Talmudic wisdom with modern guidance for the ill, the bereaved, and caregivers.

**THE JEWISH HEALING MOVEMENT:
WHOLENESS, HOPE, COMFORT,
AND CONNECTION IN THE FACE
OF ILLNESS AND LOSS**

The Jewish healing movement emerged in the early 1990s, spearheaded by a small cadre of rabbis and lay leaders, each of whom had him- or herself faced a serious illness or death of a close family member (Flam, 1994, 1996/97). Their personal struggles suggested that, as a consequence of modern life, Jewish families and individuals no longer had easy access to the spiritual and communal support that had sustained previous generations of Jews through difficult times.

This lack of access was particularly evident in the 1990s as the HIV/AIDS crisis challenged clergy, health care workers, and mental health professionals. The crisis was termed "death out of order," and Jewish communal organizations and families were ill equipped to deal with this highly stigmatized disease. Society shifted from viewing illness as a "private problem" to a "public issue" (Schwartz & Zalba, 1971). Professionals struggled with how to respond to the overwhelming suffering, fear and uncertainty in the community and looked within their professions and Jewish tradition for guidance and resources. These events coincided with an increased societal interest in spirituality and meditation. Many Jews had explored meditation within a Buddhist tradition and sought a Jewish connection.

In 1991, the founders of the Jewish healing movement organized the first of several

conferences of rabbis and community leaders. Conference participants shared experiences and explored Jewish resources for people affected by illness and loss. This creative and groundbreaking work mined Jewish wisdom and spiritual and community resources. It attracted the interest of clergy, educators, health professionals, and synagogue lay leaders across the country.

The pioneers of the Jewish healing movement sought opportunities to explore the meaning of pastoral/spiritual care and the connections between psychosocial and spiritual work. Before the 1990s, training for clergy and mental health providers had not focused on these connections. For example, consider the experience of three women members of SHARE: Self Help for Women with Breast and Ovarian Cancer, when they presented a seminar to rabbinical students at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the seminary of Conservative Judaism:

In 1993 three women from SHARE were invited to present a pastoral care seminar for rabbinical students on how rabbis had responded to their disease. Each woman represented a different denomination of Judaism and each articulated a similar need and experience. None of their rabbis had offered prayers for healing or strength or spiritual wisdom or had offered to mobilize other kinds of support. As one woman said, "The only time you heard about someone affected by breast cancer in the synagogue was when the Kaddish was being said for them upon their death." These women were gravely disappointed by this lack of response and wanted to break the silence and find meaningful support from their religion at this critical junction in their lives.

**WHAT IS A JEWISH
HEALING CENTER?**

Jewish Healing Centers are an address for people seeking a wide range of services, but unable to fully articulate their needs. Those coping with their own illness or those of a loved one find themselves in an unfamiliar world. They have multiple needs: medical, emotional, physical, and spiritual.

Healing Centers provide a critical link to resources for many families and individuals.

Within the Jewish healing movement, healing does not mean cure. Instead, issues of isolation, loneliness, bewilderment, and a bereavement of spirit are the focus. Healing Centers normalize the illness and loss experiences, helping people connect to others and find growth opportunities in their life stage. For example, a father grieving the death of a child might share his anger at God through pastoral counseling with a chaplain or talk with other grieving parents in a support group.

Each Healing Center defines its “umbrella” of services differently, reflecting the community in which it resides, its sponsoring organization, and available resources. Programs might include *Bikur Cholim* (visiting the sick) training, spiritual support groups, resource libraries, community education, professional training, pastoral counseling, community chaplaincy, wellness programs, healing, synagogue consultation, JACS (Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent, and Significant others) programs, palliative and hospice care, cancer and kids camps, and spiritual publications. Some Healing Center programs have existed within JFS for many years; others are new.

Within a single community the unique needs of individuals are met through various programs. An Orthodox couple may join a support group for people with family members with mental illnesses, which helps decrease their feelings of isolation and shame; an unaffiliated Jew may benefit from books on spiritual support from a resource library or meet other Jewish caregivers at a community-wide conference.

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR JEWISH HEALING (NCJH)

The NCJH was created in 1994 to help support and build a growing network of Jewish Healing Centers throughout North America. Its mission is to help communities meet the spiritual and emotional needs of Jews confronted with illness and loss. The

NCJH is a central address and resource center with three main goals:

1. enhancing the Jewish community's understanding of and commitment to the spiritual needs of people affected by illness/loss by integrating Jewish wisdom and traditions into practice
2. facilitating training and supporting professional and volunteer caregivers to address spiritual needs
3. helping create local Jewish care networks linking Jewish spiritual support with bio-medical and psychosocial care, recognizing the needs of the whole person

The NCJH focuses on several core activities: providing support for new and established Jewish Healing Centers through technical assistance and leadership support, facilitating conferences and training, and offering publications and other resources.

Technical and Leadership Support

NCJH staff provides individualized consultation and resources to communities that are exploring, developing, or expanding Healing Center programs. They share needs assessments, suggest community events, and provide training curricula. The NCJH sponsors national teleconference calls focusing on specific practice and program issues. An e-mail Listserv enables individuals to pose a range of questions to colleagues in the network. Healing Center directors, who have unique jobs within their communities, benefit from contact with colleagues across the country through these NCJH-facilitated networking sessions, teleconference calls, and leadership retreats.

Training and Conferences

The NCJH was a partner in the early community conferences on Jewish healing held throughout the county. As regional competency has grown, local Healing Centers have formed partnerships with organizations in their own communities and are less dependent on NCJH staff to co-

facilitate conferences. However, NCJH staff members are still an important resource in conference development, helping local Healing Centers identify speakers and conference topics. Individual NCJH staff members are often keynote speakers at regional conferences.

Publications and Resources

The NJCH Web site, established in 2003, helps connect the resources of the Jewish healing movement to a broad audience of providers and consumers. Consumers use it to locate Jewish Healing Centers near them. Professionals access resource materials, including a compendium of *Best Practices from Healing Centers*, that help them provide healing programming without having to reinvent the wheel.

NCJH publications and materials also facilitate access to Jewish spiritual resources. Examples include the *Mi Sheberach* Card and Circle of Prayer Card, which are used in medical centers, synagogues, and human services organizations across the country. Each of the 20 issues of "The Outstretched Arm," the NCJH newsletter, contains articles exploring healing from diverse voices and a range of personal experiences. Local Healing Centers regularly request permission to reprint these articles.

JFS AGENCIES AND HEALING CENTERS

The Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies (AJFCA), the umbrella organization for JFS organizations, was an early supporter of healing programs and continues to be a committed partner of the NCJH. AJFCA has showcased NCJH resources, Jewish Healing Centers, programs, and practices at its Annual Conference as part of the effort to highlight the "J" in JFCS. AJFCA disseminates resource materials and publications, and its support has been critical to the development of Jewish Healing Centers, networks, and programs across the country.

In 1997, NCJH became a program of the

Jewish Community Services Division of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (JBFCFS) in New York. NCJH and JBFCFS each deemed this new partnership to be mutually beneficial. JBFCFS, already deeply involved in programming for the ill and bereaved, believed that adding spiritual care grounded in Jewish sources would enrich the "J" in JBFCFS and enhance existing services. The NCJH benefited from infrastructure support and access to existing networks, serving both professionals and the consumers whom they support. The NCJH arrived at the JBFCFS with financial support from the Nathan Cummings Foundation, which had provided significant financial support for the development of the NCJH and the first two Healing Centers in San Francisco and New York.

Healing Centers are often quite dependent on the JFS in which they reside. Many JFS agencies provide support for supervision, marketing, resource development, strategic thinking, funding, and infrastructure. Healing Centers, like any new entity, are fragile and need this support, which JFS agencies, with years of experience in new program development, are uniquely qualified to provide. In turn, Healing Centers bring important growth opportunities to JFS agencies, including program development, funding, and outreach.

ONE HEALING CENTER'S STORY

The Jewish Healing Network of Chicago (JHNC) demonstrates the impact of a healing center on its sponsoring JFS agency as well as on the greater Jewish community. JHNC was created in 2000 as a joint program of the Jewish Child and Family Services (then Jewish Family and Community Service), Council for Jewish Elderly, and the Chicago Board of Rabbis. Its mission is to ensure that members of the Chicago Jewish community facing illness or loss can find out about and access health, social service, and spiritual resources. JHNC links people with existing programs and creates new services as needed.

Administrative, development, and financial support from the JFS and the Chicago Jewish Federation were crucial to JHNC's development. The resources that contributed to the success of JHNC were those needed to develop any new community program: leadership support, partnerships, time, flexibility, funding, passion, and resources.

Leadership Support

JHNC was envisioned by the JFS executive director, who used her experience and relationships to shepherd JHNC through its initial years. Her understanding of the political landscape and the key players who needed to "buy in" to the idea and her strength in knowing how to help them do that were crucial to JHNC's development.

The Chicago Jewish Federation became a major supporter of the program. Federation staff recognized the opportunities JHNC presented to reach out to unaffiliated and/or isolated Jews who were in need of services but unaccustomed to accessing help through Jewish agencies. JHNC provides a single point of contact for ill or bereaved community members and a coordinated response to connect individuals with resources—something the large metropolitan area of Chicago had previously lacked.

The Federation provides critical financial, fundraising, marketing, and design support to JHNC. It uses its resources and credibility to raise awareness and visibility of JHNC by distributing JHNC materials to Federation board members and other key community members. Federation fundraising staff members are active members of the JHNC advisory committee, which has kept awareness of JHNC funding needs on the Federation radar screen.

Funding

In its third year, JHNC began receiving annual grants through the Jewish Federation from a Jewish Health Conversion Foundation. These grants allowed JHNC to expand its existing support groups, develop

a resource library, sponsor community and professional conferences, and, most important, hire a full-time coordinator. In year four the Health Conversion Foundation encouraged the development of and then funded improved JHNC marketing materials. As JHNC grew, funding from Federation and several family foundations (procured through Federation) has supported the publication of hospital prayer pamphlets and these programs: the Chemical Dependency Program, Pastoral Counseling, and Shaarei Chesed: Palliative and Hospice Services. A local foundation supports the Nursing Home Visiting Program and a Congregation Connection Program, which provides funds and support to ten area synagogues, helping them create and expand programs for older adults in their communities.

Partnerships

Buy-in from the community is essential for all Healing Centers. The initial development of JHNC was slow and sometimes painful, as the partner agencies struggled to work together and meet as many of their disparate needs as possible. Meetings between the partner agencies and community professionals helped ensure that community members had input into JHNC development. Rabbis and social service providers were surveyed about existing resources and perceived needs. Feedback is sought from participants at each program to evaluate program effectiveness and determine future needs and growth.

Relationships

Healing Centers provide opportunities to strengthen existing partnerships and build new ones. JHNC is a partnership of local Federation agencies, it has a preferred provider relationship with a local hospice, and it partners with individual synagogues in sponsoring Bikur Cholim training. JHNC convenes a biannual meeting of Bikur Cholim synagogue coordinators, at which they share challenges, successes, and ideas. In

addition, JHNC staff provides consultation to rabbis and coordinators faced with difficult situations in their congregations. These connections strengthen relationships between synagogues and JFS and encourage appropriate referrals.

Healing programs also provide unique opportunities for multi-denominational partnering. Healing materials are culled from many denominations within the Jewish tradition and can touch a broad Jewish audience. JHNC annual community conferences, entitled *Renewal of Spirit*, attract unaffiliated, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews, who learn and pray together and find community. There need be no competition for this population—their needs far exceed what any part of the community can meet alone.

Time and Flexibility

Healing Centers are shaped by community needs and financial resources. JHNC initially offered Bikur Cholim (visiting the sick) training to synagogues, assuming that synagogues had Bikur Cholim groups and would be eager to receive training. In reality most congregations did not have existing groups, and outreach to synagogues was slow, requiring an understanding of the unique needs of each congregation. Over the past 5 years, congregations in 23 synagogues have participated in trainings tailored for their congregations. Initially the JHNC coordinator, a social worker, led the training, and the congregation's rabbi taught specific segments. With encouragement from the Chicago Board of Rabbis (a JHNC partner) and additional funding, a chaplain was hired to co-facilitate the trainings. The chaplain adds depth in the study of spiritual and Judaic texts, which has greatly enhanced the training.

JHNC has grown in response to community requests. At the first community-wide conference, audience members shared their fears that the needs of those affected by substance abuse were being ignored. Chemical dependency had not previously

been considered a component of the JHNC. In response to this expressed need, JHNC organized a task force of professionals from throughout the community to explore existing resources and needs of the Jewish recovery community. A plan was developed to address the spiritual needs of people already in recovery, improve skills of Federation-affiliated agency staff in working with people with substance abuse issues, and increase awareness and prevention programs to the Jewish community.

In implementing this plan, JHNC has received valuable support, resources, and speakers from JACS (Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependents, and Significant others), housed at the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services in New York. A Federation grant funds half of the JHNC Chemical Dependency program; funds for the balance of the program are still being sought. The program continues to grow; in 2006 over 85 individuals involved in 12-step programs participated in a Recovery Seder and Spirituality Day, deepening their personal recovery through the integration of Jewish spiritual materials and creating a community of Jews in Recovery.

Marketing

All Healing Centers struggle with the challenge of visibility. How do we help people find us when they cannot articulate what they need? How do Healing Centers establish themselves so that individuals experiencing illness or loss know where to call? Healing Centers are valuable for many reasons, but particularly because they provide support for needs that are difficult to articulate. They also provide resources that no one ever wants to need.

Healing Centers showcase existing expertise in bereavement and illness and raise the visibility of JFS in the community. JHNC runs ads in local Jewish newspapers and distributes a quarterly newsletter highlighting upcoming programs and support groups. The newsletter also includes an article relating Judaism to the illness/loss/addiction

experience. The JHNC director speaks at community events whenever possible, raising awareness of the program and its services. Joining with community organizations that address specific illnesses also increases its visibility; the JHNC director has presented a Jewish perspective on illness and loss at conferences hosted by local aging and cancer organizations

Spirituality

Healing Centers have become the home for “spirituality” within many JFS agencies, sometimes answering the question, “Where is the J in JFS?” Spiritual material can be integrated into existing programs; nursing home visiting and Bikur Cholim training through JHNC are co-led by a rabbi and include Judaic text study. Volunteers, often studying Talmud for the first time, learn that “One who visits the sick lessens one-sixtieth of the illness” (Midrash Leviticus Rabba 34:1). Subsequent discussions highlight the value of visiting to decrease isolation.

Healing Center staff can model the integration of spirituality into their work and help clinicians understand what spirituality means, both to them and to their clients. The JHNC director led a seminar on integrating spirituality into counseling, and JHNC sponsors conferences with that focus. When consulting with staff about clients challenged by illness and loss, the JHNC director, chaplain, and chemical dependency specialist ensure that medical, social service, and spiritual needs are explored. These consultations and clinical education help workers be more aware of and comfortable with including issues of meaning and spirituality in therapy.

The challenge and importance of integrating spiritual topics into therapy are reflected in the growth of clinical writing on spirituality in therapy and in the numerous articles in the popular press, which highlight the importance of spirituality in people’s daily lives. A recent Chicago Tribune article reported that more than 90 percent of

Americans believe in God or in some higher power (Brotman, 2006).

Staff

Healing Centers (including JHNC) are often started by JFS staff members who are able to bridge the gap between the spiritual side of Healing Centers and ongoing agency work. Many Healing Center directors have been personally touched by illness/loss and passionately believe that integrating spiritual resources into the ongoing work of JFS will enhance and strengthen services for the community. This passion helps administration and staff members accept the new programming ideas that Healing Centers bring.

Healing Center staff model the integration of spirituality into the work. In another article in this issue, the coordinator of Jewish Healing Connections in Boston shares her experiences of leading monthly Healing Circles for JFS staff (Sokoll, 2007). Healing Circles use music, meditation, spiritual writings, and sharing to support staff and highlight the spiritual aspects of their work.

Healing Centers have also re-integrated rabbis into JFS. An overview of the 140-year history of the JFS in Chicago reveals that a rabbi was on staff until 1960, when the transfer of the agency’s chaplaincy program to the Chicago Board of Rabbis occurred. JHNC has brought a rabbi back onto the JFS staff after a 45-year absence. In Philadelphia and other communities, JFS sponsors a chaplaincy program, providing pastoral counseling to agency clients and hospice and nursing home patients, and training rabbis in pastoral counseling.

Within a JFS that employs primarily social workers, the inclusion of rabbis and other types of therapists, including art therapists and meditation instructors, brings new challenges. These professionals have different educational experiences, ways to envision the work, and expectations about status and salary. Focusing on the similarities in helping people, while acknowledging their differences, helps dispa-

rate professionals work together. For example, the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) training that most chaplains complete provides preparation for working within social service settings by focusing on multi-disciplinary partnerships, group learning, and “verbatim” (much like the process recordings that social work students write).

CONCLUSION

The impact of the Jewish healing movement and of Healing Centers has been felt throughout the Jewish community. Today, community support and many spiritual materials responding to illness and loss are available; the JHNC Resource library alone includes more than 300 books, CDs, and articles. A *Mi Sheberach* prayer for healing is now regularly said during the Torah services at most synagogues. Jewish healing services and circles are found in some synagogues and JCCs, and synagogue Bikur Cholim visitors are encouraged to include prayer in their visits. Published prayer materials are available to hospital patients in communities including Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco.

Jewish Healing Centers have evolved over the past 15 years to meet the disparate needs of the ill, caregivers, and bereaved. In communities where Healing Centers have received strong support from their host JFS and local Federations, Healing Centers have improved the visibility of JFS and have provided an important nexus to JFS. They have attracted at-risk and unaffiliated individuals when they are likely to be receptive to support from the organized Jewish community.

What is the future of Jewish Healing Centers? New centers are being developed in cities across North America, and existing centers continue to expand, serving people

copied with numerous issues, including addiction and the end-of-life. As Baby Boomers age, will Healing Centers be available to meet their health and spiritual needs?

Of course, the answer to this question is, in part, dependent on funding. In many communities, funders are willing to provide start-up money, but obtaining ongoing funding is a challenge. Writing grant requests and reports is a time-consuming task of many Healing Center directors, and so finding endowment funds will be crucial to the long-term survival of Healing Centers. Many communities have obtained funds from Jewish hospitals that have closed. Will communities continue to see Healing Centers as appropriate uses for some of those funds?

In the process of bringing *refuah ha nefesh urefuah ha guf* (a renewal of body and a renewal of spirit) to those challenged by illness, Healing Centers have the potential to bring healing to the fractured relationships among the many well-meaning programs and agencies in our diverse Jewish communities.

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