

Refuah Sh'leymah, a 'complete healing' not a 'cure'

Sermon Preached by Rabbi Helen Freeman (West London Synagogue) at the Annual Service of Remembrance for Patients Treated at the London Oncology Centre held at St Marylebone Parish Church on 11th February 2013

Just over two years ago, I sat in my consultant's office, being told to my great surprise that the lump which they had assured me was benign, actually wasn't and that I was going to need an operation followed by thirty three sessions of radiotherapy. Because of the particular cancer I had, I was told that I would lose a stone in weight and be in a lot of pain during the treatment. Well actually neither of those things happened, perhaps because my husband turned into a Jewish mother for the duration, I was the only radiotherapy patient who actually put on weight during the treatment!

As the diagnosis begun to sink in a little more, I was reminded of our Jewish prayer for healing that we say in the synagogue every week. The traditional version of the prayer, that has been said in this way for many hundreds of years, asks God for a *refuah sh'leymah, refuat hanefesh oo'r'fuat hagoof- a complete healing, a healing of soul and of body.*

The rabbinic liturgy of healing is so interesting, because it doesn't ask us for cure, but rather for a *refuah sh'leymah, a complete healing.* I was fortunate, because my cancer wasn't life-threatening, but for quite a number of people, that healing may be to be spiritually ready to leave this world for the next. The Jewish model for this is Moses, who according to Deuteronomy dies in the land of Moab, 'by the mouth of God.' The Talmud in Sanhedrin 45a describes what this means, '*mitah n'shikah-*' death by the kiss of God, in other words, a gentle and pain free death. That sort of death is not always possible of course, but it can be a great gift born of the cooperation between a family and the whole medical team. A death that allows the person time to say goodbye, to be empowered to make decisions about their own treatment, and when they have had enough to say so and be heard is indeed a great gift. It takes courage and love and patience from the family, the community if they are part of one, and the whole medical team.

One of the great Jewish traditions that has helped several members of my own community is the idea of an ethical will. Interestingly a pioneer of this genre was Gluckel of Hameln, who lived in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, an early Jewish businesswoman who left a diary. In an ethical will, a person can leave letters for family members, as an expression of their love and hope for the future. I can think of a recent example where a letter allowed a man to die in peace, too young really, but with a sense that his beloved family would have the letter to hold onto once he was gone. Another wonderful man, who was brave enough to face the deterioration in his life that was leading only to death, wrote letters to all of his much loved family, full of love and hope for the future of which he would not be a part.

But what about the unfairness of early death? The anger at God and the world when a much loved young person, or God forbid a child, really isn't going to make it. That seems brutal and wrong and against the natural order of things. Rage is a natural reaction to the

unfolding tragedy, we feel somehow that it isn't fair, it shouldn't be, the medical team have to try something different, to pull the much loved individual back from the brink. One of the most unpalatable facts of our life on this beautiful earth is that it really isn't fair, the wicked sometimes do prosper and the good die young. There are lots of religious explanations for that, but in the moment of a final illness, it's really not what a family wants to hear. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a marvellous little book called 'When bad things happen to good people'. The book is dedicated to his son Aaron, who had the degenerative disease Progeria and died at the age of 14. During Aaron's sadly brief life, Rabbi Kushner learned that simplistic theology is not what a family in pain need when they are contemplating the death of a child. What they need is patience, love and presence, just to be there with them is the greatest gift a minister can give.

The Jewish tradition has a lovely image of the presence of God, what is called the *Shechinah*, hovering over the bed of the sick. The important part of this very feminine image, the word Shechinah is feminine in Hebrew, is that the beloved sick person is not alone; the presence of God is always, always, there. And so we have a whole new genre of Jewish prayers and poems that go along with that image of the presence of God hovering over the bed of the sick.

We have updated psalms that include prayers for the medical staff, the pharmacists, the chaplains, all of those on whose skill we depend so utterly when we are seriously ill. We have poems and prayers that can be used by the frightened, the atheist, those who need to express their disbelief, their horror, their fear of loss. For all of them, the beauty of words accompanies the beauty of companionship as they struggle with a cancer diagnosis and treatment.

One of the things I learned after my operation and when I was having radiotherapy was that the cancer patient most especially wants to be treated like themselves, an individual who is interested in the world, has a sense of humour, likes a joke, and not like a piece of bone china that may break when you look at it twice. I remember my twin sister, who had breast cancer some years ago, say that the thing she hated the most was people saying to her, in their most mournful tones 'how are you.?' It makes sick people quite cross because it takes away their individuality and they become 'just another cancer patient to be cared for.' I learned from her that of course every cancer patient is different, and some want to be left in peace, others to know every details of their treatment, but all want love and laughter and companionship and our presence in their lives.

That image of the Shechinah, the loving feminine presence of God holding the sick person in her arms is a very powerful one for me, because it is patient and unjudgemental, and allows the sick person to be as difficult and as uncommunicative as they might need to be at any particular time.

If you remember our Jewish prayer for healing, it asks for *Refuah Sh'leymah*, a complete healing, a healing of soul and body for the one who lies sick. And of course the inner process of healing, of going through that journey of cancer and its treatment, whether it leads to death or back to life, can help the patient deal with this life altering change in self-image.

Part of the Refuah Sh'leymah, the complete healing of body and soul that we pray for, is for the family and friends as well. It is so difficult to deal with a loved one with cancer, because of all your worries and fears and anger, not to mention the contemplation of your own mortality.

But presence, the image of the Shechinah over the bed of the sick person, can help with the healing of the family as well. Help them to use their gifts of love and creativity to help the person through the disease and out the other side, or perhaps to accompany them as they journey out of this world.

A loving presence is the most healing thing of all; it helps us through loss, whether it is the loss of health, the loss of our image of ourselves or the loss of life.

I pray that God the source of healing and the one who carries us through times of trouble and distress, will help and heal us, our loved ones, and those we care for at this time

Amen