

**Please! Heal! Please!**

(Numbers 12:1- 16, Genesis 28: 10-15)

We who mark time with ritual often overlay the experiences of the present with those of the past. As I ascend this pulpit today, I can't help but think back to the first time I climbed these steps, 11 years ago yesterday, as a candidate for the position of Associate Dean of Memorial Church. It's easy for me to mark the date, not only because I'd never before had to preach in a church to attain a position as a rabbi before, but also because, felicitously, it was March 17<sup>th</sup>, St. Patrick's Day. I remember commenting that it was a measure of Dean Gregg's tenacity and research skills that he managed to find a rabbi named Patricia to preach on St. Patrick's Day in Memorial Church! And yes, I wore green!

That year, as this, Christians were in the season of Lent and Jews were anticipating Passover, commemorating the Exodus from Egypt. I remember struggling with the question of whether to address your ritual calendar or mine, whether to speak about what Easter might mean to a Jew or what Passover might teach to Christians.

We were still living in Alameda, where I was the rabbi of a small, diverse congregation, and I remember that crowded around our Seder table on the first night of Passover that year were friends and visitors from all over the world. My husband had invited a Catholic friend, a Canadian doctor doing research at Stanford, and I was particularly grateful that he was at our table. Dan was battling Crohn's Disease, and in the previous three years, he had spent more time in the hospital than out of it. In fact, he had been released from the hospital only a few days earlier, making our celebration of liberation and freedom that much more literal. On that Seder night, as we often do, before we sang *Dayenu*, which means, "it would have been enough"--a litany that elaborates the gifts we have received from the Divine, I asked each of the participants at our table to offer a gift they felt God had given them. When it was Dan's turn to share the gift he felt grateful for, he quietly and simply offered -- "my health." He who struggled so valiantly to attain a modicum of normalcy—a ritual meal shared with friends—reminded those of us whose health was far more robust of what a gift good health is. Where we had seen the state of his health as a curse, he had found in it, an ever-present reminder of a blessing.

Like that night's Passover Seder, overflowing with ritual and story yet marked by a simple reminder of the gift that is good health, Numbers, the section from which today's reading is taken, overflows with complex ritual and detail yet ends with a struggle with illness. This section of Numbers describes the spectacle of the Tabernacle in the wilderness-- the lighting of ritual lamps, the purification and consecration of the Levites who accompanied ritual sacrifices with song, the elaboration of the Passover sacrifice itself, the carefully choreographed journey through the wilderness, the mutiny of meat, manna and quail that precipitated a plague for those led by their appetites. And

then, amidst this rich description, we arrive at today's text. Suddenly a story of sibling's secrets shared, Moses' siblings Miriam and Aaron challenge his leadership. As the story unfolds, Miriam experiences the sudden onset of a dread disease. Into these richly detailed and elaborate stories, we hear Moses' contrasting, austere, parsimonious plea on behalf of his sister. We can almost hear the concern and panic in his voice. "*El na r'fa na la.*" "O God, pray heal her!" (Numbers 12:13)

"*El na r'fa na la.*" "O God, pray heal her!" Five words. Eleven Hebrew letters are all that Moses speaks. "*El na r'fa na la.*" Except for God's name, "El"—each word ends in a vowel, as if each word were an unending cry. It is as if each word is punctuated with an exclamation point, the brevity of the syllables giving voice to the tortured helplessness of the supplicant. "*El na r'fa na la.*" Literally, "God! – Please! – Heal! – Please! – Her!" In the midst of catastrophe, the verb of consequence, the bull's eye of the prayer, is the central plea—heal! Indeed, Moses' plea is nearly a palindrome, reading the same forwards as it does backwards, homing in with laser precision on that most urgent desire—heal! This prayer has few words but much resonance. It is a primal cry, capturing fear, powerlessness, and incomprehensibility in the face of sudden illness, accident or injury. It is not the entreaty of the one beset by the catastrophe, but rather that of the witness, the powerless onlooker, the potential caregiver absorbing the shock, overwhelmed and stymied about how to help.

When illness, accident or injury comes to those we love, it is up to us, who are comparatively healthy and able, not only to beseech, but also to provide hope and healing. For the caregiver, there may be time only for truncated, hurried prayer, time only for stolen moments of naked cries and yearnings of hope. For the caregiver shouldering the burdens of action-- making comfortable, researching treatment, running interference with physicians, reporting news, calming fears—prayer is a stolen wave of calm in a sea of activity and responsiveness.

When one we love is in danger, not only our loved one, but we ourselves, also face darkness. According to Jewish tradition, the first person who prayed in darkness was young Jacob, on the eve of his exile from home. The Midrash describes the confluence of physical and metaphorical darkness this way. "God caused the sun to go down so as to speak to Jacob in private—like a king who calls for the light to be extinguished, as he wishes to speak to his friend in private."<sup>1</sup> So, too, the prayer of the caregiver is private, conspiratorial, hidden from the one who is the object of supplication, yet revealed to the Eternal One who can respond. We want to protect the one who is suffering from the compounded weight of the caregiver's distress. But in the darkness, it is safe to give voice to our fear of dreadful scenarios and the unknown. In the darkness, it is a relief to relinquish the weight of trying to hold up another's spirits, and to acknowledge that someone with far more power than we is the ultimate caregiver. In the darkness, it is possible to renew courage, to find new paths, to discover the equanimity essential to living with the terror of catastrophic illness, accident or injury.

Rabbi Zoe Klein helps to articulate the fear, the change in orientation, the wrenching desire for healing, in her poem, "A Prayer for a Cure for Cancer"

We are sometimes mistaken  
when we fear that which is big.

Godzilla, King Kong,  
Asteroid, Armageddon.

At least we can see it when it comes.

We are sometimes mistaken  
when we fear that which is big.

Change, birth,  
Death, love.

At least we can throw our arms wide around it.

God of big things,  
God of great deeds,  
God of the drama of the Exodus,  
the parting of the seas,  
the fire on the mountain,  
*the creation out of nothing,*  
we are wonderstruck by You,  
dazzled by big things.

But are You not also the God of the small,  
God of the turning leaf,  
God of the grain of sand,  
God of the passing shadow,  
God of the rotting fruit on the window sill?

I address You now  
As God of the small,  
because sometimes we are mistaken  
when we fear that which is big,  
when that which is most frightening of all,  
is small,

the size of a melanomic cell,

the size of a metastatic pinpoint,

the size of a golfball,

the size of a grapefruit

growing where there is no tree.

That immutable danger,

that makes us victims of our own  
Soft tissue, lymphnodes, and blood,  
that devastating fear  
that stalks us out of passing shadows,  
out of the mist of pesticide,  
tar, benzene, p.c.b. toxicities,  
out of the glow of gamma-rays, x-rays, ultraviolet rays, aluminum foil,  
out of the silicone, the tobacco, the skin of an apple,  
the high saturated fats, the low fiber,  
the vegetable hair dyes,  
out of nothing,  
    out of *nothing*.  
You are good at that God,  
*Creation out of nothing*.

I pray to You now, God of small things,  
God of miracles-barely-perceived  
by the naked, mortal eye,  
I pray to You now, God of small things,  
    for a spontaneous global remission.  
For erasure of that word that lurks darkly  
    behind our words.

When Moses' sister was struck,  
Moses spoke five small words to You.  
He said:  
*El na refa na lah*,  
God please heal her please.  
You answered, and You healed her.

*El na refa na lah*.  
*El na refa na lah*<sup>ii</sup>.

“God, please, heal, please.” In many traditions, and in many ways, we offer this plea. A mother, a medical sociologist, Alexandra Dundas Todd wrote a memoir of her son's treatment and recovery from brain cancer. She called it *Double Vision*. Dundas Todd begins with this reflection, “The Chinese word for crisis consists of two characters: danger and opportunity. When my son, Drew, a senior in college, was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer bordering his brain, the danger was clear; the opportunity was less apparent. Danger flashed through our lives daily, while opportunities lay waiting in murky waters, to emerge only tentatively. Family closeness, the ability to savor each moment, to find strength and courage where we didn't know they existed, to discover new methods of treatment that complemented all the surgeries and radiation and eased both body and mind, all contributed to making the unbearable bearable, turning an assault into a challenge.”<sup>iii</sup>

It does, indeed, take double vision to see both blessing and curse, to picture opportunity amidst danger. Courage grows through hope, through the willingness to look for unknown possibilities and to grasp them, through refusing to see only danger in darkness when its counterpart, opportunity, is waiting in the shadows. The prayer of the caregiver, the cry of the distraught parent, the reassuring whisper of the loving spouse, can help to wrest some measure of opportunity out of danger.

*El na r'fa na la.* In its simplicity and raw clarity, this plea for healing recognizes that more than double vision, the vision of the Divine is immeasurable; the capacity of the Healer is limitless. In response to Moses' prayer, God reveals the duration and resolution of Miriam's disease. In this case, the fortunate loved ones have only to wait out a time of quarantine, reassured that her health will be restored. Yet in anticipating her recovery and return, the Bible conveys a truth well known to the loved ones of someone contending with affliction and crisis-- "*V'haam lo nasa ad heasef Miriam*" "and the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted." (Numbers 12:15) Life does not go on with any sense of normalcy or progression while one we love is endangered; the caregiver's attention and effort revolves around the one who is stricken. Time and space are altered. The yearning for healing expands to fill both.

"*V'haam lo nasa ad heasef Miriam*" "and the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted." (Numbers 12:15) The isolation of illness, the fear of the dark uncertainty calls forth the need for community. For those to bring meals, provide transportation and do laundry; for those to report the news of treatments and carry back the hopes and prayers of those waiting to hear. Perhaps understanding how easy it is to feel alone and isolated, exiled in what Rabbi Rachel Cowan calls, "the kingdom of the sick", Jewish tradition reminds us of a particular obligation. Visiting the sick is one of the "*devarim sh'ain lahem shiur*" the obligations without measure, and we are encouraged to do so with the promise that each visitor takes away one-sixtieth of the illness (Nedarim 39b). It is not the arithmetic, as a smart student will counter, that then all you need is 60 visitors to make someone well. It is rather that we need one another; we need community more when we are contending with ill health than when we are blessed with good health. We need community to dispel the darkness and the fears. A visitor can brighten the dark weight of uncertainty for one who is ill. A visitor can offer the caregivers a brief respite, a moment of fear eased. We need community to provide us with hope and healing. We need those who have been in the hospital to be at our tables in celebration.

*El na r'fa na la.* What do these 5 simple words teach? Our present rituals may not be as formulaic as those described concerning the Tabernacle in the Book of Numbers; our contemporary prayers of healing may have become longer and more specific; our community's embrace may be driven more by Palm Pilots than casual meetings beneath a palm tree; our modern understanding of treatment may be more nuanced and comprehensive, but nevertheless, Moses' wisdom abides. The essence of what we seek is still found in Moses' direct and eternal plea. *El na r'fa na la.* God! Please! Heal! Please! Her! Let us pray for healing as we embrace those in our midst in

need of healing. Mi Shaberach avotenu Avraham, yitzcak v'yaakov, v'imahotenu, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel v'leah, Hu yivarch v'yirapeh et ha holim. "May the One who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah bless all those who are ill. May the Holy One blessed be God, be filled with compassion for them, for supporting them and for healing them. May God send them for a complete healing—a healing of the body and a healing of the spirit, along with all others who are stricken. May healing come soon. And let us say, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *B'reishit Rabbah* 68:10

<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Zoë Klein's, "A Prayer for a Cure for Cancer", *CCAR Journal*, Winter 2001.

<sup>iii</sup> Alexandra Dundas Todd, *Double Vision: An East-West Collaboration for Coping with Cancer*, (Hanover, University Press of New England, Wesleyan University Press, 1994), xiii.