

Rabbi Joel Rembaum, Rosh Hashanah 2008

The Power to Heal

I want to talk to you about the Jewish year that just ended, 5768. For me 5768 was a year of challengingly contradictory experiences and emotions. It was a year filled with much joy and satisfaction. Our family celebrated the marriage of our daughter Nomi to Yisrael, and we danced the *Muzhinka* – a celebratory dance honoring parents when they marry off the last of their children. Thank God, the kids and grandkids in Israel, Denver and LA are all doing fine, and all four households are Jewish homes in which Fredi and I can eat kosher food and fully celebrate our Jewish heritage. Mom is still with us and will be 94 at the end of October, Baruch Hashem.

As your rabbi, I continue to feel great satisfaction serving this wonderful congregation, and I look forward to the coming year as one of continued spiritual enrichment and growth for us all. 5768 saw The Pressman Academy booming, our youth programs as dynamic as ever, and TBA members of all ages learning, praying and doing mitzvot in more ways than before. I miss Rabbi Netter and Hazzan Lipton. But we have a great team of lay leaders and professionals here at Beth Am, and we are supremely optimistic that the future will hold amazing opportunities for new rabbinic leadership to move our community to even higher levels of accomplishment and fulfillment. I am blessed by being able to serve God and you, and I thank the Almighty and you from the bottom of my heart.

At the same time, in 5768 I felt as if a dark cloud were hanging over my head that was getting darker with each passing day. News of horrible events from around the world bombarded us constantly, reminding us of human beings' penchant for inhuman behavior and of our disregard for living in harmony with others and with the natural world of which we are a part. We were reminded that, more than ever, we are one world, and a catastrophic mistake in one part of the world has repercussions and increases human suffering elsewhere.

The darkness of my cloud became more intense this past July – less than three months ago, in the summertime when the living is supposed to be easy. In the span of three weeks, members of our Beth Am family lost four loved ones, all of whom were in their 50's. One was a man who died from a massive heart attack, and three were women who died of various forms of cancer. Each of the deceased was, in her or his own special way, a person who was devoted to giving freely of her or his love, energy and time to family, friends and community. They were good people, creative people and beloved by many. Their deaths were great tragedies, and they came one after the other, like a series of tsunamis sweeping over us.

This is the 21st century, and we expect to continually witness major strides in the prevention and treatment of disease. We expect people to live into their 80's, so when they are taken from us in their 50's we are left groping for answers to unanswerable questions. In July we witnessed parents burying children, which is a reversal of the

natural order and one of life's most painful experiences. We witnessed spouses left bereft of partners with whom so many hopes and plans were yet to be realized. We witnessed children in their teens, and younger, left with one of the anchors of their lives torn away. We witnessed the pain of friends who lost cherished companions and who suddenly were made aware of their own mortality. So the cloud over my head became darker.

It is normal under such circumstances to become angry at God. In July this was expressed to me in very blunt terms. But that was soon after the deaths had occurred, and our Sages teach us that we should not try to comfort the bereaved while the deceased still lie before them; so I simply affirmed the legitimacy of the anger and did not try to offer an explanation. But time has passed, and I want to address that anger with you now and share with you some insights I found helpful in the hope that you may find them helpful, too.

We believe in one God, one Creator, so we have to hold God accountable for everything. As I noted last Yom Kippur, our tradition teaches us that God did not create a perfect world. In the weekday *Amidah* we pray: *R'fa' einu adonai v'neirafei*, "heal us Adonai and we will be healed," and the prayer concludes with a reference to God as *rofei holei amo yisrael*, "the Healer of the infirm of His people Israel." The prayer presumes there is sickness in the world, be it physical or spiritual. Why? How did it get there? God, the Creator, made a world in which there is sickness that causes untold amounts of pain, suffering and death. The Rabbis teach us, however, that before God brings about a

makkah, a plague – a horrible illness – He prepares the *r'fuah*, the antidote. It then becomes our job, individually and collectively, as God's partners in creation, to apply the medicine. If we fail to do so, then we suffer the consequences of our failure.

These ideas, formulated two millennia ago, can be translated into more contemporary terms in this way: God's influence in the world can be recognized by the presence of powerful principles – not merely laws of nature – call them laws of existential being, potentialities we mortals can access to improve life on our little blue planet. One of these potentialities is the power to heal. It is a gift from God to help us manage and even overcome the evil of sickness and disease. If we put our minds to tapping the power, we can cure diseases.

Why is the average lifespan in North America today 79 years, whereas fifty years ago it was 69 years? Because we have made progress in tapping into the power to heal. That progress has been and remains incremental, and to some degree, aspects of it will always be that way. But, one has to ponder the following: If the proportions of medical research were to increase exponentially, wouldn't progress in fighting disease move at a faster pace? Wouldn't the breakthroughs for which so many sick people are waiting, that we are told are right around the corner, come more quickly?

One measure of how highly humankind prioritizes healing and medical research is the amount of money we allocate to this sacred endeavor as compared to other priorities. So, with no political insinuations intended, let us compare the amount of money that is

projected to be spent in the USA in 2008 for medical research with the amount we will spend on military defense. It is estimated that the total amount we will spend on medical research in 2008 will be something under \$120 billion, of which \$29 billion will be from the US government. That is a rather handsome sum. The 2008 USA Department of Defense regular budget, however, is \$481 billion, and we have to add to that \$142 billion for GWOT, the Global War on Terror, which includes funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This totals \$623 billion. The ratio of the medical research budget to the defense budget is 1 to 5. For every one dollar we spend on medical research we spend 5 dollars on defense.

Again, no political judgments are intended here. This is how our world operates. It is commonly held that a government's first priority is the defense of the country and the protection of its citizenry from its enemies. This is nothing new. How much money did the USA and the FSU pour down missile silos to fill them with nuclear-tipped rockets during the cold war? Imagine where we would be today with cancer treatment and prevention if the greater proportion of all these funds were spent on cancer research. So I say to the loved ones of the four dear souls who were taken from us in July: If you need to point a finger of blame for the death of your child, spouse, parent, sibling or friend, start by pointing it earthward, not heavenward. Humankind has yet to learn that disease is a greater enemy than an army, and its defeat ought to become the greater priority.

While this redirecting of blame may have implications for the future, it does not bring back the dear departed whom we have lost, nor does it heal the emotional pain of the

mourners, nor does it wipe away their tears. Where, then, can we look for the healing and the faith we need when confronted by such tragedies?

The answer is hidden in plain sight. It is present in the souls of people who touch us and who mentor us by showing us how to find and access the power of healing that God has placed in the world. I know families who have lost small children who found comfort by learning to appreciate the healing power in the love and care they received from family, close friends and community members who reached out to them in their hour of need. These wonderful people taught the bereaved how to tap into the power of healing. They showed them how their faith in God as the Supreme Healer gave them the strength to be present when they heard the cries of anguish. The bereaved, in turn, became spiritual mentors for others. Witnessing this miracle of healing affirmed my belief in God's gift of healing – not just physical healing, but spiritual healing and emotional healing – and filled me with hope.

I saw the healing emerge in July. I saw caring people surround the bereaved families with love, compassion and empathy. I saw the power at work in the stories people told about how the deceased, even as they were coping with their own illnesses, reached out to try to heal others who were in pain. I saw the power at work in the food that was prepared in countless kitchens and brought to the homes of the mourners. I saw it in the congregations that gathered for the Shivah minyans, in the tears that were shed by friends, in the moments of remembering that were shared, in the embraces and the kisses that were showered on the families that suffered these tragic losses and in the efforts of

members of the bereaved families to try to comfort friends who were grieving. I saw it in the words expressed at funerals by children who spoke lovingly of the parents taken from them. The psalmist tells us that God is the Healer of shattered hearts, *ha rofei l'shvurei lev*. Well, I can tell you that I saw a lot of angels sharing the Divine power to heal shattered hearts during those dark days of July, and as dark as that period was for me and for others, I saw rays of light, the light of healing, penetrating the darkness. May the four families who shared sorrow in July feel the warmth and bask in the glow of that light. May they continue to find comfort, and may they not have to face such tragedies again. May we all see the day when no one has to face such tragedies.

Two months earlier, in May, Fredi and I were in Israel, and, in addition to being with our kids, we visited the Chaim Sheba Medical Center in Tel Aviv for the dedication of the Sigi & Marilyn Ziering National Center for Newborn Screening. Our dear friend Marilyn and her family have provided major funding for the Center through their foundation. That funding will help ensure that every child born in Israel, regardless of religion or ethnicity, will be screened by the Center for a variety of treatable genetic diseases and, if found to test positive, will immediately receive treatment and be cured. Once again, because of people like Marilyn, who help us tap into God's gift of healing, I continue to believe that God is in the world, waiting patiently for us to partner with him.

Because Mom will soon be 94, on the same day that Rabbi Jack will be 89, because Ann Miller and her sister, Rose Pilch, and Lou Colen, and Helen Ziman are all in their 90's I believe that God is present among us with His power to heal. And, I believe we –

humankind – will, one day, choose wisely, to become God’s *full* partners and eradicate scourges like cancer and heart disease and Alzheimer’s, and Parkinson’s, and bipolar disorder and all the others.

So, in certain respects, the cloud that hangs over my head did grow darker during 5768. But I focused on God, on the potentiality for healing and other potentialities – peace, cooperation, creativity, beauty, love, and countless others – that God has planted in our world. And, I focused on the good people who are God’s angels, who actualize the potentialities and bring about the healing, and light began to break through.

It takes effort to recognize all of this goodness and blessing, because the cloud can be dark like the clouds of Noah’s flood, and the noise of the evil can be very loud, just like the noise of Sodom and Gomorrah that reached all the way to heaven. But the world is filled with love, light and beauty, and we have to recognize and appreciate these blessings from God. If we can accomplish this, we can strengthen our resolve to partner with God and grow the light and make the cloud go away. Then, we, like God at the end of His creation, can say of our world: *V’hinei tov m’od*, “behold, it is **very good**.”

May you and yours and all of God’s creation have a 5769 that is *tov m’od*, **very good**.

L’shanah tovah tikateivu.