

Pray and Mean It is an occasional listserv – every 2 to 3 weeks. Its aim is to build an understanding of and connection to Jewish prayer step by step. It is administered through googlegroups. (Your inclusion in this group is confidential. I am the only person who has access to the names and e-mail addresses on the list.) People who wish to be added to the listserv may visit the googlegroups site or e-mail me at CantorJC@aol.com. All postings can be viewed with clear legible Hebrew at my synagogue's website, www.tiferethisrael.org You are welcome to share this with others who might find it interesting or valuable. Recipients will NOT be able to respond to the entire list, but may correspond with me.

Thanks and best wishes – Cantor Jack Chomsky, Congregation Tifereth Israel, Columbus Ohio

Pray and Mean It 14

This is the 14th installment in this series.

Returning to one of the central ideas of this project, we have sought to examine individual prayers with an eye toward the notion that each one would itself be sufficient as a daily conversation with the Creator. Of course our goal is to build the practice of reciting more and more of the service -- but we will rarely encounter a passage so obviously worthwhile as the next b'rachah -- *r'faeinu* -- the prayer for healing.

R'faeinu Adonai v'neirafei

רְפְּאֵנוּ ה' וְנִרְפָּא,

Hoshieinu v'nivasheiah

הוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ וְנִשְׁעָה,

Ki t'hilateinu Atah

כִּי תִהְלַתֵּנוּ אַתָּה,

V'ha-aleih r'fuah sh'leimah l'chol makoteinu. וְהַעֲלֵה רְפוּאָה שְׁלֵמָה לְכֹל מַכּוֹתֵינוּ.

Ki el melech rofei ne-eman v'rachaman atah. כִּי אֱ-ל מֶלֶךְ רוֹפֵא נֶאֱמָן וְרַחֲמָן אַתָּה.

Baruch Atah Adonai

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'

Rofei cholei amo yisrael.

רוֹפֵא חוֹלֵי עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Heal us, Adonai, and we shall be healed;
save us and we shall be saved; for You are our glory.
Raise up perfect healing from all our hurts;
because You, King, are a faithful and merciful Healer.
Praised are You, Adonai,
Healer of the sick among the people Israel.

One of my great concerns in looking out at the people who come to services on an occasional Shabbat is that they might come with a particular need, a particular concern or worry, and open the prayer book only to find the matter seemingly unaddressed, because Shabbat prayer (mostly) excludes the petitionary, and heaps praise after praise after praise upon God.

Naturally, health is at or near the top of the list of concerns that people bring with them -- concern for one's own health and concern for others in our lives for whom we care deeply. A firm connection to this life-threatening issue is to be found in this b'rachah that appears in the Amidah each day -- *except* Shabbat.

This prayer serves us in at least two ways. One is that it provides a language and ritual for us to ask for healing for ourselves. When someone asks you “how are you?” and you reply “fine” when that’s *not* the case, you know how you are cheating yourself out of deeper human contact. So being able to say “heal us” when we ourselves are hurting is a step in the right direction.

The act of healing is one of the most remarkable things that God has given to us. Ultimately, a time comes in all our lives when we will *not* be able to heal -- where we will ultimately reach the end of our days. Yet if we are cognizant of the many times that we *have* healed or been healed successfully over the course of our lives, the prayer will still have meaning.

I find myself always thinking of a toaster in this context: once my toaster breaks, it will never get better -- although someone might come along and repair it (-- less and less likely in this day and age!). Yet if we cut or bruise ourselves, our body has the capacity to heal itself. If we get a headache or cold, it will eventually go away. Even when our heart breaks, it can be re-formed. Isn’t this sort of God-given capacity worth reciting a *b’rachah*?!

Even more powerful than contemplating our own healing, though, is the opportunity to pray for the healing of others. I find the regular recitation of this prayer an opportunity to specifically remember loved ones who need healing. I can even say their names -- in Hebrew or in English -- using the formula shown below, adding this passage after the words *l’chol makoteinu* above.

וַיְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ
ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ וְאֱ-לֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ
שֶׁתְּשַׁלַּח מִהֵרָה רְפוּאָה שְׁלֵמָה מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם
רְפוּאָת הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְרְפוּאָת הַגּוּף לְ _____
בְּתוֹךְ שְׂאֵר חוּלֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

*Vihi ratzon milfanecha
Adonai Eloheinu Velohei Avoteinu
Shetishlach m’heirah r’fuah sh’leimah min hashamayim
R’fuat hanefesh u-r’fuat haguf l’ _____
B’toch sh’ar cholei yisrael.*

May it be thy will, O Lord our God, and God of our fathers, speedily to send a perfect healing from heaven, a healing of soul and body unto the sick...among the other sick of Israel.]

It is customary to use the Hebrew name of the “patient” and his or her mother -- with the idea that God is somehow more merciful when we invoke the name of the mother. I advocate using the father as well where possible.

These prayers can really work -- and not necessarily in mysterious ways. For me, the paragraph where I insert the names of people I’m praying for helps to remind me that I ought to visit them or call them and find out how they’re doing. (I only wish I did a much better job of doing this.) Visiting the sick, being supportive of them, listening to them -- these are simple tasks with miraculous power.

Some say that there's scientific evidence that people who are being prayed for do better than people who aren't being prayed for -- even if they are unaware. Others say that there *isn't* evidence like this. I say -- I don't really care which way the science breaks on the question -- praying for people is a beautiful and meaningful idea.

A note on the origin of the phrase **רפאנו ה' ונרפא** etc. This is a somewhat modified quote of Jeremiah 17:14 -- **רפאני ה' וארפא הושיעני ואושעה כי תהלתי אתה** -- "Heal me Adonai and I will be healed, Save me and I will be saved, for You are my glory." Jeremiah speaks to a *people* in the singular. Our prayers speak to us *individually* in *plural*. Were we to intone this prayer in the singular only, it would or could be a selfish statement. Yet by praying it in the plural, we are better prepared to call on God for healing for ourselves as individuals, for those for whom we specifically pray, and for all those who are ailing.

This suggests a remarkable dynamic -- that by praying for others, we are somehow in a better position to pray for ourselves.

If you wish to respond, you may e-mail me at CantorJC@aol.com.