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Introduction to Jewish Healing

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At age 51 my friend Paul, a moderately observant Jew, lost his father who died suddenly of a heart condition. Their relationship was imperfect, but Paul accepted his father for who he was and came to appreciate the man who, as a physician, taught him to value relationships with others. One day Paul noticed that he began to view two of the many Jewish burial and mourning customs -- shiva and saying Kaddish every day -- in a wholly new way. He came to regard his experience with death as a way of becoming centered, a process wherein he could examine his path in life and find meaning from what he had previously termed the worst emotional pain he'd experienced in his entire life. As we spoke, we realized that these traditions gave him the means to heal.

A midrash is a teaching story for elucidating biblical writings, similar to a homily. There's an old midrash that teaches when God created the world He told Adam and Eve that His work was finished and that they and their descendants were to be His partners in the future maintaining and repairing the world. Hence was born the tradition of *tikkun olam* (Heb., repairing the world). We understand our mission in the physical world is to create an abode for the Almighty which can only happen when there is sufficient sanctity in the universe so that it becomes appealing and acceptable to God. Perfecting the world is the ultimate goal because it will bring more holiness and with it a reunification with God. Each of us has a responsibility for making corrections within ourselves as individuals because as we improve ourselves, we make tiny improvements in the world. And we also get the benefit of becoming elevated spiritually.

Spiritual healing occurs as the byproduct of attaching oneself to the Almighty through following commandments and reaching higher levels of spiritual experience (Spiegler, 2006). It is healing that is predicated on the belief that one should follow mitzvot as closely as possible in daily life. In Jewish writings it is spoken of as accepting the yoke of Heaven, which involves

humility, or a nullification of self, referred to as *bitul hayesh*. That is, one's ego is an obstacle to fully connecting with God. When this humility is achieved, one may be ultimately rewarded by following the holy commandments only out of a sense of obedience because of a love for God, not when there is an expectation of reward. In this regard it is contrary to secular thought about human nature and the laws of learning and conditioning. Performing a mitzvah is its own reward as we are taught that one receives Divine blessing for performing this act. Further, if one has an ulterior motive to be rewarded, then reward in the Hereafter shall not be forthcoming. Desire for reward, whether material or otherwise, comes from a lower level of consciousness, the animal soul as opposed to the aspect of soul that appeals to what is right and proper in the eyes of the Almighty. Contrast this with the position commonly held by modern psychologists that people behave primarily because they either expect to receive a payoff or to avoid some negative consequence.

Spirituality is known to all cultures. Bradford Keeney (2010) eloquently describes the pure joy in directly experiencing the Divine among the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert. While seeming heretical, contemporary anthropologists and linguists have identified these African people as perhaps representing the epicenter of humanity's beginning, suggesting they are our common ancestors. Consequently, their spiritual practices are likely the progenitor of all spiritual practice. Their practice of self-deprecation and rhythmic movements as the mode of tracking God elicits images of a thread connected to other spiritual endeavors.

Modern Christian theologian Gregory Knox Jones (2001) teaches that accepting the world on its terms is essential to coping with adversity in his charming book *Play the Ball Where the Monkey Drops It: Why We Suffer and How We can Hope*. As a practicing Presbyterian minister his experiences in assisting his congregants come to terms with the bitter hands life has dealt them led him to conclude the most meaningful way to cope and heal from tragedies begins with letting go of self and selfishness and find a means to transcend its limitations. We also see the Chinese practice of *qigong* in which breathing, movement and awareness are aligned to achieve an intrinsic energy balance that produces a higher spirituality. And we can point to the spiritual practices of the Sufis, a sect of mystical Islam, and the trance dancing of aboriginal peoples in South America and Indonesia as practices that forces people to get out of their left brain dominated consciousness and have a more direct experience of the Divine. From

a Jewish perspective these practices go beyond the swaying often seen among synagogue worshippers lost in prayer and are more on point with the fervent dancing at Simchat Torah celebrations of Chassidim drunk on the joy of Torah... and sometimes vodka as well. So it begs the questions what is Jewish spirituality, and how do spiritual practices aid in achieving Jewish healing?

A host of sources within Torah, Talmud and midrashim provide some glimpses into the beginning of the discussion (Bialik & Ravnitzky, 1992). In Parasha Tazria (Lev.13:1-59) we read about Miriam, sister of Moses Rabbeinu, who spoke ill of her brother, for which she received a Divine punishment. Thus, we are taught that those who engage in *lashon hara*, literally evil tongue, referring to gossip and slander, are afflicted with *tzara-at* a condition typified by white patches of skin. Someone who suspects skin discoloration may be the dreaded *tzara-at* is required to go to the *Kohein*, or priest, for a confirmation of the diagnosis. If confirmed, the afflicted person must go through an elaborate and peculiar ritual to be cured. Because the etiology of the condition is purely spiritual, one can only become affected through a violation of a spiritual law. And the Torah goes into great detail describing the state of *tammei*, or spiritual impurity, and the way it is to be eradicated. Here we get an insight into the importance of ritual in bringing about healing. While the symptoms may be physical, the healing is spiritual.

The explanation for why someone becomes afflicted with *tzara-at* is fundamental to the understanding of Jewish healing. The sin for which there is spiritual punishment due to one violating a commandment. In Jewish thought it is the commandments that keep people close to God. The more one observes mitzvot, the more this person is in tune with Divine energies, and the more wholeness there is. A fracture in the relationship with God results in a kind of spiritual brokenness. That is, a departure from the nullified self that is attached to God. It is this aspect of human experience that must be healed. All of life is attuned to the Divine in its normal state. Like a violin, when we go out of tune something is obviously askew. Healing is a term that may be likened to correcting the tuning. When we get in tune life plays us beautifully, as we have a bond with the Almighty.

In Chassidic times, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we find elucidation of healing ills by mystics who were simultaneously revered as holy men and vilified as charlatans. A favorite story about healing involves the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Chassidic movement, who was widely known throughout Eastern Europe as a healer.

The teenaged daughter of a wealthy Jewish merchant in Vienna suddenly suffered paralysis in her legs. She was taken to all the best doctors to no avail. The distraught parents brought her all over Europe but no cure could be found. While lodging at an inn a distant city, the father listened to the ramblings of some Jewish peasants who told of miracle cures by Baal Shem Tov. Of course he thought it was foolishness and like most observant Jews at the time did not believe in miracles or miracle workers whom he understood just preyed on the simple folk and took advantage of their ignorance. Having exhausted all other avenues of relief he decided to give it a try and traveled far away to the town of Mezibush, deep in the Carpathian mountains.

After weeks of difficult travel he arrived and found where the Baal Shem Tov lived. Having grown more skeptical he decided he would just go in, ask for a blessing for his daughter, and leave. He wrote out a note asking for a blessing for healing and a wish for a long and happy life. After hours of waiting he was escorted in to see the rebbe, who was seated behind his desk. After what seemed like a long time the rebbe finally glanced up from the open book on his desk and cleared his throat. The wealthy man could barely hide his contempt as he placed a bag of gold coins on the rebbe's desk. "Here, I thought you could use this." Then he handed the rebbe the note and the rebbe made a generic blessing for a healing and good life. As he finished the rebbe picked up the bag of gold coins and tossed them out an open window saying "To tell you the truth I don't really have a need for this money."

The wealthy man was shocked and disgusted at what he'd just experienced. He hurried down the stairs to the courtyard and his carriage where his daughter was waiting. As he arrived he was startled to see his daughter jump down from the carriage and scurry about the courtyard picking up gold coins. "Quick, get back in the carriage," shouted the man to his daughter as he pointed up to the window where the Baal Shem Tov stood smiling "I don't want him to think he was the one who healed you."

In his comprehensive volume, *Jewish Spiritual Practices* (1990), my teacher and mentor, Maggid Yitzhak Buxbaum, extensively catalogs the myriad approaches Jews have developed for attaching themselves to the Almighty. In Hebrew they are known as *hanhagot*, and go beyond mitzvot; they are expressions of personal piety. They are intended as ways of enhancing one's spirituality. Healing implies that something is broken. Rabbi Elimelech Lamdan's concept of Torah therapy (2006) touches on spiritual healing, and while interesting

falls short as it is not truly a kind of Jewish healing and instead attempts to deliver a spiritual effect through the vehicle of psychotherapy. As with techniques for advancing spirituality, Jewish methods for healing are numerous. We need a variety of approaches because we are not all the same. And at different times we need different methods that allow us to heal the brokenness. In this volume, a variety of approaches for a uniquely Jewish expression of healing have been assembled. Consider them a starting point for further self-exploration and repair of our personal paths in life. As we take it upon ourselves to make corrections and adjustments these are counted as our own contribution to repairing the world and raising the level of holiness. And thus the world is a little better because we were in it. In so doing we create a better place for other human beings and a place that is truly suited to be a home for the Almighty.

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The Healing Aspects of Jewish Beliefs and Mourning Rituals

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In his 1789 letter to Jean Baptiste Leroy, Benjamin Franklin famously said “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” We’d like to offer a slight modification. One is not obligated to pay taxes if willing to suffer the alternative; a prison sentence, which is almost guaranteed. Thus, the only thing that is certain is death; our own and our loved ones’. Inasmuch as we all must deal with the inevitable vicissitudes of life we explore what Judaism has to contribute to restoring emotional balance and producing personal growth when addressing grief and mourning. In this chapter we identify some of the essential tasks to be accomplished in order to heal and grow to integrate loss through death and indicate how Judaism fosters completion of these tasks. We prefer using stories since they often allow us to achieve a deeper understanding of complex ideas with an economy of words.

Appropriate expressions of grief and sadness

A 36 year-old woman was referred to a psychiatrist for headaches that were unresponsive to standard treatment. Originally trained as an osteopathic physician, the psychiatrist planned to do cranial massage but took a history prior to initiating treatment. The woman, who was not Jewish, indicated that she had suffered from headaches for many years. The psychiatrist inquired about family history and was informed that the patient’s mother died when she was five years old and had two younger siblings. The psychiatrist commented that the patient must have had a rough time coping. The patient revealed that she had never cried or mourned her loss. She was not permitted as she had to be strong for her sisters. The patient immediately realized something was askew and began to weep and wail uncontrollably. She stopped after five minutes. Her headache was gone and she was never again bothered by them.

In Jewish tradition when a loved one dies, grief, sadness, anger, disappointment, and discouragement are all anticipated as likely reactions. Their expression is recognized as necessary to eventual healing and renewal of one's spirituality. Consequently, this story is less likely to be about someone who is Jewish and had the experience of growing up exposed to Jewish rituals and traditions. *Minhagim*, or customs, that have been developed for coping with death and mourning in Judaism have adaptive value that is rarely questioned, even by the less observant. When questions arise they tend to be of the “how” nature rather than “why.” It appears that over the centuries we’ve perfected an effective system for allowing

members of the Jewish community to cope effectively with loss and recover our steps on the path of life.

At age 18 Sandi lost her older brother to an overdose of a street drug, while he was away from home at college. The family was shocked and devastated by the loss. She knew about Jewish mourning practices and was told that Ashkenazi Jews generally do not visit a grave prior to unveiling of the headstone. Her uncle was a congregational rabbi in another state and had officiated at the funeral. Sandi ignored the admonition to refrain from going to the cemetery and regularly visited her brother's burial site, where she'd sit for hours and cry or commiserate with a sympathetic friend she'd brought along. Her overwhelming sense of grief was confirmed on her Facebook page where she'd make comments about her emotional pain, speak to her deceased brother, and talk about her continued use of mind altering substances as her way of coping. It's little wonder that after a year she continued to have difficulty adjusting to the loss.

Psychotherapists rarely see Jews who have not adequately mourned the loss of a loved one unless there are extenuating circumstances that prevented grief from being completed. The above anecdote about the woman with headaches, recently shared by a psychiatric colleague, points to the necessity of mourning not only as part of the healing process, but also serving a prophylactic purpose. Jewish rituals during mourning encourage crying. Rending of garments or the modern practice of wearing a black ribbon that's been cut externally symbolizes the torn heart of one who is in grief, and provides a concrete vehicle to physically express emotional grief.

When the ancient Jews developed the humane approach to caring for members of their community they had no way of knowing that emotional crying releases prolactin, which is produced by the body in times of stress and aids in its management. Crying eases emotional suffering and is the body's natural way of coping. Yet, when there is excessive emphasis on emotional pain outside the context of the process that takes the mourning forward the result can be remaining stuck rather than resolution.

Acceptance of Death

Baruch Dayan Emet, Blessed is the True Judge, are the Hebrew words we say immediately upon learning of someone's passing. It is the recognition that there are events that occur in our lives that are difficult to accept and perhaps impossible to fathom. In saying these words, we acknowledge God as Creator and Giver of life, Whose judgments we may not like, but nonetheless accept. This concept is reinforced by the words of the Yom Kippur *machzor* stating it is God's call to decide who shall live and who shall die, and by what means those chosen to die will meet their end. While it is our tradition to recognize that the hand of God is involved, we are simultaneously shocked, in disbelief, and sometimes even angry at God's decision. However,

acknowledging the role of God in our relationships in the first step to healing. Our tradition holds that all life is sacred. Preservation of life is so significant that one is required to break the laws of Shabbat in order to save a life. Similarly, one may even truncate or avoid a fast on Tisha B'Av, where the laws governing fasting are more stringent than those of Yom Kippur. A person with serious health problems is entitled to an exemption from a fast, and is often required not to fast. That individual is not judged harshly by the Heavenly Court.

Involvement with Community

The rituals we have for mourning are designed to strongly encourage, if not force the healing process on a mourner. There is comfort in knowing that others share in our pain as they themselves have gone through similar experiences. It is like we are being told "Yes, we have been in the same unspeakable place as you, and we have the collective wisdom gleaned over centuries to help you get through it." Once it is learned that a family member has passed away, grief is an expected and normal reaction and we know that each individual will respond in his or her unique way. Assistance may be necessary to make final arrangements, but the ritual mourning is not yet begun. Plans must first be made to care for the deceased, and these do not end until after the burial. For many Jews, even those who have not been particularly observant, it is common to insist on the presence of a *shomer*, or guardian, provided by members of a local chapter of the Jewish Burial Society. Those who volunteer for involvement in these organizations often do so for the pure merit of performing a *mitzvah shel emet*, as this is truly an act of kindness that cannot be repaid. A *shomer* remains with the body until the time of burial, reading Psalms aloud. The recitation of Psalms is a form of praying for the soul, thereby easing the soul's transition from the Earthly plane of existence to a higher one. It is further felt that the deceased would have wanted it this way, and thereby emphasizes a note of caring in the relationship with the deceased. This ritual, too, is comforting and therapeutic to the mourner(s). During the funeral we emphasize that the deceased is joining other members of *Klal Yisroel*, the Jewish people, and that death is essentially the next phase of life that is God's plan for all of us. The healing process begins at the funeral, where some, particularly Chassidic and Sephardic communities, have the custom of mourners asking *mechillah*, forgiveness, from the deceased, of any wrongdoings they may have committed toward their loved one during his or her lifetime. As part of the burial service, we have the tradition of placing dirt on the back of a shovel and then tossing it onto the coffin. This practice not only serves as a concrete reminder that our loved one is truly gone and will not be joining us in the

physical realm, but also symbolizes and acknowledges that our life is, like the shovel, "upside down", i.e., now thrown into chaos as a result of our loss. This has a cathartic effect on the bereaved. As the burial service ends, two lines are formed as the mourners pass through, with words of consolation offered. Here we see that the mourner is being assured that she or he is not alone, and that there is a supportive community in place for his or her needs.

Once we wash our hands to be purified of spiritual uncleanness, we enter the *shiva* home and formally begin the process of mourning. It is during this week of required mourning that we may freely cry and feel the pain of our loss. The community is obligated to visit the mourners, and its members bring foods and offer whatever expressions of consolation is appropriate. Visitors are discouraged from speaking to the mourner until the mourner speaks first, once again showing the psychological sensitivity to the mourner's heartbreak. All mirrors in the house are covered, with one reason being the avoidance of any temptation to be concerned with our physical appearance, since what is going on inside of us, i.e., our heart and our mind, is more important. We recite the *Mourner's Kaddish* three times a day to both praise and gain comfort from God. *Kaddish* is traditionally said in the presence of a *minyán*, a quorum of ten, thereby again showing the mourner(s) that she or he is not alone. It is also a time to direct our consciousness inward and reflect on our relationship with our loved one as we come to realize that our lives are forever changed, and contemplate ways in which our lives have been enriched by the presence of one who is no longer with us. We may replay these repeatedly in our minds with words and visual images that allow us to bring some closure, a psychological term meaning that we complete whatever unfinished issues we may have had with the deceased, such as giving or receiving forgiveness for imperfections, so common among family member. This task is eased somewhat if there had been a time for formal goodbyes when death was anticipated.

Shana had been married to Joe for nearly 35 years when he passed away. Joe contracted a treatable form of brain cancer and the two traveled periodically to a nationally known cancer treatment center where Joe received state-of-the-art care. Things were progressing, but follow-up care at home was required. Joe, who had returned to Jewish worship practice in his late 40s regularly attended services at a traditional shul. He was accepting of his health issues and trusted in a merciful God. One evening Joe started to complain of pain near the site of a shunt that was inserted for fluid drainage. Shana took him to a local hospital. Unfortunately, through a combination of neglect and unfamiliarity with the advanced treatment protocol, Joe died of a hemorrhage.

Shana was overcome with grief, as expected, but blamed herself for Joe's death because she felt she had not done enough to prevent the tragedy. After a few months she recognized continued guilt was impeding the mourning process and she sought counseling. Shortly thereafter, she reported having

unusual experiences. A smell she identified as associated with her late husband became noticeable in her bedroom at night. In fact, once her adult daughter came to visit and exclaimed, "That's Daddy's smell."

Shana was encouraged to remain open to this experience and soon reported that Joe would visit her in dreams. This was understood as spiritual visits from her late husband and it was explained as a common, but rarely spoken of, phenomenon. She was asked to try to recall the events of the dream and bring them in for discussion. A week later Shana reported that Joe came to her in a dream expressing his concern that she was not progressing and this was slowing his journey in the Hereafter until he knew that she was alright. He also told her that she had no culpability in his death and she should forgive herself. This led to profound insight and she was able to get closure and complete the mourning process in a reasonable amount of time.

Here we see that in the event there was no time to say goodbye, as when death is immanent, attaining psychological closure is still possible.

Hopefulness about the future

Among the many prisoners of the Inquisition on the island of Majorca was Rabbi Shimon. There were many Jews there who were often tortured because they clung to their belief in Torah.

At last, they were sentenced to death, for their captors recognized they'd never give up their faith. As they awaited the appointed day of their execution, some 30 days away, Rabbi Shimon began doing something very odd. He started to draw a picture of a ship on the cell wall.

Although he was not an artist, his fellow prisoners marveled at his skill. The ship was detailed, and precise, as if he's been an experienced sailor. Yet, he never set foot on a ship his entire life, except in shackles when he was brought to the island.

As the day of the execution grew near, the other prisoners watched him work carefully on the drawing. "Why are you making the drawing so exact?" one of them asked.

He answered, "I'm going to escape on this ship. Who wants to come with me?"

They all eagerly announced their willingness to join him, for they'd heard stories about Rabbi Shimon being a master of miracles.

Just before the drawing was completed Rabbi Shimon added himself and all the others. They were standing on deck, looking out to sea.

Everyone recognized himself. The resemblance was uncanny. Then, on the day of the execution, they heard the jailer's keys rattling as the lock was being opened. Rabbi Shimon announced "It's time to go." And with that he turned toward the ship and pronounced the Holy name.

At that instant they found themselves on the deck of a great ship in the middle of the ocean.

And they sailed away to safety and freedom.

Holding on to hope in the face of almost certain disaster is a historically Jewish way of viewing the world. The foundation of the belief is that miracles happen, and they often happen when there is a loving, accepting, uncritical faith in the Almighty. When

we lose a loved one, we recognize that the loss is not so much permanent as it is forever changed. Almost as if it is the next chapter in life, we might say that death is the next phase of life, defined as moving on to the wholly spiritual plane of existence.

As mentioned earlier, one reason we recite the *Mourner's Kaddish* is the hope that the loved one will receive rapid and benevolent treatment in the Heavenly Court and not be judged too harshly. We believe our loved one will find peace in the World to Come and that we will join him/her one day. Judaism also believes that all Jewish souls were present at Mount Sinai for the giving of the Torah. This includes previous generations, those who were not yet born, and those of potential converts. In other words, some souls were in bodies and some were not in bodies, but were spiritually present. This formed the basis of the mystical tenet that souls become embodied to achieve spiritual improvement and thus leads to the teaching that although someone may have died physically, their soul is eternal. This too is a belief that provides emotional comfort and healing to the bereaved.

Finding strength to go through life

One day a farmer's donkey fell down into a well. The animal cried piteously for hours as the farmer tried to figure out what to do.

Finally, he decided the animal was old, and the well needed to be covered up anyway; it just wasn't worth it to retrieve the donkey. He invited all his neighbors to come over and help him. They all grabbed a shovel and began to shovel dirt into the well.

At first, the donkey realized what was happening and cried horribly. Then, to everyone's amazement he quieted down. A few shovel loads later, the farmer finally looked down the well. He was astonished at what he saw. With each shovel of dirt that hit his back, the donkey was doing something amazing.

He would shake it off and take a step up. As the farmer's neighbors continued to shovel dirt on top of the animal, he would shake it off and take a step up. Pretty soon, everyone was amazed as the donkey stepped up over the edge of the well and happily trotted off.

We are born and we die. In between we are to live our lives focused on social relationships mostly distracted from our individuality. When faced with the loss of a loved one, we are reminded that despite community support, we have to rely on our own internal resources to live each day and find a sense of purpose and significance. Participating with communal activities allows us to find our way to our inner strengths irrespective of our level of observance prior to the loss.

Acceptance of Divine Providence

The Talmud tells us about Rabbi Nachum Ish Gamzu, who is called by this name because no matter what befell him, he always said: "This is also for the good". (in Hebrew: Ish Gamzu means the man (who says) this is also...). One of the most famous stories of the righteousness of Rabbi Nachum Ish Gamzu was when the sages of the time decided to send him to present the Emperor with a gift. He was chosen specifically because he was accustomed to miracles and they realized the possible hazards that faced a person on such a trip to Rome. He arrived at the Emperor's palace with a box of earth, and not with the jewels and precious stones with which he had set out -- because the owners of one of the inns where he stayed overnight decided to investigate what the box contained while he slept. When they discovered it was full of jewels, they emptied it, and replaced its previous contents with earth from their garden. When the Emperor found the box to contain nothing but earth, he had Nachum Ish Gamzu imprisoned. Nachum accepted this with his usual 'Gam zu le tovah' -- "This is also for the good". A miracle then occurred, in the form of a visit from Elijah the Prophet, who suggested to the Emperor that this might be special earth from Abraham, the father of the Jews, who, during the battle against the four kings, threw earth at them which turned into arrows. When the Emperor tried it out on an enemy army which he had previously found invincible, sure enough, the dirt turned into arrows, vanquishing the enemy the Emperor had so tried to conquer. The Emperor was thrilled, setting Nachum Ish Gamzu free, filled the same box Ish Gamzu had brought with jewels and precious stones, and sent him home with great honor. When the owners of the inn realized what had happened -- they demolished their house and brought the dust to the Emperor as a gift, thinking that all the earth on their property was special "miracle earth". But of course, nothing happened with the earth that they brought, and the Emperor had them executed for mocking him.

The notion that whatever happens in this world happens because it is Divine will is one of the traditional foundational beliefs in Judaism. Nothing happens unless God wills it to happen and God's actions are purposeful. When a person becomes ill, has an accident, or dies it is thought to be the result of Divine intention in the same way that natural disasters or the results of an election are. While this may initially lead one to become angry at God, the healing rituals coupled with community support serves to diminish this natural tendency, further assisting in the healing process.

Letting go and moving on

Rabbi Yaakov Landa was a chassid of the Rebbe Reshab, but not the usual type of chassid. The Rebbe took an unusual liking to him and even made him the 'House Rabbi.' Any questions that arouse in the household of the Rebbe; if a chicken was kosher, if something was permissible on Shabbat etc., would be directed to Rabbi Landa. And, needless to say, the devotion of Rabbi Landa to the Rebbe was boundless.

In addition to being a great Scholar, Rabbi Landa was a very knowledgeable man in mundane things as well and was an expert at home remedies. When the very contagious and deadly disease of typhus broke out in Russia near the turn of the century Rav Landa had ample opportunity to use his skills. The regular doctors, besides having virtually no treatment for typhus, were also understandably very reluctant to come in contact with the sick, while Rav Landa did have remedies and did not fear for himself when it came to saving others.

He succeeded in healing hundreds but it was almost inevitable that he eventually contracted the disease himself. In a matter of days he lost consciousness and his life was hanging in the balance for several weeks until the crisis finally passed and he came to. The only problem was that when he was sick and unconscious, the Rebbe Reshab passed away, unbeknownst to him.

Every day Rav Landa was taken from his room outside into the sun to get stronger, until after several more weeks he was back to his old self. Of course, all the time he was recovering he asked everyone that

passed by about the Rebbe's health, but the Chassidim agreed among themselves not mention a word to him about the Rebbe's passing. The answer was always the same: "the Rebbe is fine."

But Rabbi Landa sensed that something was wrong and kept asking until somehow he got the one person who did not know about this agreement, and he heard the bitter truth.

A normal person can understand what a terrible blow this must have been to him. A Rebbe is more than just a leader or even a father, the Rebbe virtually reveals the soul and true essence of the Chassid. But the relation between Rav Landa and the Rebbe Reshab was even deeper and more personal than that. Rav Landa had been near the Rebbe day and night and his life was virtually tied up with his.

That night Rabbi Landa wrote a short letter to the Rebbe. He folded the letter up, put it in an envelope, and the next morning when he was taken outside, he waited for the same man to pass, to whom he handed the letter and requested that he put it on the Rebbe's grave and tell no one about it.

In the letter he wrote that he wanted the Rebbe to take him away from this world. He wanted to be with the Rebbe because he felt that life was worth nothing without him. Two days later the Rebbe's son, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak (who became the Rebbe in his father's stead) came to visit Rabbi Landa. He pulled up a chair, sat next to his bed where he was laying in the sunlight, and said, "I just was by my father's grave and he gave me a message to give to you."

Rav Landa mustered all his strength, propped himself up on the bed and prepared himself for the Rebbe's message from 'beyond.' When the Rebbe's son saw Rav Landa was ready, he continued.

"My father said: 'Stop making stupid requests!'"

This story drives home the point that although it is often felt by the mourner that he or she wishes to "join" the loved one now deceased, Judaism's emphasis is on life and living, and the mourning customs and rituals have the purpose of reincorporating the grieving individual back into the community.

Renewal of faith in a benevolent God

Once there was a rabbi, a very good and pious man, who wanted to see justice in the world. But often it seemed to him that good people got punished and that bad, or undeserving people thrived and prospered. He thought long and hard but could find no answer.

One night while in his study Elijah the Prophet paid him a visit. Elijah said to him, "Tomorrow I wish to go out into the world and see if people are still hospitable the way Abraham, our father, taught us in the Torah. I want you to come with me. We'll disguise ourselves as filthy beggars and knock on doors. The only condition is that no matter what, you must only observe and not say anything."

The rabbi agreed and when morning came they set out on their journey. They came to a small village and stumbled upon a hovel that barely looked like anyone could live there. They knocked on the door and discovered a poor farmer who lived there with his wife and a cow. The cow provided them with milk they could sell and they eked out a meager living. The couple shared what little food they had and let their guests sleep on fresh straw they kept for the cow.

In the middle of the night the rabbi awoke to find Elijah outside whispering into the cow's ear.

They awoke in the morning to terrible crying. When the farmer's wife went to milk the cow she found it had died. She was beside herself and feared she and her husband would perish. The rabbi tried to console her saying she should trust in God. They left with her sobbing. Elijah looked at the rabbi and reminded him of his promise "No questions, remember."

They walked and walked and by evening they came to a town and heard joyous music and laughter. They found the source: a big brick house with servants scurrying about. They were told that the wealthy owner was having an engagement party for his daughter. The servants warned them not to disturb the wealthy man as he didn't like beggars under normal circumstances. They insisted. The wealthy man came out and yelled at them and threatened to have his servants throw them out. But they pleaded and the man let them stay in his stable just to get rid of them. He warned them not to show up at the party and certainly would give them no food.

So the rabbi and Elijah went to sleep hungry. When the rabbi awoke the next morning he found Elijah patching a hole in the wall. Elijah shushed the rabbi as he was about to ask why Elijah was making the repair. They didn't bother to tell the wealthy man they about the wall, they just left and headed back to the rabbi's home.

On the way Elijah said "I know you don't think it's fair that the poor couple's cow died and that I fixed that stingy man's wall, but let me explain."

"While the couple was sleeping I heard a noise outside. I went out and found the Angel of Death who had come to take the farmer's wife. I pleaded with him to leave the couple alone. But you know the Angel of Death doesn't go away empty handed. I convinced him to take the cow in her place and then I told the cow. I gave a blessing to the couple when we left, and at that very moment another cow was lost and making its way to their hut. I knew they would find it and take care of it and it, and it will provide a living for them."

As far as the stingy man, someone had hidden a jar of gold coins in the wall. If I did not patch it he would have found it himself. So now the gold will stay hidden until worthier person finds it. Also, the party for his daughter will not bring him luck. She is destined to die before her wedding and he will have bad fortune in business. He will end up as a beggar going from door to door asking for handouts."

And the rabbi said, "Now I understand about justice; there's more to it in God's world than meets the eye."

This story represents a basic belief about God. Whatever is done by God may be so complex that mere humans, with our limited capacity for understanding Divine will, are unable to decipher the significance of events. A woman received ongoing counseling as she was struggling with the death of her fifteen year old son, who died tragically through the negligence of the boy's step-father. She repeatedly wondered why her son was dead, and this man, whom she felt compelled to divorce, was allowed to remain alive. The step-father continued to be insensitive and tormented his ex-wife to the extent that her experience of the mourning process was interrupted and she was unable to heal and move on with life. She could not face the prospect of an unveiling and delayed the ritual for two and a half years. Finally, she felt marginally improved sufficiently to schedule the event. The above story was told during the unveiling ceremony and the next week she reported she felt that she understood the message but was enabled to understand what she needed to do to further her spiritual healing. Reaching a point where we can accept God's actions without necessarily understanding them allows us to attain a sense of calm. Surely our ancient sages could not have

known that the internal peacefulness and calm produced as acceptance and faith in our Creator grows has the effect of diminishing cortisol levels in the blood. Cortisol is a steroid hormone secreted by the adrenal gland that is accelerated during times of stress and has the destructive effect of suppressing immune system functioning. Or, to put it in other words, we have been created with a simple mechanism for reducing and managing stress. Our sages may not have understood the physiological processes, but knew the therapeutic end result of accepting God's will and judgments for healing.

Peace with our allotted portion

A man came to see Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezrich, grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Chassidic movement, with a theological question he was struggling to understand. "Rebbe," he said, "I'm having difficulty understanding how to make sense out of the Jewish teaching that we should accept the good and the bad equally because everything that happens comes from God, and is therefore good. I appreciate that some things are sweet while others are bitter and that whatever we received are gifts from God, but I still have trouble accepting unpleasant things the same way I do sweet things."

Rabbi Dov Ber replied "Yes, I understand your problem, but I am not the best person to assist you. I have a colleague in the city of Annapoli, a two day journey from here who will know how to answer your question. I'll send word that you will be coming to see him."

Two weeks later the man arrived at the home of Rabbi Zusia. By now Zusia had become old. He lived in a hovel with broken stairs and threadbare furniture. He was alone, as he'd lost his wife to illness the previous winter. And many years before his son was conscripted by the czar's army, never to be heard from again.

The visitor knocked on the door and was warmly greeted by a smiling Rabbi Zusia. "Come in, come in my son and let me get you a glass of tea." Then they sat together and Rabbi Zusia said "Rabbi Dov Ber sent word that you would be coming and only said that you have a question you thought I could help you with." The man told of his dilemma of wrestling with acceptance of good things and bad things happening as gifts from God that were to be treated exactly the same.

Rabbi Zusia's jaw dropped and he exclaimed to the man "I'm afraid there's been a terrible mistake. I can't help you. You see in my entire life nothing bad has ever happened to me."

The lesson we get from this story is that whatever we receive in life is simply our experience in the physical universe. The spin that is put on life experiences determines how we are affected by them. They are neither good nor bad. They just are. When we evolve past our egos and achieve the high level of spirituality we see in someone like Rabbi Zusia, we are no longer emotionally impacted by life experiences. The spiritual level exemplified by Rabbi Zusia is an ideal, but it does tell us that it is attainable and that like him, it is available to us. When this occurs for someone who has lost a loved one, then it is possible

to go beyond the pain and to discover that the only thing that is immutably permanent is the existence of God. When we attain that level everything we know in life falls into place and we discover the peacefulness of accepting where we are in relation to God and can begin to taste Gan Eden, for which we have been destined.