

The power and potential of Jewish ritual in the hospital.

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I have consistently found that Jewish ritual practice in a hospital setting is crucial in the healing process. One who is already accustomed to such practices outside of the hospital may find that it normalizes the Jewish environment and offers an enhanced sense of well being. Even for those not normally accustomed to Jewish practice, there are times when such activity may allow the patient to temporarily lift himself or herself beyond the medical tasks at hand, spiritually transcend the confines of the hospital walls and experience a closer divine connection, all of which can enhance one's healing process. The following two patient encounters serve as examples:

“What's In a Name?”

I once met a patient who was not particularly connected to Jewish ritual practice, but before going into surgery she decided that it couldn't hurt to ask for the hospital rabbi to come say a pre-surgery blessing for her. I came up to the patient's room and found a very strong, yet worried woman who graciously accepted my visit. When she told me that she would like a traditional prayer for healing said in Hebrew, I asked for her Hebrew name. She became somewhat emotional as she informed me that she had never received a Hebrew name.

As we proceeded to speak, the patient and I decided to come up with an appropriate Hebrew name for her right then. She described herself as “an attorney, someone from whom people seek advice, who has great inner spirituality, is very feminine yet also very strong.” Her self-description immediately evoked images of the prophetess and Judge, Deborah. I explained to the patient why I thought this name was fitting for her, and she seemed genuinely honored to be named after such a powerful, pioneering female leader. She now felt ready to face her surgery with courage, bravery, and a sense that God was with her.

A few days after the surgery I learned that not everything was proceeding according to plan. The patient was suffering tremendous pain and the goals of the surgery had not been achieved. The patient's surgeon was encouraging her to attempt another surgery, a difficult decision she was faced with when I was summoned to her room once again. I didn't have to say a word, but simply sat by the patient's bed as she cried. “I am in so much pain,” she began. “I don't want to go through this again.” She paused, “But I've been thinking about it and decided that I am Deborah, that represents who I am, and Deborah would have the courage to follow her doctor's advice and go through with the second procedure, so that is what I have decided to do!”

Later, I was gratified to learn that the surgery went smoothly and the patient was well on her way to recovery. She was soon discharged from the hospital. However, a few weeks

later I received a letter from her, telling me that when she first returned home, she had been so overwhelmed with a sense of her vulnerability that she had been afraid to return to work. For a few days she had just lain in bed alone, afraid to face the world again. One morning, however, she awoke and said to herself, “Who am I kidding? I am Deborah! Deborah can do this!” And she got out of bed and made her way back to work, where she is once again thriving, pain free, and fulfilled.

This impressive woman, who had the strength and fortitude inside her all along, explained to me that receiving a meaningful Jewish name, which she learned about and repeated in her head as a sort of mantra when the going got tough, gave her the strength to proceed with surgery (twice), progress through her recovery ahead of schedule, and confidently return to her professional life with vigor and grace. All from just receiving an appropriate Jewish name!

“Retying the Knot”

One day I was called to visit a patient who said he urgently needed to speak to the rabbi. The moment I entered his room, this middle-aged man became very emotional and asked everyone else to leave. I sat in silence with him for a few minutes, until he finally whispered, “Rabbi, I have some terrible secrets to share with you. There are bad things I’ve done, things that I’m ashamed of, and I’ve never been able to talk to anyone about them.” Now seriously ill and in extreme pain, he felt the need to get his heavy burden off his chest. “The time has come,” he said, and he turned to me and began reciting his story. I let him speak at his own pace and gave him as much time as he needed, until he finally said, “That’s it.”

At that point, he appeared more relaxed, and he reported that he felt “lighter,” but still anxious. When I asked him why, he told me that he was worried that he had irrevocably severed his connection with God. He wanted to know if there were any Jewish rituals that could symbolically reconnect him to his Creator.

I asked the patient if he had ever heard of Tefillin. He started to cry as he told me that he knew what they were, but he had not put them on since his Bar Mitzvah. I informed him that we keep a pair in our office and that I would be happy to put them on him if he thought it would be helpful. The patient started to weep even more. Choking back his tears, he nodded his assent and said, “Yes. Please, please bring them to me.” When I returned with the Tefillin, I slowly helped this man put them on and we recited the appropriate blessings together. At that point he could not even speak. His flowing tears became his own personal prayers. When he finally became composed, he turned to me, saying: “I just opened up to God like I never have before. I don’t know how to describe it, but I feel that a broken link has been repaired and reattached to me.” I thought that was a beautiful description of the profound process of spiritual healing that he had experienced.

I continued to visit this patient daily. As he miraculously improved, he consistently credited the spiritual healing sparked by putting on Tefillin as the key to his subsequent physical recovery