

KESHER

connecting our community

ON THE FRONT LINES

LIFE OF A HOSPITAL CHAPLAIN

RABBI JASON WEINER TELLS ALL

the great

SAN ANDREAS FAULT LINE

Earlier this month
the Ridgecrest Earthquakes
stirred fears of potentially triggering
the San Andreas.
Is there any basis to these claims?

**THE WORST
EARTHQUAKES
IN CALIFORNIA HISTORY**

**WHY ARE THERE
SO MANY**



ON THE FRONT LINES

LIFE OF A HOSPITAL CHAPLAIN

Yehudis Litvak

As a hospital chaplain, Rabbi Jason Weiner is always on call. Once, he was asked to come see a patient at 2 a.m. The patient had just received a devastating diagnosis and wanted to ask a rabbi why G-d made it happen. A medical emergency can trigger a spiritual emergency, or at the very least, earnest introspection. The job of a hospital chaplain is to support patients and their families in the midst of a medical crisis and to help them find their own inner strength to meet their challenges and to heal.

"I feel honored and lucky to be doing this work," says Rabbi Weiner, senior rabbi and Director of the Spiritual Care Department at the Cedars-Sinai hospital in Los Angeles. Rabbi Weiner began his rabbinical career as a pulpit rabbi at the Young Israel of Century City (YICC). Among his congregants was Rabbi Levi Meier, a'h, the previous Cedars-Sinai chaplain. When Rabbi Meier became ill, Rabbi Elazar Muskin, senior rabbi of YICC, asked Rabbi Weiner to volunteer at Cedars-Sinai and fill in for Rabbi Meier.

"I was really scared," recalls Rabbi Weiner. "I had no proper training back then, and no experience. It was very hard at first, but I fell in love with the work. It is a special privilege to be on the front lines of life and death, supporting people who are facing the most traumatic and significant experiences and decisions of their lives."

Inspired by his experience as a volunteer, Rabbi Weiner completed four units of Critical Pastoral Education and became a board-certified chaplain. He has worked as a chaplain at Cedars-Sinai for over a decade.

What is his job like? Every day is different, explains Rabbi Weiner, but each day is a mixture of emergencies and routine hospital visits. “Sometimes the routine is more meaningful than the emergencies,” says Rabbi Weiner. At the beginning of his chaplaincy career, he used to encounter many Holocaust survivors, whom he recognized by the numbers tattooed on their arms. Back then, most survivors did not want to talk about their experiences during the Holocaust. Now, it’s become less common to encounter a survivor, but each encounter becomes more meaningful because they realize that there aren’t many survivors left and they want to share their story with the chaplain as a way to leave a witness behind once they are no longer in this world. In general, Rabbi Weiner’s interactions with patients vary depending on the patient’s needs and personality. Sometimes he is asked a *halachic shaila*, but more often, patients simply want to talk to a rabbi and are happy to find a listening ear in Rabbi Weiner. A chaplain’s role is different than that of a community rabbi. “A

chaplain is more anonymous,” explains Rabbi Weiner. “You don’t see him every Shabbos in shul. There are laws against privacy violations. All conversations are confidential, and the patient is free to talk about anything. Sometimes, people open up with a chaplain more than with their own rabbi.”

In his work, Rabbi Weiner witnesses much pain and suffering. He recalls that when he first started, he’d asked Rabbi Meier, a”h, how he managed not to get depressed while working as a chaplain. “How can you be depressed?!” Rabbi Meier had exclaimed. “These are the healthiest people in the world! They have the sickest bodies, but the healthiest souls.” Unlike other interpersonal interactions, which are often superficial, the interactions between patients and chaplains are much more real. Within the first five minutes of their meeting, the patient is sharing their innermost thoughts and feelings, and the chaplain has the opportunity to support them in their deepest struggles.

Not all aspects of Rabbi Weiner’s work are gloomy. While patients arrive at the hospital very sick, many of them do recover and leave the hospital healthy. “It is inspiring to see how much *refuah* happens,” says Rabbi Weiner. He adds that sometimes, even when the patient

dies, there is emotional and spiritual healing that takes place at the end of life that is also very inspiring.

At times, Rabbi Weiner’s work has unexpected twists. Once, an elderly Jewish patient was brought in with a massive heart attack and rushed to cardiac surgery. Rabbi Weiner visited the family in the waiting room and noticed that the family members were especially distraught. When he spoke with them, he found out that the patient, a grandfather of a large family, had one dream – to be alive at his granddaughter’s upcoming wedding. He had come so close, but the doctors predicted that he wouldn’t survive the heart attack.

Rabbi Weiner had an idea. “How would you like to get married in your grandfather’s hospital room?” he asked the granddaughter and her fiancé.

By that time, the patient was out of surgery and conscious. When they asked him about holding a wedding in the hospital, he got very excited. The young couple readily agreed.

As quickly as he could, Rabbi Weiner got together a *minyan*, witnesses, a ring, a *chuppah*, and wine, and they made a wedding right then and there. The grandfather sat under the *chuppah*, and the *chassan* and *kallah* stood on either side of him. It was a very emotional wedding. Everyone present was crying. That night, after the wedding, the patient died.

The family never forgot Rabbi Weiner’s *chesed*. A year later, the young couple had a baby boy. They invited Rabbi Weiner to the *bris* and gave him the honor of giving the baby a name. The baby was named after the grandfather.

The couple stayed in touch with Rabbi Weiner, later inviting him for their son’s *pidyon haben* and then his third birthday. Another story with an unexpected twist involved a dedicated family man whose wife and daughter were everything to him. His daughter was seven months pregnant, and the patient very much wanted to meet his grandchild, but he was dying from a terminal illness. One day, his heart stopped, and the patient was pronounced dead. As the family was saying goodbye, the doctors attempted resuscitation, not expecting it to work. Miraculously, the man’s heart began beating again, and he regained consciousness.

The next day, his daughter went into labor. The baby, born early, was placed into the NICU on the 4th floor of Cedars-Sinai. The patient was on the 6th floor. The family received a special permission to bring the newborn baby in the incubator to the grandfather’s room on the 6th floor. The nurse put the baby into the grandfather’s hands. The man cried as he held his new granddaughter. That night, he died.

“Hashem had kept him alive to see the baby,” says Rabbi Weiner. “We saw the hand of Hashem.”



”
The patients discover parts of their own *mesorah* that they’d never even known about



Prayer is another vehicle of inspiration in this line of work. Many patients, even those that had never prayed in their lives and haven't given G-d much thought, ask Rabbi Weiner to help them pray. They might not be particularly religious, but they need G-d most and they ask the rabbi for guidance.

Rabbi Weiner recalls a patient who was a lawyer at the height of her career. She received a devastating diagnosis and asked Rabbi Weiner to give her a blessing. He asked the woman for her Hebrew name, but she said that she'd never received one. Rabbi Weiner suggested that she choose a Hebrew name for herself. He gave her several options, one of which was Devorah. He told her about Devorah who judged the Jewish people in the Tanach. The next time he came to visit her, the patient excitedly told him that she read more about Devorah and felt a special connection to her and to the name. Rabbi Weiner arranged for her to receive this name at a Torah reading and said a *Misheberach* with her new Hebrew name.

Soon afterwards, the patient had serious surgery. Before the surgery, she said to Rabbi Weiner, "I'm not even scared, because I am Devorah, and Devorah can handle this." The woman had an amazing recovery. "She changed her whole identity," says Rabbi Weiner. She began lighting Shabbos candles and bringing other aspects of Judaism into her life.

Even patients who already pray three times a day sometimes discover new ways to approach their Creator. One might find that praying from a *siddur* is not enough. They want to speak from the heart. Rabbi Weiner tells them about *hisbodedus* and encourages them to talk to Hashem in their own words. These patients discover parts of their own *mesorah* that they'd never known about, and they embrace their own heritage more fully.

Praying with religious patients who manifest deep *emunah* is also inspiring. Rabbi Weiner recalls a very sick cancer patient who had never missed *davening* in his life. His wife asked Rabbi Weiner to come to his room and *daven* with him every day. One day, this patient's surgery was scheduled for *mincha* time. The doctor wanted to hurry the procedure along, but the patient insisted that he *daven mincha* before the surgery. The doctor allowed Rabbi Weiner to come to the operating room and *daven mincha* with him before the anesthesia took effect. Rabbi Weiner said the *Shmoneh Esreh* out loud, and the patient answered *amein*. "I said *Refaeinu* like never before," says Rabbi Weiner. "It was the most incredible *davening* I ever had." The doctor said to Rabbi Weiner, "Your prayers may be the most helpful thing we can do for him. We are partners in this healing work."

Patients also appreciate when others pray for them. It is very helpful for people to know

that they are part of a community that cares about them. Cards and get well wishes are also much appreciated.

Another way community members can help is with very specific offers to do something for the patient or their family. When an offer to help is vague, the family likely won't take them up on it. But when someone calls from a kosher store and offers to pick something up for them, or when someone says that they are taking their kids out and offers to bring the patient's kids along, the family finds it much more helpful.

Volunteering in the hospital is another way to alleviate the patients' suffering. At Cedars-Sinai, volunteers come every Friday and deliver electric candles, grape juice, and challah to all the Jewish patients. Often, it is the volunteers who refer interested patients to the chaplain. In addition to his hospital duties, Rabbi Weiner officiates at funerals of unaffiliated patients who did not have a connection to any *shul* or rabbi. When the family, who'd met him when their relative was in the hospital, asks Rabbi Weiner to perform the funeral, he sees it as an opportunity to make a *kiddush Hashem*. When non-observant family members opt for cremation, Rabbi Weiner offers them the option of a kosher burial. Since the reasons for cremation are often financial, most people readily agree to a kosher burial when Rabbi Weiner helps them raise money to cover the

costs.

Along with doing a tremendous amount of *chessed* at his job, Rabbi Weiner also finds himself busy with introspection and personal growth. He says that a large part of his training for chaplaincy involved working on himself. "You reflect on who you are, what's important to you, how you make decisions, how you interact with people," says Rabbi Weiner. He also had to clarify theological issues for himself, such as the theology of suffering.

Overall, Rabbi Weiner's job brought him to a closer relationship with Hashem. "I talk to Hashem constantly now, more than ever before," he says. He also feels a sense of *achrayus*, of partnership with Hashem, and he *davens* to Him for help in this holy work.

So what does a rabbi tell a distraught patient at 2 a.m. when the patient wants to know why G-d allowed such a calamity to happen to him? "Usually, I don't give an answer," says Rabbi Weiner. "There are things we don't understand. They are beyond what our human brain can fathom. Just like we cannot understand infinity, we cannot understand how G-d runs the world, but we can have faith that everything He does is ultimately for the good." Instead of a simplistic answer, Rabbi Weiner tries to understand where the patient is coming from and to respond with empathy and compassion. ■

