

through interaction with sacred texts, God speaks to us. The fixed, standardized prayers of the *siddur* (prayer book) are there for us, and we may weave them with our own heartfelt, original, personal prayers. And through study of Torah - the Bible and Jewish teaching in general - we can encounter meaningful texts and gain insight and direction, growth and connection.

**STORIES:** Elie Wiesel writes, “*God made man because he loves stories.*” Remembering is one key to Jewish spiritual healing. Biblical narratives, rabbinic lore, medieval folktales, Yiddish literature, Hasidic parables, contemporary American and Israeli short stories can offer great healing. They put us in touch with profound Jewish experience and Jewish ideas. In this way, we can relate our story to others’ and, ultimately, to the One Story, the Big Story, to God.

**NATURE:** The Talmud (TB, *Berakhot* 57b) notes, “*Three things restore a person’s good spirits: beautiful sounds, sights, and smells.*” Certainly an important way of reconnecting with God is through appreciating and enjoying the world around us. Many people mark these moments with the traditional blessings assigned to them; others hallow the sensual experience with lines from the Book of Psalms (verses from Psalm 104, for example). Find a way to reconnect with the wondrous and ever-present blessings of this planet.

**SILENCE AND MEDITATION:** Judah of Kfar Gibboraya taught (TB, *Megillah* 18a), “*The best of all medicines is silence.*” Judaism’s rich heritage of meditative practices can help center and align the spirit with the body’s healing resources, draw sustenance from community across time and space, and focus on deeper relationship with the Divine. If possible, seek out a like-minded group of

Jews to embark on this aspect of our healing journey.

**SONG:** Psalm 104:33 proclaims, “*I will sing unto God as long as I live.*” Our spirits require unique channels for expression and growth, which music makes possible. The *niggun*, the Jewish chant, offers both a way to “warm up” before prayer and a way to distill and amplify our hopes, fears, yearnings, and crying out.

### Opportunities for Transformation

Illness is an opportunity for reflection, for us to reconcile with someone, to return to a path long forsaken. The Talmud states, “If we are visited by pain, examine our conduct.” That kind of *teshuvah* (renewal/return/repentance) is an obligation and is certainly a blessing at any time. As much as illness dramatically alters our lives and the lives of those near and dear to us, we remain a unique child of God with infinite worth and the potential.



# Finding Spiritual Strength in Pain or Illness

BAYCREST

[www.baycrest.org](http://www.baycrest.org)



Adapted from “*Finding Spiritual Strength in Pain or Illness*” by Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, CSW and used with permission from Jewish Lights Publishing

Baycrest Health Sciences  
is fully affiliated with  
the University of Toronto



UNIVERSITY OF  
TORONTO

Baycrest



## Illness

Everyone hates or at least resents illness. Sometimes we disbelieve it, fight it, denounce it or deny it. We may try to finesse it or cosmeticize it, minimize it or disguise it, reframe it and rename it. But there it is, and there we are. But where are we?

## Describing Our Experience

Everyone needs to use their own vocabulary to express their individual stories of illness. That, perhaps, is the first step. Some of these words are as old as the Bible:

- *I am disgusted with life; / I will give rein to my complaint, / speak in the bitterness of my soul* (Job 10:1).
- *I am worn out / with my groaning / sighing; / every night I flood my bed with tears; / I melt my couch with weeping* (Psalm 6:7)
- *My God, my God, why have You abandoned me; / why so far from delivering me / and from my anguished roaring? / My God, I cry by day - You answer not; / by night, and have no respite* (Psalm 22:2-3).

Whatever words we come up with trust them as our narrative and regard them as a critical tool as we move ahead.

## Reach In

Articulating our story is a first step to reclaiming the inner resources with which we

are blessed. We begin to reach in. We rediscover and remobilize strengths and challenges to comfort, fortify, and direct ourselves on the path ahead. Judaism encourages us to inventory our inner selves, our deep resources of character and personality.

Start, perhaps, with the adjectives, even the labels, that we and others use to describe us. From an initial short list, draw out the tools and opportunities that they represent. If we are seen as a loner, honor our independence; if we are an extrovert, use our gregariousness to draw the help and support of others. Our impatience can feed our necessary role of "self-advocate," just as one's long forbearing patience may help create a thoughtful oasis for reflection, and so on. Whoever we are, whatever skills, gaps, orientations, strengths, and flaws we possess, bring them to these moments.



## Reach Out

The Sage, Hillel, taught (M. Avot 2:4): "*Do not separate yourself from the community.*" Illness and suffering tend to isolate us just when we so desperately need to connect with others. Jewishly speaking, there can be no spiritual healing without community. If we have connections with a Jewish community, now is the time to deepen them; if we have been at a

distance, draw nearer. For what is the purpose of religious community if not to care and support those in need?

Practically, the community may offer ideas for coping; it may offer uplifting song, ritual, or writings, or even opportunities for helpful distraction. Sometimes the community offers the company and wisdom of people whose response to their own suffering can teach us something significant and enduring. On a very deep spiritual level, community represents meaningful social context, which all humans need to live and to thrive. And remember, the community needs us at least as much as we need them. Our skills, perspectives and presence are all unique, an integral part of a historic mosaic, an unfolding family.

## Reach Up

The Psalmist teaches (34:19): "*God is near to those that are of a broken heart.*" For many people who are ill, a relationship with God is problematic, to say the least. The very basic, eternal questions of life, such as "Why do (good) people suffer?" loom so large before us; God may seem, at best, confusing or irrelevant and, at worst cruel, punishing, and sinister.

Judaism, while not silencing our doubts or denial, reminds us that, somehow, the very same God can comfort and strengthen us when we are suffering. Our tradition offers many routes, including prayer and study, reflecting on stories, appreciating nature, practicing silence, meditation, and song.

**PRAYER AND STUDY:** Dr. Rabbi Louis Finkelstein taught, "*When I pray I speak to God; when I study Torah God speaks to me.*" Through Jewish prayer we address God;