

Friends and Colleagues;

On the question of Healing and Curing; we ought to pay attention to the old saw; what works, works! We have, I think because we are unsure of our own power, resorted to the semantic difference between healing and curing. We defer to the medical world and to God assuming that only they can cure. Because our prayers, our mishebeirakh's, the laying on of hands, our use of curative language don't always result in the melting of a tumor or a continuation of a life we assume that we cannot cure. And so we create a linguistic distinction between words that mean virtually the same thing. (Check it out) We as rabbis do healing--others do curing. Yet the evidence is plain that we are directly involved in areas that have curative powers. From the day we are born we are dying. The evidence shows that a persons belief system, mood, etc. are important determinants in delaying that day.

We know that;

- psychological depression reduces the immune systems capabilities.
Isolation, pain and lack of coping lead to and accompany depression.
- heart patients who are optimistic live longer than those who are not optimistic.
- women who undergo group therapy as part of their treatment for breast cancer live longer than those who receive no such treatment.
- men with HIV infection who receive guidance in relaxation or other therapeutic techniques show a delayed onset of AIDS related symptoms.
- expectation is a powerful force in keeping people alive.
- how we think effects our expectations and our immune system.
- our beliefs make up our thinking and our thinking shapes our beliefs.

Because rabbis are symbolic exemplars (we have little choice about that) and are perceived as the emissaries of God and the Jewish people, we have special opportunities and power to affect those systems that govern health and well being. Rabbis need to believe that they can make a positive difference in peoples physical

health and well being by what we do in contact with the ill, in hospital, synagogue and home.

When people are ill, our symbolic exemplarhood grows. What we say and do is immensely important. What people believe of us, gives us influence, potency and power. People under stress and confusion will attend to and are looking for anything that will diminish their stress and confusion. Fright and isolation may open previously locked belief systems. Our symbolic exemplarhood can be an ally in helping us change their beliefs, and help their beliefs help their healing/curing.

We need to stop being apologetic about what we can do. We need rather to develop expertise in doing healing/curing. We need to do better work, whether that be using language in curative ways, i.e. seeding ideas about health, laying on of hands, community and individual prayer or whatever. All or any of these can have a powerful influence on peoples belief systems, and belief systems can cure and heal. We need to learn how the people we are dealing with are organized, how they think, how their belief systems work. We need to avoid fundamentalism, thinking that "one way fits all". No two people will respond the same way. So, laying on of hands might be powerful in increasing one's coping skills, and just hokey with another. A mishebeirakh with an entire congregation holding hands might raise one person's sense of worth and thereby increase the immune systems capacity and do nothing for another. And while doing all we can, and doing it unapologetically and as expertly as we can, we need to know that we don't know the effect of everything we do. And when we fail, which will be often, let us fail lightly, knowing that even God has not done much better in this business of healing/curing. Maybe that is why God has subcontracted this holy work to us.

Jack H Bloom

For further study of the above, See; The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar; By the Power Vested in Me. Haworth Press Binghamton, New York 2002 Chapter 11 Curing and Healing pp223-267