Jewish Healing in Boston

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Introduction

A joke that has been circulating recently on the Internet goes like this:

The Italian says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have wine."
The Mexican says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have tequila."
The Scot says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have Scotch."
The Japanese says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have sake."
The German says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have beer."
The Greek says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have ouzo."
The Swede says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have aquavit."
The Russian says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have vodka."
The Jew says, "I'm tired and thirsty. I must have diabetes."

Illness and complaining (*kvetching*) about illness have been central to American Jewish identity at least since the large-scale arrival of Eastern European immigrants during the late 1800s and early 1900s.[1] While no more or less healthy than members of other ethnic groups, American Jewish women and men have tended to be portrayed and to portray themselves as bedeviled by a variety of illnesses and ailments (just think of Woody Allen). At the same time, both as patients and as doctors American Jews have eagerly embraced modern medicine, abandoning "folk" practices such as the use of amulets and blessings at a breakneck pace. Throughout the twentieth century Jews have been in the vanguard of Americans utilizing allopathic (conventional) medicine and allopathically trained physicians; for example, Jews were among the first to adopt the practice of regular physician visits for healthy babies. Jewish immigrants quickly targeted medical school as the best possible path to success in their adopted country; "my son the doctor" became the symbol of triumph for Jewish families. As Neil Cowan and Ruth Schwartz Cowan have shown, "In the space of one generation the physician replaced the rabbi as the Jewish cultural hero."[2]

Observers of Jewish life in the United States throughout most of the twentieth century would surely have had to search far and wide to find public instances of Jewish ritual healing or even to find significant interest among Jews in religious approaches to coping with illness. In American Jewish culture the way to deal with illness was to seek the "best" internist, specialist, surgeon, or therapist, a networking task made possible through the extensive presence of Jews in the health care professions. Why would anyone be interested in a prayer against the evil eye when one's cousin, neighbor, uncle, or in-law was, or personally knew, or knew someone who knew, the chief of cardiology, oncology, ophthalmology, not only at Beth Israel Hospital but also at Massachusetts General and New England Deaconess!

The Jewish Healing Movement

Why, then, and how did some American Jews at the end of the twentieth century and start of the twenty-first create a "Jewish healing movement"? What *is* "Jewish healing"? And who has promulgated it and embraced it? During the year 2000 I spoke to the majority of Jewish healing leaders and activists in the Boston area, and I participated in a variety of Jewish healing services and events. This essay presents a small yet suggestive part of that research.

Initiated approximately two decades ago, most likely synchronously by several small groups of feminists, rabbis, and rabbinical students on the East and West Coasts, the Jewish healing movement is more a convergence of projects and programs developed by individuals around the country than any sort of planned, centralized, or ritually or theologically unified association or organization. While Boston is not especially or uniquely active in terms of Jewish healing (New York and San Francisco host the most vibrant Jewish healing communities), Boston is home to a significant Jewish population and probably surpasses most other American cities in the visibility and accomplishments of Jewish healing groups and practitioners.

Boston Jews participate in a variety of private practices and group settings that engage with illness and healing from a Jewish perspective. Some of these practices and settings are highly traditional,

such as personal prayer in the context of the standard daily or Sabbath liturgy and during the customary lighting of Sabbath candles. Others, some more and some less innovative, are products of the Jewish-American experience:

•Integration of Jewish sacred objects, healing songs, prayers and symbols into eclectic healing repertoires that, for an individual, may include guided visualizations, meditation, or other New Age or personally significant elements.

•"Prayer for the Sick" ceremonies during the Sabbath morning service; for example, at some synagogues congregants stand up and say aloud the names of ill friends and relatives. While the prayer is traditional, this format is a relatively new one; until recently, the names of the sick generally were not announced.

•Synagogue-sponsored healing services, support groups for people living with illness, and visitation programs for the house-bound ill and elderly.

•Support services for the ill and elderly offered by Jewish community and social service agencies. These programs may have more or less overt religious emphases.

•Independent practitioners offering "Jewish healing" or "kabbalistic healing" to clients.

•Twelve-step groups oriented toward Jewish members who otherwise might feel alienated from the implicit or explicit Christian orientation of many Twelve-step groups.

•Hospital chaplaincy.

Three Jewish Healers

Marjorie Sokoll, Matia Angelou, and Chaya Sarah Sadeh are three Boston-area women who exemplify a variety of streams or modalities of contemporary American Jewish healing: Sokoll organizes and oversees Jewish healing programs through her position in a Jewish social services agency; Angelou, having experienced many years of chronic illness, is a ritual leader and singer of healing music, offering her talents primarily in small groups at workshops and synagogues; Sadeh, a registered nurse, sees clients for Jewish healing in private practice.

Marjorie Sokoll is the director of Jewish Healing Connections of the Boston-area Jewish Family and Children's Service (JFCS), the major social service organization serving the Boston Jewish community. She sees her work as part of the national movement to create Jewish healing centers, a mission that has recently been taken on by many within the network of JFCSs throughout the country: "This is part of the recognition that our own tradition has wonderful concepts of healing."

Sokoll had not heard of the formal Jewish healing movement until recently, "but I was immersed in this [caring for people in the framework of Jewish Family and Children's Service]. I came from a typical nontraditional Jewish background. No God talk. Then I went to Israel. . . . I was there for eight years. I worked as a social worker, and there were many positive aspects of living in a Jewish state. But I also became sick while living in Israel, multiple stresses. . . . As an immigrant I learned what it is not to be part of the majority culture, to be other, separate, outside. Back in the United States I received an M.Ed. in counseling. I began to think about death, the existential angst of nothingness. I didn't realize that Judaism had its own riches, and this led me to Eastern religions, and Buddhism led me to the Jewish renewal movement. . . . Making spiritual life a reality in Judaism.

"I came to JFCS almost seven years ago. They were trying to figure out what the 'J' in JFCS is. Is this organization nonsectarian or Jewish? It is both, and how do these things fit together? I was on my own journey and brought that into the agency. I was the coordinator of the home visitation program for frail elders. I was interested in illness, disease, and death. I brought to this work my Jewishness, the [traditional] practice of visiting the sick. . . . This is about community, about being there.

"Our executive director wanted to fund a Jewish healing center. After attending a conference at the National Center for Jewish Healing, I realized that we [at JFCS] already had programs in place doing these things, but we hadn't thought of it as healing. Until then, Jewish healing sounded like an oxymoron. Healing sounded Christian. . . . JFCS is a mainstream Jewish agency. Our board wanted to understand this concept—it sounded New Age, touchy-feely. I wanted them to understand that Jewish healing is based in Jewish tradition. I did a healing service with the eighty members of the board of directors. They loved it. I focused on what affects all of us—illness. . . .

"People are looking for a sense of wholeness." Sokoll emphasizes that "Jewish healing connections—the essence is connection. People going through times of trouble shouldn't have to feel alone. . . . This is beyond denominations; this is personal healing and communal healing of the rifts between our people."

Through JFCS Sokoll serves as a resource person for rabbis and organizations interested in developing healing services or programs for visiting the sick at home or in nursing care facilities. She also supervises Jewish spiritual programs for home-bound frail elders, residents of nursing homes, and people

with HIV/AIDS and psychiatric conditions, and she organizes and leads on-going and drop-in support groups for people coping with a variety of illnesses, care-giving issues, and bereavement. "JFCS fills in gaps that some synagogues don't provide [for]. The synagogues call us to lead bereavement groups. They don't know how to do it. Our goal is to support the synagogues."

In addition to the organizational work that she does, Sokoll leads a monthly healing circle for the staff of the Boston-area JFCS, a circle that, for Sokoll, is aimed at "healing the healer." Participants in the healing circle work in direct services to the sick, elderly, and needy. Although both men and women are employed by JFCS, primarily women staff members—not all of whom are Jewish—attend.

At a typical healing circle, held in a JFCS conference room, Sokoll arrives a few minutes early to dim the fluorescent lights and spread on the large conference table a black velvet cloth with pictures of the moon and stars. On the cloth she sets out an aromatherapy candle, a rock, a picture of her dog who recently died, a tape player (with a tape of bird sounds), and a book. The circle begins with one woman striking a beautiful and haunting sound on a Tibetan gong, followed by a few minutes of silent meditation. Sokoll's ritual leadership is low-key and nonauthoritarian. She reads a Hassidic story teaching the importance of taking the time to look at the sky because life is impermanent. The women sitting around the table are invited to say what the story makes them think of, or anything else they want to say. One woman suggests they take time to remember a staff member who died recently. Memories are shared and then Sokoll reads a traditional Hebrew prayer, El Male Rahamim, for the dead. Participants are invited to share feelings, problems, concerns, and issues that have come up recently. Several talk about maintaining relationships after death. Time is given for people to utter the names of sick people they want to have healed, and Sokoll reads the customary Hebrew MiSheBerach prayer for the sick; unlike in the traditional Hebrew text, she names the biblical matriarchs before the patriarchs. A bit of time is left for silent prayer with eyes closed. Sokoll then starts to hum a wordless melody (*niggun*), and the Tibetan gong is rung once more to signal the end of the service and the return to the work of caring for, advocating on behalf of, and serving others.

In contrast to Sokoll, who has created Jewish healing opportunities through her work in a mainstream institution, Matia Angelou is an independent Jewish healer, songwriter, and musician, in much demand at Jewish feminist spirituality workshops and courses. Like Sokoll, Angelou is happy to talk about both the content of her work and how she began her healing work. "In 1991 I became ill with fibromyalgia. This was after eating a fish with a neurotoxin. This is one of the things that started me on this, but also before that I was in a women's healing meditation group. We were working with a woman who had a brain tumor. In the middle of that [period] I got sick. I was already doing some kinds of healing, but about a year after the fish I used these techniques—meditation, singing, touch—on myself and others. It came to me. A lot of my interest came from my Rosh Hodesh group [Jewish women's ritual gatherings—often with a strong feminist and spiritual orientation—at the time of the new moon]. We did healing in that group, [creating] ceremonies for each other. Then I learned more, from books and classes. Then I looked around the community [for a place with which to get involved]. [With a friend] I did a couple of healing services and workshops. We used movement, song, and artwork to help people get to consciousness of their core issue and begin healing around it. . . .

"At Bnei Or [the Jewish renewal-style synagogue with which she is involved] the healing ritual is part of the regular service. Those in need of healing go into the center of the circle during the regular service. Bnei Or started about fifteen years ago. People were slowly drawn in. About five years ago . . . I took over as interim leader, and then co-led. I am a spiritual counselor, good at community building and education, one-on-one. Spiritual, health, emotional issues. Some people just need talking, or I give them a prayer to say, or teach what Jewish tradition says about the thing, or hands-on healing, or soul singing—letting your authentic song rise out of you, or I sing to them. I also visit people in hospitals.

"I learned from various classes: Reiki and some others, I don't remember. I always rephrased things into a Jewish form, so I searched out Jewish healing. . . . In that women's healing group I found that singing was healing. [The woman who was struggling with a brain tumor] would ask me to sing a certain song each time, and she would weep. It would open something up for her. When I got sick myself, at first I couldn't get out of bed, and just rented funny movies. And then I began to sing. So I knew from personal experience that it helped.

"Healing to me is a process of becoming closer to your own spiritual center and connection, in whatever way you understand that. A lot has to do with healing attitudes, perspectives, how we relate to our own condition, whether we see it as a burden or an

opportunity. Healing is finding the opportunity for spiritual connection in whatever different conditions we find ourselves. People can be cured [of their symptoms] but not be healed. I don't believe that people bring on their own illness. We've almost gotten to the point of saying that 'if you have any problems in your life, you caused them.' I don't believe that. Life happens, we live in fragile physical bodies. We take care of them the best way we know how. For whatever stresses, environmental, accidental reasons—I don't believe we make decisions to put ourselves in that place to cause it [illness]. I do believe that, once it happens, we have a choice about how we will relate to it, learn from it."

I ask her how God fits in. "It changes for me day to day. I don't believe that God causes things, bad things, to happen. But I do gain strength in understanding my situation and living with it through my belief in God. The ability to tap into something bigger and greater than I am, that gives me access to healing. Maybe this is the healing energy that I can tap into, and I do that through my Jewish practice, and through Jewish meditation."

Unlike Angelou, whose healing work emerged out of her engagement with feminist spirituality, Chaya Sarah Sadeh is a registered nurse who now works as a psychotherapist, healer, and teacher of meditation and kabbalah studies. "I first was involved in healing in a secular way as a nurse. Twenty years ago I learned therapeutic touch. [Even then] I also was intrigued with where in Judaism is healing . . . [but the answers I received—study Jewish scripture and sacred texts—] did not satisfy me. At the time I wasn't attuned to it.

"I went to Israel for a year in 1982 [and that is where] I began studying kabbalah. When I came back I opened a healing center, not Jewish. I've been in private practice doing psychiatric nursing and energy healing. First therapeutic touch and then Reiki, crystals, whatever was going on, I was doing it. Over time it becomes *you*, not just a technique."

Sadeh studied kabbalah and Jewish meditation for several years with a local Orthodox rabbi. "After I left the kabbalah course, I felt I needed more and learned about Jason Shulman's course. He is Jewish but secular, about fifty years old. He developed or channeled healing techniques from traditional texts. He has a three-year training program—four weekends a year. I graduated in 1999. Around 1996, I stopped studying with [a rabbi] and I needed to develop my own capacity to read texts. I started at Hebrew College and now am close to an M.A. in Jewish studies. Now what I am doing is Jewish healing.

"When I practiced nursing in hospitals and mental health agencies, I discovered that I didn't like the medical model. In the 1950s there weren't many choices for careers. Women didn't have as many options then. I became a nurse by default. Got married, had kids, divorced. I got a B.A. in English literature, an M.A. in education. I'm a teacher. What I offer people—I see individuals for psychotherapy and energy healing—I don't call it kabbalistic healing; that puts people off. . . . I see myself as a pioneer, a discoverer. . . . I teach people how they are healers; everyone is a healer. We all do it in different ways.… I draw my work as a healer from the Jewish tradition.

"I have become more observant over the past ten to fifteen years. Over time I've begun [observing] more of the *mitzvoth* [Jewish law], and this is an essential part of my Jewish healing practice. All healing occurs through relationship. Who I am has a major effect on who my client is. Not *what* I am or what I do. . . . Healing comes from God. . . . Relationship with the self, God, and others is all the same. You must be in relationship with yourself to be in relationship with God or other people. The focus of my work is helping people learn to be in relationships with themselves, to clear away obstacles, debris. . . . My clients come with both physical and psychological issues. A woman with a benign tumor wanted to avoid surgery. We worked for four or five weeks, and the tumor is shrinking. I told her to go back to her doctor to check, but I know it's going away. She has changed, opened up. . . . True healing to me is holistic, integrated. A doctor would cut out a tumor. I help the client understand it and know how it got there and what the lesson is and embrace it. All the people I work with want to know that."

Conclusion

Despite passionate and widespread engagement with traditional Jewish symbols, stories, and locutions, contemporary American Jewish healing is clearly and energetically engaged in constructing a model of healing that reverses many customary Jewish paradigms. The kinds of religious healing practices that Eastern European Jews had abandoned upon arrival in the United States were, for the most part, interpreted and experienced as deeply rooted in tradition. The various prayers and amulets used for protection from the evil eye, for instance, were passed down from mothers to daughters in what was felt to be an unbroken chain. In contrast, the rituals of the contemporary Jewish healing movement are self-consciously innovative. Leaders and practitioners knowingly select elements from

Jewish sources, approaches from American psychology, the self-help movement, and holistic healing, and even take inspiration from non-Jewish religious healing, whether New Age or Christian-oriented pastoral counseling.

Unlike the holy men/rabbis who healed Jews in both Eastern Europe and North Africa,[3] most of the founders and leaders of Jewish healing events and groups are women, reflecting both the key role of women in American healing religions, such as Christian Science,[4] and the recent entry of women into the Reform and Conservative rabbinates. Many of the women who shape and practice contemporary Jewish healing have been engaged in healing work of one kind or another—as nurses, social workers, nurturing mothers—throughout their adult lives. Yet, only in middle age did they begin to frame their work in explicitly Jewish terms. None of the women with whom I spoke described a dramatic conversion story in which they abandoned their previous secular or self-centered lives and through divine revelation discovered their power or responsibility to serve as Jewish healers. Rather, they told stories of continuity in which childhood empathies and spiritual leanings and adult professional work in various kinds of human services slowly led to the realization that what they were already doing was, in fact, Jewish healing.[5]

American Jewish healing is deliberately egalitarian, both socially and theologically. Unlike the traditional *rebbi* or *zaddik* (saint or holy man), leaders do not hold special power or authority; in fact, the community of sufferers often includes the leader. Healing is more likely to be seen as a process generated by the self or community than as a favor bestowed by God. God is rarely depicted as involved in miraculous cures; contemporary Jewish healers typically sound nervous about miracles, often making the distinction that we are not "into superstition." God is drawn into the healing process as a source of courage more than as a source of miracles. In the words of the song that has become the informal anthem of the Jewish healing movement, "May the One who blessed our Fathers, the Source of blessing of our Mothers . . . help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing, and let us say Amen."[6] This song, sung at every healing service that I attended in the Boston area (and usually at the climax of the service), seeks from God not an expression of His strength but, rather, inspiration for the humans to find their own strength.

In contrast to long-established Jewish theological understandings, participants in the modern Jewish healing movement do not view illness as a punishment for sin or moral failings. Rather, illness (for which the individual is not culpable) is seen as leading to loneliness, depression, isolation, and loss of hope (for which the community bears the responsibility to respond and the blame for failing to respond). In the discourse of the healing movement, the goals of healing are connection, relationship, wholeness—goals that are always attainable, even if the process of realization is life-long. Curing, not always possible, remains for the most part in the jurisdiction of physicians, a jurisdiction not particularly contested by the Jewish healing movement.

Notes

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1. This pattern probably preceded their arrival in the United States. Daniel Boyarin and others have argued that "effeminate," pale, weak, intellectual, sensitive, and victimized were among the culturally recognized traits of Jewish men of the Eastern European shtettl; Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

2. Neil M. Cowan and Ruth Schwarz Cowan, *Our Parents' Lives: The Americanization of Eastern European Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 110.

3. They continue to be active in Israel today. See Susan Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jews in Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

4. See Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

5. This is consistent with the kinds of life stories told by women religious leaders in a variety of cultures; see Susan Sered, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

6. The lines are from Debbie Friedman's "MiSheBerach." The first two lines are sung in Hebrew. This song can be found on her *Renewal of Spirit* album.