

*ba-guf* (healing of the body) and *refuat ba-nefesh* (healing of the soul) are at once distinct and interrelated. This awareness challenges our notion that healing and cure are synonymous. There are times when the symptoms of illness leave the body but the soul continues to ache, and there are times when the body does not get better but the soul finds transformation and healing. In addition, there are times when *refuah shleimah* must include the difficult truth that the healing may never come. The loved one will not return, the illness will not improve. That for which we yearn is not a possibility. But this understanding may also be a form of healing, as we come to terms with the painful truth. The *Mi Sheberach* teaches us that even when a complete healing is unachievable, healing is still possible. This shift in understanding is a healing in itself.

Coping with loss is never easy. In shifting our understanding of both prayer and healing, we claim prayer as our own and unlock its potential for healing.

Practices 16–19, the first three by Rabbi Anne Brener, put the above ideas into action.

## Mourning and Death

Prayer can also play a central role in coping with irrevocable loss, with death. I'll never forget a woman who spoke to me after I gave a guest sermon about prayer. In her early thirties, she was already a widow. The second paragraph of the *Amidah* praises God for "healing the sick, freeing the captive, and keeping faith with those who sleep in the dust." That line, she said, saved her. Every Shabbat she came to synagogue to connect to God who stays with those who sleep in the dust.

After my mother's recent death, I followed the laws of mourning and attended a daily minyan to say *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayer uttered in memory of the departed. The wisdom of the tradition was brilliant. Every day I spent a few minutes connecting with my

mother. In fact, I was devastated when the year of mourning was over and I had to stop. I knew I would no longer keep the connection fresh and I felt her loss all over again. But the Jewish liturgical tradition was speaking to me. It's been a year. It's time to move on.

## Prayer as Preparation for Ultimate Truth

Upon hearing about a death, the tradition bids us to say the blessing *baruch dayan emet*, “blessed be the true judge,” or “judge of truth.” I don't believe in a “judge” who issues decrees, but I do relate to God as judge in a broader sense. It is the judgment of the universe that we shall die. Living is not possible without death. The spiritual question becomes, “Can I put my personal encounter with death in a cosmic context?” And I particularly relate to *emet*, truth, which here means genuine or authentic. Another meaning for *emet* in the Hebrew Bible is loyal or faithful. In this moment of ultimate contraction, can I remain authentic? Can I respond from an open heart? Can I remain loyal and genuine to all that I have gleaned in my relation to transcendence—to my values, to my heart, to God?

A nineteen-year-old Israeli soldier was on his way home to see his family in the summer of 1994 when he was kidnapped by members of Hamas. For several days his family and the country held their breath as they searched for him, desperate for a sign that he was alive. Finally, in the middle of the night, there was a knock at the family's door. The soldier's father opened the door and saw three generals standing before him, the requisite number for a *beit din*—a Jewish legal court. He immediately knew what this meant. But before they could even tell him that they had found the body of his beloved son, his “tall blue-eyed, golden-haired son who was always smiling with the innocence of a child and the understanding of an adult,” he had the following thought: *thank you, God, for blessing me with nineteen years with this angel on Earth.* His

beloved son was murdered by terrorists, and his first thought was an expression of gratitude for the blessing of his life.

Years later, the father explained: "I understood in that instant why I had been praying three times a day my whole life. It was all preparation for that moment." Over the course of a lifetime he had built a consciousness that allowed him to grieve with gratitude.

What made it possible for that father to recognize, in the moment of his son's death, the great blessing of his life? He had spent a lifetime cultivating a humble awareness of the gift of life, of the majesty of the world, of the presence and possibility of love. It doesn't mean that loss isn't excruciating, it means that a life of humble gratitude places loss in a context of meaning. It means that even in the darkest and busiest moments, our hearts are open to beauty and possibility. This is the essence of prayer.

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