

God Please Heal Her Please

*Rabbi Zoë Klein*

Yom Kippur 5765

Some say the Messiah will come humbly,  
Riding a low white donkey,  
Some say the Messiah will come grand  
Charging through Jerusalem's golden gate,  
Some say the messianic age  
Will see all countries at peace,  
The messiah an amazing politician,  
Some say the messianic age will see  
The resurrection of the dead...  
Hey, it's you, wait,  
I remember you,  
High school, yeah, algebra,  
Man, what has it been,  
1,200 years?  
You look great,  
Where've you been the last millennium,  
Hillside? You're kidding,  
I was at Hillside!  
What plot number?  
Imagine that, all this time  
We could have...you know...  
Some say the messiah  
will come on a fiery chariot.  
Some say he's already come  
And his picture is hanging  
Over the counter at your local  
Kosher butcher.  
Some say the messiah will be a beggar,  
No one knows him,  
But I will know him,  
I already have a clear picture of him in my mind.  
She has a white lab coat,  
And glasses,  
She gets lots of grants,  
Spends her days and some nights  
In the lab  
Thousands of test tubes,  
Equations scrawled madly across the board,  
And she leads a large team of researchers,  
And the moment I know she is the Messiah  
The moment I know the messianic age has dawned,

The most perfect moment in the history of the world,  
Is when she holds up that bubbling test tube  
With fizzing purple steam  
And says, "Ladies and Gentlemen,  
I have discovered the cure."

Then the messianic age would  
Rip through the brown sky  
Air from heaven's treasuries  
Stored just for this day  
Streaming down  
Ice blue but warm  
The name of the one who discovers a cure  
Emblazoned in history books,  
Holy books,  
Across the bright sky  
And the great shofar would blast  
But instead of sound  
Billions and billions  
Of platelets and white blood cells  
Whirling out in triumphant spirals  
These, the messengers of the Most High,  
These, the hosts of Heaven,  
Summoned by this Messiah  
rushing, little white steeds,  
toward every last  
melanomic, metastatic,  
cancerous speck,  
a cosmic battle  
in which the forces of health prevail,  
I believe,  
I believe  
With perfect faith in the coming of the messiah,  
Though he may tarry, I still believe.

In Talmud Sanhedrin  
Rabbi Joshua ben Levi asked  
the prophet Elijah  
"Where shall I find the messiah?"  
The prophet replied,  
"At the gate of the city."  
"But how shall I recognize him?"  
"He sits among the lepers."  
Rabbi Joshua was startled and exclaimed,  
"Among the lepers? What is he doing there?"

“He changes their bandages. He changes their bandages one by one.”

It is beautiful, the notion  
That the messiah would be found there,  
Dressing the wounds of the lepers.  
That was written around 400 ad.  
But what about Dr. Hansen  
The Norwegian scientist who discovered  
A cure for leprosy in 1873...  
Might he be the messiah found among lepers?  
The one who finds the cure,  
Lays his hands upon the sufferer  
Who then rises miraculously out of his wheelchair  
No one thought he'd walk again,  
Halleluiah,  
The one who raises the dead,  
Isn't that the messiah?  
Yet Elijah says the messiah  
Is the one changing the bandages,  
The gentle nurse,  
Who replenishes the IV  
And rinses the bedpan  
Instead of the wonder doctor  
Who's world renowned.

Moses was a healer,  
When his sister was struck with leprosy,  
4,000 year prior to Dr. Hansen  
He spoke five simple words  
*El na refa na la,*  
God please heal her please  
*El na refa na la.*  
And she was healed.

When a plague broke out in the desert,  
Moses lifted his rod entwined with a golden snake  
And all who lifted their eyes to it were cured.

Elijah the prophet  
Stayed in the home of a woman,  
In the book of First Kings.  
Her son died,  
And she said “This is the thanks I get  
For letting a prophet of the Lord stay with me?”  
Elijah went to the boy's room

And brought him back to life.

His disciple Elisha did the same thing.

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai had great power of healing,  
When he visited someone who was sick  
He would ask “Are your sufferings welcome to you?”  
And if they answered, “Neither they nor their reward,”  
He would lift them out of their sickness.

We have many healers in our tradition,  
Maimonides our greatest philosopher  
Was trained as a royal Egyptian physician.  
And we have miracles,  
Hanukkah oil,  
Splitting of the sea...

Tradition teaches that there are four angels  
That surround us at all times,  
In front of us,  
Uriel, to our right Michael,  
To our left, Gabriel,  
And always behind us, Rafael,  
Whose name means, God heals.

In our morning prayers,  
Actually, upon leaving the bathroom,  
One says:

“Praised are You  
Who with wisdom fashioned  
the human body  
creating openings, arteries,  
glands and organs,  
marvelous in structure,  
intricate in design,  
should but one of them  
by being blocked or opened  
fail to function,  
it would be impossible to exist  
even for a moment.  
Praised are You, Adonai  
healer of all flesh  
who sustains our bodies in wondrous ways.”

Soon after in our liturgy  
It says,  
“The soul that you have given me is pure,  
you have created and formed it,  
breathed it into me  
and within me you sustain it.”

That is what we think of religion,  
As sustaining the soul,  
But the previous prayer calls God  
*Rofei kol basar*,  
Healer of all flesh...sustainer of bodies...

Judaism has ever suggested prayer over medical attention,  
On the contrary,  
Tradition says, (Ben Sira)  
“Show the physician due honor  
for the Lord has created him.  
The Lord has created medicines out of the earth,  
and a sensible person will not refuse them.”

Religion is not only concerned with the soul,  
And should not shy from the truths  
That are written within  
the scroll of the skin of the body.  
Today is Yom Kippur,  
The day devoted to the imperfections of the soul,  
When we come to mend our souls,  
Correct our ways,  
Tune our character  
To be in sync with a transcendent moral code,  
The antiseptic we use is repentance,  
The aloe we use is tzedaka,  
And injection of preventative prayer,  
You might feel a slight burning,  
But just around the corner from Yom Kippur  
Is the festival of Sukkot,  
Which is devoted to the imperfections of the body.  
And the order is wise,  
For God created the soul first,  
and then placed it in the body...  
and we, we come all of us on Yom Kippur,  
because that's how we understand religion,  
for sustaining the soul,  
and not nearly as many celebrate Sukkot,

which is physical,  
hammering together a loose construction  
called a sukkah,  
metaphor for the shortcomings  
of our physical world.  
These structures, banged together,  
Dolled up with flowers and ornaments,  
Like our bodies,  
Our flaws covered up  
Laugh lines lathered.  
But however we dress it,  
The sukkah, like the body is the same,  
A temporary dwelling place  
Vulnerable to the elements,  
Weaker than we like to believe.

The roof of a sukkah is only kosher  
If you can see the sky through the fronds.  
You may see it as a shabby roof,  
Full of holes,  
Or you may see instead  
The sunrays streaming in,  
The stars winking down,  
The thin or open walls  
You may see as flimsy and futile,  
Or you may see straight through them  
To the abundance of nature shivering and beckoning  
Your senses just beyond  
Where a good healthy wall would shut them out.

Rabbi Milton Steinberg wrote:  
“After a long illness,  
I was permitted for the first time  
to step out of doors.  
And as I crossed the threshold  
sunlight greeted me.  
This is my experience – all there is to it.  
And yet, so long as I live,  
I shall never forget that moment...  
A faint wind blew from off the western plains,  
cool and yet somehow tinged with warmth,  
like a dry chilled wine.  
And everywhere in the firmament above me  
in the great vault between the earth and sky,  
on the pavements, the buildings,

the golden glow of the sunlight.  
It touched me, too,  
with friendship, with warmth, with blessing.  
And as I basked in its glory  
there ran through my mind  
those wonderful words of the prophet  
about the sun which someday shall rise  
with healing on its wings.  
In that instant I looked about me  
to see whether anyone else  
showed on his face the joy,  
almost the beatitude I felt.  
But no, there they walked,  
men and women and children,  
in the glory of the golden flood,  
and so far as I could detect,  
there was none to give it heed.  
And then I remembered how often I, too,  
had been indifferent to sunlight,  
how often, preoccupied with petty  
and sometimes mean concerns,  
I had disregarded it.  
And I said to myself,  
How precious is the sunlight but alas,  
how careless of it are men.  
How precious, how careless.  
This has been a refrain sounding in me ever since.”

His body was a sukkah,  
And in that instant,  
He was not considering the holes,  
The scars and ravages of a long illness,  
But what was flooding him  
Through his fractures,  
This radical amazement of  
Light, life...

To heal means to make whole.

In *mishebeirach* we pray for *refuah sheleyma*,  
A complete healing,  
Body and soul,  
*Shalom*, wholeness,  
Still, many of us are only comfortable  
With religion as it pertains to the soul,

When it pertains to the body  
We think of charlatans  
And charismatic tricksters,  
So many people do not believe  
Religion can help the body at all,  
Help heal someone,  
Despite the studies done by doctors  
On patients who have been prayed for  
And those who have not,  
On the power of faith in healing,  
We are skeptical that religion is just a crutch...

It is a crutch...  
But if you've ever broken your leg  
Or had a hip replaced,  
Don't discount the crutch,  
I remember when I was in Sunday school,  
The teacher asked us to fill in the sentence  
"God is like a..."  
Most of us said things like King  
Or Guide,  
But one boy said a cane,  
He was thinking of his grandfather's cane,  
And how it enabled him to get from place to place,  
It allowed him to rest  
And lightened his burden,  
The teacher was so taken by the boy's answer,  
I was a little jealous that I hadn't said anything nearly as clever...  
I've been trying to make up for it ever since...

So religion is a crutch sometimes...so what,  
Aren't we all in one way or another,  
The walking wounded?

To heal means to make whole.  
And we understand that healing is not the same as curing.  
That while we long for the messiah with the  
Purple fizzing test tube  
We are in a world of messiahs  
Who lovingly dress wounds  
Instead of always taking the wounds away.

Healing is different than curing,  
The definition of curing  
Is to make healthy again

Unless you're talking about curing a pickle,  
For which there is no cure.  
Whereas the definition of healing  
Is to make whole,  
To integrate the fault into the design...  
To make *shalom*,  
To make peace.

There are three essential elements to healing,  
Prayer, presence and practice.

How does one pray,  
And what does one pray for?  
There were Bedouins who were invited to a big city  
For the first time,  
And the thing that amazed them the most  
Were these shiny silver faucets  
From which came an endless supply  
Of fresh water...  
Before returning to the desert  
They loaded their camels up  
With these faucets  
For everyone in their tribe  
But they did not work...  
Of course,  
They only work when they are connected to something,  
And isn't that true with prayer,  
Don't you need to be connected,  
And how does one get connected  
When you've lost your faith,  
When you are filled with pain and fear,  
How do you get connected?  
And what even to pray,  
I am too angry for prayers of gratitude.  
"Praised be the Lord of imperfection,  
Your flaws are everywhere  
In the elm's unbalanced foliage,  
And the asymmetric faces of Your creatures.  
You form the ripping floods  
That tear the forest  
And bend tornadoes in a twisted dance,  
The lion is blotched with age and mud  
And the Shabbat silverware lies stained...  
Praised be your torah of scratches and scars.  
Praised by your discolorations,

For they are puzzles and poems of your sacred character.” (Danny Seigel)

Let peace reign between my shoulders,  
Let there be reconciliation between my body and mind,  
How good is our breath,  
Our rushing energies,  
As I breathe let me receive,  
Let my body and soul unite in peace,  
Keep me in awe of grand mountains  
And humble dandelions,  
Let me embrace happiness even though...  
Life even though...  
Find it in me to praise you even though...  
Let not my spirit wither and shrivel  
In its thirst,  
Let not my body lose the dew with which you  
Sprinkled it when I was young,  
As I breathe let me receive,  
Deepen and broaden my senses  
To a fresh and green flowering world,  
Oh God, wherever You are,  
As I walk through this desert,  
Let me find my manna,  
That thin flakey film of impossible sweetness  
That the Israelites woke to every new day...  
Send your messiah to change my bandages,  
As I breath let me believe.

Prayer is not always praise  
As one patient said to his doctor  
Who asked what he prays for,  
He responded “I don’t pray for,  
I pray because...  
It reminds me I am not alone...”

Prayer is not always about  
Bringing water to parched field,  
Mending broken bridges,  
Rebuilding ruined cities,  
But watering arid souls,  
Mending broken hearts,  
Rebuilding weakened wills...

Prayer is not always about petition,  
But often conversation,

Like the prayer of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev...  
“I do not know how to ask you Lord of the world,  
and even if I did know,  
I could not bear to do it,  
how could I venture to ask you why  
everything happens as it does?  
But in the Haggadah,  
the father of the one who does not know how to ask is told,  
it is for you to disclose it to him.  
And Lord of the world, am I not your child?  
I do not ask you to reveal to me the secret of your ways,  
I could not bear it!  
But show me one thing,  
show me what this very moment means to me,  
what it demands of me,  
what you Lord are telling me  
through my life at this moment.  
O I do not ask you to tell me why I suffer,  
but only whether I suffer for your sake!”

Prayer is not always ancient,  
Most prayer hasn't even been written yet,  
Your prayer hasn't been written yet,  
God of the broken-hearted,  
God of the angry and grieving,  
Many blessings have been taken from me,  
I hesitate to even call out to You,  
Yet I must be mindful of being alive...  
Create for me possibilities.  
Being crippled  
Colors my life...but remind me that I can choose the color...  
Help me to choose the brightest.

There are two categories of prayer in healing,  
one is *deferring*,  
when people put themselves in the hands of God,  
the other is *collaborative*,  
when people work cooperatively with God.  
We chose what feels right.

Change these bandages, God,  
Change them to something else,  
To priestly garments.

Prayer is not always clear,

Not always certain of itself at all:  
Rabbi Steven Moss wrote:  
“I recall once being asked to pray Psalms  
for a seven-year old boy who was in a coma.  
As I prayed the ancient words,  
I knew I was not sure of the reason  
as to why I was praying.  
Was I asking for the child  
to come out of the coma and  
live a vegetable like existence?  
Was I praying that the child  
would miraculously awaken  
from the coma and be totally cured of cancer?  
Or was I petitioning God  
to mercifully take this child’s life?  
In truth, I was asking for all three answers,  
as well as none at all.  
For, by this act of prayer,  
I was not saying to God  
that I wanted one answer over the other...  
By this act of prayer  
I was doing the only thing I knew to do  
at this desperate moment,  
which was to place this boy’s existence  
in God’s presence,  
through my presence of love and care for this child.”

I am not connected to my faith, rabbi,  
How can I pray...  
Do not think of a master-servant model  
When you pray,  
Rather try covenantal prayer,  
In which you and God are co-creators and co-sanctifiers,  
But I do not believe in God, how can I pray...  
Abraham Joshua Heschel said  
“To pray is to take notice of the wonder,  
to regain a sense of the mystery  
that animates all beings.”  
And you for whom the cure is yet a mystery,  
How can you not wonder...  
If to pray it to take notice,  
Take notice,  
Of child,  
Painting,  
Song,

Sun,  
If you cannot pray because you cannot believe in God  
Right now,  
Then let your eyes and ears take notice of the wonder,  
And they will pray for you.

Do not say there is no hope for me,  
For there is always hope in you,  
Hope in the things we know today,  
Hope in our ability to re-open  
Our dreams for our future,  
With new circumstance,  
Integrate and make whole.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner wrote:  
“God puts you where God needs you,  
you are where you are supposed to be.  
So this is where I am supposed to be!  
I always thought I was supposed to be somewhere else,  
doing something else...”

But here you are,  
Your presence as real and sacred as  
When your heart was stronger,  
As real and sacred as before your stroke...  
Before the pain...

Your presence,  
Through the presence of those who love you  
Is placed into God's presence,

Prayer, presence, practice...

A cardiologist once said,  
“healing begins with the heart,  
with emotional open heart surgery...”  
sharing with ones you love...

The presence of people is so important  
For resilience, will  
And comfort...

Tradition teaches...  
Anyone who visits a sick person takes away  
a sixtieth part of his disease or ailment.

Maimonides said this was part of the Golden Rule and therefore visiting the sick though rabbinically ordained has Biblical status. He devotes long sections of his Code to visiting the sick.

Akiva said it was a sin not to visit the sick.

On Sunday October twenty fourth, from 9-4:30

There is a conference at UCLA called

Hope Abandoned, Hope Redeemed

Training volunteers for the mitzvah

Of Bikur Holim,

Visiting the sick,

And I would love to go with a group of our congregants.

There are some of the most extraordinary thinkers

And teachers in this field,

And many sessions to choose from,

Let me know please if you are interested,

That way we don't have to choose,

We can each go to different sessions and reconvene

And swap sacred stories over lunch together.

Prayer, presence and practice,

Practice as in ritual,

Whether religious rituals,

Of which there are many new ones,

The *taanit dibbur*,

Where people gather with someone who is ill

And have a fast of words,

Meaning no one says anything for an allotted time

Except reciting psalms,,

Or other rituals,

A special havdallah for a divorce,

Going to mikveh, the ritual bath

And immersing in its buoyant life-affirming waters,

Rituals anchor and empower a person,

spark courage and surge of inner strength,

gives a sense of action instead of submissiveness –  
creates goals...

to live from Sabbath candles to Sabbath candles,

to dignify oneself with sacred song and gathering,

and there are small rituals,

the large yellow juicy Asian pear

that my beautiful Telma eats every day,

what does that pear have to do with the tumor in her body

which is already bigger than the pear itself?

Everything,

It's all connected,  
The pear is like a silver faucet  
Out of which gushes  
Fresh clean supply of  
God's kisses.

You might be the holiest people...  
You who'd trade holy for healthy  
In an instant,  
Are your sufferings welcome to you?  
Neither they nor their reward.

The Garden of Eden was perfect,  
And yet,  
A misstep, and man was exiled,  
The original tablets God inscribed  
Were perfect,  
More perfect than the second set  
And yet,  
They were shattered,  
The Temple in Jerusalem was perfect,  
And it too was destroyed...

Our role models in Torah,  
Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, all flawed.

Jacob was a trickster,  
Swindled his brother out of his birthright,  
Stole his brother's blessing,  
And then one night,  
He wrestled with a Presence...  
His hip was twisted  
So he walked with a painful limp  
And here,  
Here when he was broken  
Did he receive his true name, Israel,  
And it is him, our namesake,  
In incompleteness  
He was suddenly whole,

Moses had a serious speech impediment,  
He stuttered and was heavy of tongue,  
And some say that his difficulty in speech  
Was the very reason he was chosen  
For only a man with no gift of speech

would never mistake God's voice for his own...

Midrash says, "Broken vessels are scorned by men, but God uses them."

We do scorn broken vessels,  
But these are the vessels God uses...

The shattered pieces of the original tablets,  
They were not discarded  
But placed in the ark  
Sacred though broken,

Dr. Steven Levine in his book  
*Healing into Like and Death*,  
describes those whose healing  
allows them to live  
and whose healing allows them to die.  
He wrote of a woman who greeted her physicians  
with verbal abuse,  
judgmental, her children would not visit,  
dying alone and in pain.  
Unable to fight another moment,  
she surrendered.  
She began to sense that she was not alone in her suffering,  
images came to her of others suffering,  
an Eskimo woman dying from childbirth,  
a woman in a car wreck,  
a young woman with yellowing skin dying of hepatitis,  
an mother dying of cholera.  
"The pain was beyond my bearing.  
I couldn't stand it any longer and something broke.  
Maybe it was my heart.  
I saw it wasn't just MY pain, it was THE pain.  
It wasn't just my life, it was all life.  
It was life itself."  
Her heart opened to others in pain in the hospital.  
She asked forgiveness from her children and met her grandchildren for the first time.  
She had found the universal in the personal.  
Out of the broken, to at last be whole.

A King had a jewel he loved to gaze upon every day,  
His most treasured possession,  
Until one day it dropped,  
And a large crack appeared in its center.  
Devastated,

The King summoned all his jewelers and artisans,  
But all they could suggest was splitting it  
And making two gems,  
Until one humble artist came  
And said if he could take the jewel to his workshop for a week  
He could fix it.  
At the end of the week,  
The artist returned,  
And the King marveled at what he had done,  
For the jewel was now even more dazzling than before,  
The artist had not split the jewel,  
He had carved along the crack  
Leaves and delicate petals,  
Turning the break into the stem of a rose,  
And now it was whole, again,  
Whole, and better,  
Though the break was still present,  
For now it was not just hewn from ground,  
It was a sign of covenant,  
It was God's work and man's skill  
Come together,  
A covenantal prayer.

You are the holiest people in the world,  
You who are engaged  
In battles for your health,  
Drafted into an internal war  
You never imagined fighting.  
The messiah sits among you,  
Concerned with your bandages,  
You are the prophets,  
You are the faithful  
You didn't want this,  
This attention,  
Like the toys in the nursery  
Who are loved so much  
Their skin wears off,  
Their eyes fall out,  
Their stuffing peaks through seams,  
There is no question, you are the sacred.  
And there is no question,  
And any one of us could prove it a thousand different ways,  
That life is unfair.  
Life is completely unfair,  
Still we are called to make the cracked jewel

Into a work of art.  
On Yom Kippur we fast,  
We come empty handed before our God,  
We ask who will live and who will die,  
We ask for forgiveness on behalf of all people,  
a new start,  
A rebirth,  
We consider not only our pain, but the pain,

And when we step out into the air,  
Perhaps it won't be Rabbi Steinberg's air,  
That lovely dry chilled wine,  
But it will move through you,  
Through the sukkah of your body,  
For we are vulnerable and soft,  
Take notice of the wonder,  
Death sometimes lives in the living,  
And healing arise in the dying,  
Let go of any thoughts that don't enhance you.  
You don't have to prove yourself to anyone today.  
Say no when you mean no,  
Free yourself to mean yes when you say yes.  
Seek peace in your own place.  
In yourself.  
This day lies open at your feet.  
Measure out life in spoonfuls you can swallow.  
The river of our blood  
Reminds us of all those rivers that lead to the great ocean,  
The wind of our breath  
Reminds us all the white clouds windswept over the planet,  
Our bones are the birch tree forests,  
Our flesh reminds us of all bodies,  
Salamander, dove, gazelle running for its life  
Over the body of the plain,  
Our passions and our fears,  
Volcano and glacier,  
We are not alone,  
Through the cracks in our lives  
We can see it all,  
If we have the courage to look,  
God is a crutch, but you are wobbly, lean on it,  
Healing is wholeness,  
Dream of it,  
Don't give up because the jewel of your life is cracked,  
Don't split yourself in two,

Your pain will go away and you will still be here.

You are where your thoughts are

so be in the Presence of God

and of people,

Moses spoke five simple words

And she was healed,

El na refa na la,

God please heal her please

El na refa na la.

El na refa na la.

El na refa na la.

El na refa na la.

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El na refa na la.

El na refa na la.

El na refa na la.

El na refa na la.

El na refa na la.

I place this congregation's existence

In Your Presence my God,

Through my presence of love and care

For this congregation.

El na refa na la.