

Finding God in Chaplaincy Work Through Jewish Text

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Training and working as a chaplain have impacted not only the way I am able to be with people in their times of need but also the ways that I think about and connect with God. Most Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) courses consist of clinical hours in a hospital, hospice, nursing home, or prison as well as classroom time where one learns how to be present with another person and reflects on their work. The CPE experience gave me the tools to use my “sacred texts” to connect my work with God and to have a more personal relationship with God.

In writing about his CPE experience, Chaplain Dr. Bruce Feldstein reflects:

Through a process of continual reflection and refinement that is at the core of CPE training, I learned to observe my own reactions and thoughts, feelings, and images and draw on these in formulating what to say to patients and families. I would consider how to be with them whether to accompany, guide, bless, or advocate, or some combination of these. Over time, I became a spiritual reflective practitioner in action.¹

As Feldstein explains, the CPE experience can be a way of enacting practical theology, which, according to Bennet, Graham, Pattison & Walton, “... seeks in explicit and varied ways to enable the Christian practitioner to articulate faith — to speak of God in practice.”² CPE is rooted in Christian values and

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1. Feldstein, C. (2011). Bridging with the Sacred: Reflections of an MD Chaplain. *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, 42(1), pp.155–161. 158.
 2. Qtd. in Stoddart, E. (2018, June 21). Retrieved from <https://ericstoddart>.

ideas, where the role of chaplain is seen as one's "ministry," the place where one is doing God's work, relating to God, and sharing God with others. By working within the frame of practical theology, the chaplain gains a language of God through their ministry.

In this paper, I present a Jewish view of "practical theology," illustrating how Jewish chaplaincy is a way to interact with God and to think about God, and how Jewish text can not only guide how we are meant to live our lives but also how we might speak to and about God. Through this lens, I explore how chaplaincy has affected my thinking about God, how chaplaincy taught me to use text as a reflective tool, and how it informed my views on Jewish education generally and rabbinic training specifically.

Thinking about God

In my years of yeshiva day school, *midrasha*, and rabbinical training, I don't think I was ever asked about my personal relationship with God. I wasn't asked about how my actions allow me to connect or not to connect with God. I wasn't asked to use the texts I was involved in to garner meaning in my life. My education was about learning and memorizing. I studied law. I memorized which rabbi said what. I learned about structure and versions of text. I practiced holding many opinions in my head so I could answer questions. I examined different interpretations of a seemingly extra letter written in a verse. I was encouraged to ask questions. Ideas, words, and songs were playing through my head at any given moment.

CPE was a shift. I was told to reflect, not to spit back information, not to argue a point. I was asked to think about what my "sacred texts teach me about my situation." The primary tool I used was writing in order to craft spiritual and theological reflections. At first, these two genres seemed very foreign, but I learned from my Christian colleagues that, while in seminary, they were asked to write these on a regular basis. Through their years of studying, they

wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2018/06/21/what-is-practical-theology/. Bennett Zoë, Graham, E. L., Pattison, S., & Walton, H. (2018). *Invitation to research in practical theology*. London: Routledge.

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had “spiritual direction,” wrote their own theology, and openly spoke about the place of God in their journey.

This reflective process asked them to take “a concrete experience in spiritual care that is being critically examined and evaluated, drawing upon the wisdom of one’s religious heritage in the larger context of major perspectives and practices in the social sciences, while generating new visions in understanding and practicing care.”³ I viewed this as a backwards *d’var Torah*; instead of seeing a piece of Torah and writing about my ideas, I took a situation and made connections to text. The theological reflection “is a self-conscious, intentional act in which one seeks to know God and be known by God so that one can love God and others as God loves. It is theological because it consciously relates the divine to the human in a way that makes transformation into wholeness possible.”⁴ I looked at the texts to which I connected, delving into them to discover my feelings, what I could learn about a situation based on that text, and where I saw God.

This practice can be illustrated in the case of M, a 40-year-old woman with metastatic cancer. I spent many days visiting with her and her family. After one visit with her, my theological reflection was:

I was in shock when I was speaking to M this time. She practically quoted the fears of the rabbis in Moed Katan. This was the most tearful visit with M. I was at a loss for my own words, but really this visit was full of tears. She is crying for all that she will be losing. She is crying for the pain and sadness that she fears her son (age 2.5) will feel. She is crying out of fear. She is crying because there is nothing more to be done. Just as it says in Lamentations 1:16:

על־אֵלֶּהָ | אֲנִי בּוֹכֶהָ עֵינַי | עֵינַי לְרֵדָה מַיִם כִּי־רַחֵם מִמֶּנִּי מִנְחָם מְשִׁיב נֶפְשֵׁי הָיוּ בְּנֵי שׁוֹמְמִים כִּי גָבַר
אוֹיֵב:

For these things do I weep, My eyes flow with tears: Far from me is any comforter Who might revive my spirit; My children are forlorn, For the foe has prevailed.

For now comfort is too far away.

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3. VanKatwyk, P. 2010 [online] Spiritualcare.ca. Available at: https://spiritualcare.ca/flow/uploads/pdfs/THEOLOGICAL_REFLECTION1.pdf [Accessed 9 Jan. 2020].
 4. Warren, H., Murray, J. and Best, M. (2002). The Discipline and Habit of Theological Reflection. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 41(4), pp. 323–331. 324.

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And to this, my self-reflection exploring my own feelings, was:

Again I find myself in tears even as I am writing this. I know that there was so much more said during the visit than I could hold onto, as it was really difficult to stay present. I have seen her since this visit.... She also told me that I don't have the temperament of a traditional chaplain, but that was something good for her — that we are able to joke around, talking about regular things, but that I will also be ok for the more difficult conversations. Going to the birthday party was very bittersweet. Her son was so happy, and it was really amazing to see the entire staff there (many came in even though they were off). But I couldn't help thinking in the back of my mind that this is most likely the last birthday she will celebrate with her son. In speaking with her after the party, she was more tearful and sad again. She is in disbelief that she will be moving to hospice and this is the end — and I'm really not sure what else I am able to do, other than just show up to sit with her and her husband.

It was through reflection on the verse in Lamentations that I was able to realize the deep sadness I felt in this visit. But it was not only the verse itself that brought meaning to the situation but also the general emotion of the book of Lamentations and the time of year at which it is read. Through the interactions with Patient M and my connection to this verse, I found words for a feeling and a perspective on God that I could not have found on my own.

The CPE process provided me a new avenue for use of text as an explanatory or responsive tool for emotional experience for myself, my patients, and their families. The process shed new light on God and my own spirituality. This new perspective offers a significant avenue for growth both as a chaplain and as a rabbinic scholar, which is not generally available through traditional avenues of study.

Theological Growth as a Chaplain and Rabbi

As VanKatwyk describes, “Theological reflection is a spiritual discipline in self-care and in personal and professional growth.”⁵ When done right, it allows

5. VanKatwyk, 3.

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for a person to consider the texts they are learning to guide their actions, not only has *halakhic* precepts but also as ideas and language to deeply explore what drives their actions. One can then look at biblical verses, Talmudic exegesis, and even *halakha* as a basis for discussing one's personhood. As Warren explains, "Theological reflection goes beyond analysis, leading the practitioner into a different relationship with God because of the new configuration between them that arises."⁶ Using theological reflections allowed me to notice those things that influenced me, giving meaning to all I was experiencing and, most importantly, allowing me to recognize God in it all.

Rabbi Amy Eilberg, in her remarks at the 10th anniversary of Jewish chaplaincy at Stanford University Hospital, relates her work to the ideas of *bikur cholim*:

...The Jewish chaplain enters that door each day to come to work, or each week as a volunteer, ready to perform the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*, being present to the ill, which Maimonides says is an expression of the overarching *mitzvah*, "Ve'ahavta le'rei'a'cha kamocho," "Love your neighbor as yourself." Contrary to the natural way of living outside the hospital, in which we instinctively recoil from pain and struggle to avoid it, here we intentionally place ourselves in the realm of suffering in order to reach out to another, to bring the balm of human presence to aching souls, to imitate God's role as a Source of love and healing. As Jewish chaplains — or as volunteers — we also draw on the wisdom of Jewish tradition to bring comfort and connection, and we invite a Jewish patient or staff member experiencing isolation back into the embracing circle of Jewish community.⁷

Throughout the time I was working as a chaplain, I too connected my work to the laws of *bikur cholim*, visiting the ill. I used the *halakhic* texts to dictate how I was supposed to interact while visiting patients, but these texts also allowed me to talk about theology: where God's place was in my work and where God's place was in myself. Rabbi Yitzchok Silver, in his work *Kitzur Mishpatei HaShalom*, separates the laws of *bikur cholim* into four components:

6. Warren, 324.

7. Eilberg, A., 2010. Rabbi Amy Eilberg Remarks. SUH Jewish Chaplaincy 10th Anniversary, May 23, 2010. Available online: <https://stanfordhealthcare.org/content/dam/SHC/patientsandvisitors/spiritual-care/docs/rabbieilbergremarks52310.pdf>.

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1. To do what the ill person needs
2. To provide comfort to the ill person and their family
3. To pray on their behalf at the bedside, because that is where the *shekhina* (God's presence) is residing, and it is a time for asking for mercy
4. To take 1/60th of the illness away.⁸

Rabbi Silver's breakdown of *bikur cholim* gave me concise language to present my goals when working as a chaplain. I wanted to do what the patient needed, whether that was finding a nurse, sitting and crying with the patient, or even joking around. I was there to bring comfort, even when the familiar sense of comfort was not possible. Instead, I saw comfort as being present and supportive. I learned the art of spontaneous prayer, reciting prayers not during a set time but in response to need or emotion. Sometimes those prayers were traditional liturgical texts and other times they were created with the people beside me. Prayer did not have to be fancy or long; at times, prayers were as simple as "may you have a peaceful day." The idea of taking away 1/60th of the illness, found in BT Nedarim 39b and reiterated by Rabbi Silver, felt like the answer to the overarching question of "what am I doing in these visits?" It is a reminder that being present, even when you can't see an immediate result, is still significant.

In further exploration of the laws of *bikur cholim*, I realized that these rules were not only about how to care for those who are vulnerable; they also included an underlying theme of connecting to God and emulating God. The prooftexts brought by the rabbis are "follow in the way of God" (Deut. 13:5), "do what is right and good in the eyes of God" (Deut. 6:18), and "love your neighbor as yourself, for I am God" (Lev. 19:18). It became clear that by interacting with those who are ill and their caretakers, one is also connecting to God or even perhaps being God's emissary. The work of a chaplain became inherently a spiritual practice. Through connecting my work to the text, the work became an interactive text study, not only allowing me to have a greater understanding of the texts of the rabbis but allowing me to have a closer, more personal, relationship with God.

8. Silver, Yitzchok. *Kitzur Mishpatei HaShalom*. Agudas Notzrei Lashon. 14:8.

Conclusion

Thinking as a chaplain is different from the way I was learning in yeshiva, which was, in many ways, not asking me to think about God. Rather, it was about learning how to use the texts as law or inspiration. Thinking as a chaplain, by contrast, is about exploring how the stories, the ideas from *chasidut*, the verses from the Bible, and even the ideas in *halakha*, can give language to our actions, to our interactions with others, and to our relationship with God. This approach creates new avenues for thinking about God and new directions for spiritual and professional growth not part of traditional rabbinic training and thinking.

However, there does not have to be, nor should there be, such a dichotomy between working as a chaplain and a rabbi. As illustrated in the discussion above, Jewish texts can be used as a companion for pastoral care and as a source for reflection and growth as a rabbi. Having a strong background in traditional text study allows one to build meaningful and rigorous pathways to practice, prayer, and healing. If we can appropriate the language and reflection of chaplaincy, rabbis and Jewish lay people can use texts to illuminate new realities of God in one's life and experience new dimensions in pastoral and spiritual interactions.