

What is Refuah Shleimah? A Deep Dive into Middot



Middah – Refuah Shleimah

Healing and Wholeness



May the One who blessed our ancestors – patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah – bless and heal the one who is ill: _____ child of _____. May the Holy Blessed One overflow with compassion upon them, to restore them, to heal them, to strengthen them, to enliven them. The One will send them, speedily, a complete healing – a healing of the soul and a healing of the body – along with all the ill, among the people of Israel and all humankind, soon, speedily, without delay, and let us all say: Amen! (Mi Sheberach Prayer)

In Jewish tradition, visiting the sick is one of the greatest mitzvot someone can do for another person. According to the Talmud, even just visiting and acknowledging the pain of others allieves part of their suffering.⁽¹⁾ However, one of the great arbiters of Jewish Law, Rabbi Moshe Isserless, claims prayer is an essential part of the mitzvah:



“One who visited [a sick person] and did not pray for him has not fulfilled the religious duty [of visiting the sick].”⁽²⁾

(1) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Metzia, 30b

(2) Shulchan Aruck, Yoreh De'ah, Siman 335

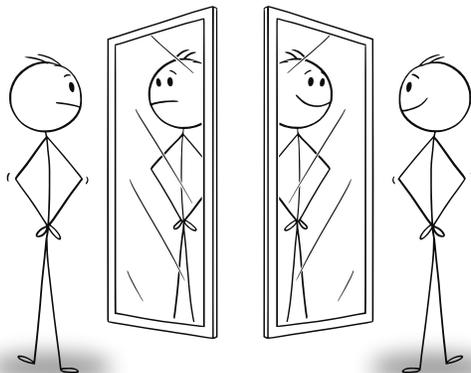
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Whether we're a caregiver, a care receiver, or even just a friend of someone who is suffering, we sometimes find ourselves at a loss for words in the face of what feels like insurmountable pain and distress. In those moments, we can recall the inherited language and ritual the Jewish people have passed down for centuries—the mi sheberach prayer for a “refuah sheleimah/full healing.” But the usefulness of this prayer comes not only in its ready application; it comes in the unique way it addresses a fundamental and painful truth about illness: There isn't always one thing that needs healing. But what is prayer, and what should we expect a mi sheberach?

On the subject of what prayer is supposed to accomplish, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote: “[Less than prayer changes the world, it changes us.](#)” This sentiment mirrors an observation by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19th century rabbi who wrote about how the deeper meaning of the Hebrew word for prayer can be found in its etymology:



“Hitpallel, from which “tefillah” (prayer in Hebrew) is derived, originally meant to deliver an opinion about oneself, to judge oneself, or [to make] an inner attempt at so doing...it denotes to step out of active life to attempt to gain a true judgment of one’s relationship to God and the world, and the world to oneself.” (3)

(3) Horeb Part IV

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Tefillah, according to Rabbi Hirsch, is a reflective experience that consists of both speaking to God and to ourselves. When we pray, we are also reaffirming our belief in and concern for the values, ideas, and people we are praying for. When we've finished praying, we should be inspired to open our eyes and act, to the best of our abilities, in alignment with our prayers toward their fulfillment. This applies to all prayers, including ones for safety and livelihood as well as those for healing. Reciting a mi sheberach should be an opportunity for us to meditate on the people in our lives who need our thoughts, prayers, and support, and inspire us to reach out to them.

The mi sheberach for healing's unique formulation can also serve as a reminder of a crucial aspect of healing and illness; illness can affect more than our physical body. While physical conditions can improve, traumatic medical experiences can leave emotional scars on patients who we when serving as caregivers and loved ones cannot always see. Inversely, mental health conditions can affect our physical bodies in ways that aren't immediately intuitive, causing things like fatigue, high blood pressure, and headaches. Recognizing this duality, Jewish tradition coined the phrase *refuat hanefesh v'refuat haguf*, a healing of spirit and of body, within the language of the Jewish prayer for healing, emphasizing the healing of both the inner and outer experiences of our patients and loved ones.

When you recite this prayer, recognize the people in your life who need healing, say their names out loud, and acknowledge their suffering, physically and/or mentally. Make mental space for God and each other, and say "Hineni - I am here," to both.

