FROM THE DOCTOR'S DESK

And We Will Be Healed

By Dr. Daniel Eisenberg

As Jews, we thank Hashem three times daily for curing the sick. Refaenu, the prayer for healing, was instituted as the eighth blessing of the weekday Shemona Esrei as an allusion to the baby boy whose bris is on the eighth day and requires a refuah. A discussion of the blessing of Refaenu is particularly appropriate for this time of year, as we reflect on our lives and the year to come.

The Talmud describes a disagreement: is man judged for the entire year on Rosh Hashana or is man judged each day? If we are to believe that the world is truly judged for the coming year on Rosh Hashana, why do we say Refaenu each weekday? Several commentators have attempted to answer this question.

Sefer Chasidim explains that according to the opinion that man is judged on Rosh Hashana, only the decision of whether a person will die during the coming year is made and this judgment only extends until the following Rosh Hashana. He suggests that perhaps even though an individual will live until the following Rosh Hashana, he or she might develop an incurable disease during the coming year and die immediately after the next Rosh Hashana. We cannot just wait until next Rosh Hashana and pray for the sick because at that point it may be too late. We must pray for people before they are in an irreversible situation.

The Ben Ish Chai explains that while Hashem may decree an illness for a person in the coming year, we pray in Refaenu that Hashem precedes the illness with the cure. That is, we pray that He grant him strength and a healthy body, so that the illness which is decreed against him will not cause lasting injury.

The text of the first part of the blessing comes from the book of Yirmeyahu. When we use pesukim in our prayers, we usually take them verbatim. However, in this case, the original text is worded in the singular, yet the blessing that we recite is in the plural. Rabbi Elie Munk, in The World of Prayer, explains that we change the verse to the plural because "all requests have to be made for the community; never for the individual alone."

Additionally, we are allowed to add personal requests into the end of each blessing of Shemonah Esrei. Within the communal blessing of Refaenu, we personalize our prayers by inserting a short paragraph that requests a complete healing for an individual. But even in the added paragraph for the individual, we end with the words, "among the other sick of Israel."

Rabbi Wohlgemuth, author of A Guide To Jewish Prayer, writes: "From this we learn that we do not have the right to pray for just one person. All Jews are equal; there are no privileged characters before God. The moment I say, 'Heal this specific person,' and I neglect to mention anybody else, it means that this individual is somehow more important, and I do not really care about the rest of the Jewish people."

Rav Shimon Schwab teaches that upon careful analysis of the passage from Yirmeyahu from which the beginning of the blessing is taken, we see that the prophet is not praying for a physical cure, but a cure for spiritual sickness. Yirmeyahu is praying for a healing of the spiritual afflictions that affect the people and we do the same in our prayers.

The phrase in the middle of the blessing, "For You, Divine King, are the faithful and merciful Healer," implies that Hashem is a different kind of healer than man. Several commentators explain that often it is the way of the world that an effective healer cannot also be merciful. To be an effective healer, the physician sometimes needs to use painful treatments, which requires him to close his eyes to the suffering of the patient. On the other hand, were the physician to be "merciful" and not utilize painful cures, he cannot be effective because all human treatments involve some side effects, risk, or pain. However, Divine treatments are always efficacious and without side effects. Hashem is different in that He is able to be both an effective healer and truly merciful.

Why does the Refaenu blessing end with the words: "Who heals the sick of His people Israel" as opposed to "Healer of all flesh," as Asher Yatzar, the blessing we recite after using the bathroom, ends? In fact, Rav Shlomo Zalman Aurbach rules that if one inadvertently ends Refaenu with the words "Healer of all flesh" he has not fulfilled his obligation to say the blessing.

The ending of the Asher Yatzar blessing represents the natural process of healing that Hashem has built into the world. We thank Him for creating such an amazing, finely tuned system as the human body. And we recognize that if one small thing were to go wrong with the system, we would not be able to live.

The Talmud states that if someone becomes sick, it is decreed that the person will only recover on a certain date, at certain time, via a certain individual healer. The special ending of Refaenu represents this "supernatural" healing that Hashem performs when He heals a person "before his time."

May we merit a year free of spiritual and physical illness. K'siva va'cahsima tova.

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