Pastoral Care through Psalms, Meditation, & Midrash

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Pluralistic Rabbinical Seminary

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**Course Description:** This course will focus on the utilization of psalms, meditation, midrash, and poetry in pastoral settings. It is intended to complement and expand the pastoral tools that we studied in Basic Pastoral Care which were more clinical in approach. This class will offer the opportunity to develop a pastoral care toolbox that includes the vast array of Jewish creative expression throughout the millennia that can provide comfort, support and meaning. The course will consist of nine on-line classes, assigned Hebrew and English readings to be read prior to class, and assignments intended to develop your own creativity. Assignments for each class must be completed prior to that class, without exception, unless in the case of medical emergency. For much of the course, you will be working in chevruta.

**Course Objectives:** By the end of the course, students should in general have familiarity researching and accessing Jewish texts and specifically (i) understand how creative expression can be employed meaningfully during pastoral encounters; (ii) cultivate their own set of meaningful Jewish writings upon which they can draw in an authentic way; (iii) be able to translate, interpret, and contextualize the traditional writings that we have studied in the class; (iv) feel comfortable offering and leading one or more forms of meditation as a pastoral intervention; (iv) be able to incorporate Jewish writings in their offerings to congregants for the purpose of pastoral support; (v) be able to design and lead a healing service in a variety of pastoral settings.

**Course Requirements:**

1. Students must come to class having read the materials assigned.
2. Attendance and class participation is mandatory. In the event of a student's absence, that student will be required to prepare and record a half-hour teaching on that session's material for the benefit of the rest of the class members, who will be required in a short writing to reflect on that teaching.
3. Each week there will be a written assignment, based upon the reading assignments. They will vary in form from week to week.
4. The instructor will specify which assignments are to be done in chevruta. Those assignments are marked with an asterisk.
5. All assignments, those done individually and those done in chevruta, should be turned in via email to fredda.cohen@gmail.com

**Required Reading Material:**

Dayle Freedman, Ed., *Jewish Pastoral Care: A Practical Handbook from Traditional and Contemporary Sources,* 2nd Edition (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing 2005) [*Jewish Pastoral Care*]

All other required reading materials will be provided on the PRS website, other than materials that can be found in a hardcover Tanakh or on Sefaria.

**I. March 16 – Overview of the Course and Introduction to Tikkun Haklali**

We will begin the course by ascertaining specific learning objectives of participants and establishing a class contract to ensure a sacred space during these sessions. We will briefly review/discuss how we have applied the pastoral interventions taught in the prior session and engage in an exploration of the psalms and how they can serve as equally important tools and how they can be utilized in a practical way.

Readings for March 16

Psalms 23, 121, 133, 134 (please have psalms readily available for class)

Assignment due March 16

Read Psalms 23, 121, 133, 134 in Hebrew and English. Out of these psalms, which have you used or might you use in its entirety in a pastoral situation and why? What are the Hebrew words that have resonance for you? Select another psalm out of these four and pick just one or two verses that you invoke during a pastoral conversation. Why did you pick that verse or verses? Which might you intentionally choose to omit? This assignment is to be done individually (between 500-700 words).

**2. March 23 – Tikkun Haklali – Reb Nachman of Bratzlav**

According to BT Pesaḥim 117a there are ten kinds of songs in the Book of Psalms, consisting of ***nitzuaḥ*, *niggun*, *maskil*, *mizmor*, *shir*, *ashrei*, *tehilla*, *tefilla*, *hoda'a*,** and ***halleluya*.** Reb Nachman identified ten psalms, each representing one of these categories, that could serve as a spiritual remedy. We will examine each of these psalms to discern how and where they might be helpful in the healing process.

Readings for March 23

Psalms 16, 32, 41, 42, 59, 77, 90, 105, 137, and 150 (please have psalms readily available for class)

Assignment due March 23*

In chevruta, read all ten psalms to gain a general familiarity with each. Each chevruta will then focus more intensely on 3 or 4 of these psalms: 1 - Psalms 15, 32, 41; 2 – Psalms 42, 59, 77; 3 – Psalms 90, 105, 137 & 150. Each chevruta should analyze in depth their assigned psalms and teach on the potential of their healing power. Please provide a written interpretation and reflection which you will present in class (one per chevruta, including points of agreement and disagreement) In addition, each chevruta will select one of the psalms assigned and provide its own creative and resonant translation.

3. **April 6 – Psalms of Lament – Hope in Light of Loss**

During this session, we will discuss how the psalms can provide an expression for those who are suffering loss of different types. In this session, we will examine how our pastoral counseling can be informed by Psalms of Lament, in terms of our ability to facilitate the exploration of feelings of loss, identify stages of loss, and provide structure for counseling.

Readings for April 6

Walter Brueggemann, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life" and "The Formfulness of Grief," in *The Psalms and The Life of Faith* (Augsburg Fortress 1995), pp. 67-97 (on PRS website)

Assignment for April 6

Brueggemann cites six general stages in the psalms of: (i) address to God; (ii) complaint; (iii) petition; (iv) motivation; (v) vow of offering; and (vi) assurance of being heard (praise). Brueggemann asserts that this formulation is intended to rehabilitate and restore those who are suffering as it "enhances experience and brings it to articulation and also limits the experience of suffering so that it can be received and coped with…" He contrasts this method with that of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross who articulated the iconic five stages of grief. While Brueggemann supports Kubler-Ross's attempt to give form to grief, he notes that there is a significant difference in that formulation, i.e., the absence of an intervening God. What is your theology regarding an intervening God? If your theology does not contemplate divine intervention, can the psalms still maintain an affective quality for you? How might one's spirituality have its own truth and path vis-a-vis one's belief system? This assignment is to be done individually (between 500-700 words).

4. **April 13 – Derash and Midrash**

During the next two sessions, we will address spiritual care through the lens of derash and midrash. To paraphrase Rabbi Dayle Friedman, as midrash enables us to unearth meaning from the text, so can the practice of derash direct us to look more deeply into a person's soul to mine meaning at a more profound level. It ensures that we get past the facts that can mire us and prevent a true pastoral encounter. Midrashim can serve as tools to discern what a person finds resonant in life through story. (The recently developed discipline of Narrative Medicine similarly

operates on the same theory of using the narrative skills of recognizing, absorbing, interpreting and being moved by stories of illness.)

Readings for April 13

*Jewish Pastoral Care*, pp. 42-55

Silberman, Jeffrey M. Jewish Spiritual Care as a Midrashic Process. *The Journal of the National Association of Jewish Chaplains 2004*, Vol. 6, Number 2: 8-11 (on PRS website)

Assignment for April 13*

In chevruta, read the two midrashim (regarding Rabbah and his illness and the conversation between Simeon and Yochanan ben Zakkai) in the Silberman article. Record a dialogue between the chevruta in written form (you can record and then transcribe or recreate from memory) that reflects the meaning that you derived from both midrashim. Questions that may be addressed: Did one midrash speak to you over another? Did your meaning differ from that of Rabbi Silberman? How did the midrash make you feel when you read it? After discussing with your chevruta, did you feel differently? What type of personal memory or experience did it evoke? Did it provide new insights into that memory? (One dialogue of 500-700 words per chevruta; please be prepared to present in class.)

5. **April 20 - Midrash: Stories We Tell, Stories That Inform**

We will continue our exploration of midrash as it pertains to understanding one's spirituality. Spirituality has been defined as that aspect of humanity that is nurtured by seeking and expressing meaning, purpose, and connection. Through the stories we tell and are told we make sense of our world. Midrash is the process of interpreting sacred texts so they may address questions of meaning and provide an instructive or identifiable narrative. Midrash can provide greater understanding of a situation and also affirmation that one is not alone in one's plight.

Readings for April 20

Mishle 31:2 (on PRS website)

Assignment for April 20*

Please translate the marked off section of this midrash from Hebrew to English. Notice the poignancy of the Hebrew as you read to each other. What do you experience hearing the midrash in Hebrew? What words or sounds are repeated? Does that enhance the affective quality of the midrash? What provides greater resonance for you: understanding the meaning of a writing or appreciating its sound, cadence, and/or music? How might that inform your usage of the Jewish texts in your pastoral care? Please work in chevruta on this project. You may submit one translation for the chevruta, indicating any differences you may have regarding the meaning of the text. Do you think this text would provide comfort for one who is grieving? What might we be wary of?

6. **April 27 – Poetry: The Metaphor That Attends to Life Itself**

Over the next two sessions, we will change our medium, concentrating on the poem. Similar to psalms and midrashim, poetry generally focuses on one life event without providing a larger life context. They in essence provide a snapshot of an event or feeling. The words chosen are deliberate and carry a heightened intentionality.

Readings for April 27

Capps, Donald, The Poets's Gift: Toward the Renewal of Pastoral Care (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press 1993), pp. 7-38 (on PRS website)

Assignment for April 27

In the chapter assigned, Donald Capps explores the poetry of William Stafford, which delves into his formative years, enabling a mechanism for introspection and self-reflection. As clergy and pastoral caregivers, it is essential that we also recognize our own humanity, with its flaws, vulnerabilities and hopes. Which poem of Stafford's connects with you? Write a brief reflection (one or two paragraphs) describing how Stafford's poetry might guide you in examining your own life. Then write a poem of your own about yourself which has a revelatory nature. I would prefer that you create your own poetry, but if you find yourself stuck, identify a poem that has spoken to you in a very personal way in terms of lifting up personal issues of your own that have informed your decision to become clergy and prepare a 500-700 word reflection on that process.

7. **May 4 – Poems for the Ages**

During this class, we will be reviewing the poetry of Jewish poets which constitute responses to societal and political issues of different eras.

Readings for May 4 (handouts)

Poems by Solomon ibn Gabirol, Yehuda haLevi, Moses ibn Ezra, Chaim Nahman Bialik, Saul Tchernichovsky, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Lea Goldberg, Zelda, and Yehuda Amichai (on PRS website

Assignment for May 4*

All students should read and be familiar with the poetry assigned. Each chevruta will be assigned to study in greater detail one of the poets of these three eras: the Golden Age of Spain (ibn Gabirol, haLevi, ibn Ezra), the Hebrew Enlightenment of Eastern Europe (Bialik, Tchernichovksy), and the Rise of Israel (Greenberg, Goldberg, Zelda, Amichai). As a chevruta, prepare a short literary and political history of the era assigned to describe to the class (may be written out, bullet point, outline, etc.). Then read the Torah portion of the week (B'har Bechukotai) and create a d'var Torah incorporating one of the poems to address an issue of concern.

8. **May 11 – Meditation: The Healing Power of the Breath**

This session will be based on the teachings of Drs. Richard P. Brown and Patricia Gerbarg and Dr. Dan Siegel. These practitioners explain how mindfulness and breathing practices activate communication pathways between the mind and body, changing the brain and calming the stress response. Siegel teaches how we can achieve, and help others to achieve, a place of equanimity.

Readings for May 11

Bingaman, Kirk A. The Promise of Neuroplasticity for Pastoral Care and Counseling. Pastoral Psychology 2013; 62: 549-60 (on PRS website)

Open My Heart: Living Jewish Prayer podcast (produced by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality): Podcast 3 (11/30/20), Podcast 6 (12/14/20), Podcast 18 (2/5/21)

Roth, Jeff, Jewish Meditation Practices for Everyday Life: Awakening Your Heart, Connecting with God (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing 2009), pp. 19-39 (on PRS website)

Assignment for May 11

Prepare a written reflection on your own mediation practice. If you do not currently engage in a practice, you may find a mediation on Insighttimer.com or download the app. Describe how meditation has benefitted you and how you might utilize it as a rabbi in a number of scenarios (500-700 words)

9. **May 25 – Healing Service: The Power of Community**

Jewish healing services offer a safe and sacred space for individuals to pray for healing for themselves and others. They often include text, meditation, music, and poetry to create a calm and uplifting experience. The healing impact is enhanced by the communal and interpersonal nature of the service.

Readings for May 25

Prince, Michele F. Judaism, Health, and Healing: How a New Jewish Communal Field Took Root and Where it Might Grow. Journal of Jewish Communal Service 2009 Summer/Fall; 84: 3/4, 280-91(on PRS website)

Goodman, James Stone, In the Meadow of Healing-Instructions for Facilitators. *The Journal of the National Association of Jewish Chaplains* 2004, Vol. 6, Number 2: 20-23 (on PRS website)

Assignment for May 25*

For your final project, in chevruta create a healing service (approximately 20 minutes), which each chevruta will lead in class. You may want to focus on a particular ill of any nature that is impacting the community. It may be helpful to review some of the services posted in ritualwell.org/healing-services.