

Rabbi Judy Schindler
Healing Drash
Yom Kippur Afternoon 5772

We've entered the heart of our healing service. When people make it to the other side of an illness there are several rituals we offer.

The first is the mikvah. In the ritual bath which we use at Temple Israel, as there are in all mikvahs, there are seven steps leading down into the transformative waters. In Judaism, seven is a number of wholeness. As one immerses in the waters they emerge into a new stage of life, as a survivor.

The second ritual we offer is Birkat Hagomel, a blessing of Thanksgiving that according to our tradition can be said on four occasions: when one has crossed the ocean as on an overseas flight, when one has crossed the desert, when one has recovered from a serious illness, or when one has been released from prison.

Two weeks ago, we were blessed to offer Birkat Hagomel for a congregant, Jerry Rittenberg, who healed from one of the toughest cancers that can come one's way.

There is a popular adage that time heals all wounds but often, time is not enough. We need more. The multitude of cancers in our congregation, the declining bodies of those who are aging, the struggles with mental health that so many of our congregants face, all take far more than time to heal.

Echoing the seven steps that bring one into the healing waters of the mikvah, I offer you the seven steps beyond simple time, that Jerry Rittenberg found to help him heal.

It was two and a half years ago that Jerry was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. After overcoming the understandable shock of hearing those words cross his doctor's lips, Jerry chose to take a walk at the nearby Columbia Zoo. On that reflective stroll he made a commitment: No disease was going to change the way he lived or the things he cared so much about.

That was his first, most important, step towards healing: a drive to not let the disease keep him from living life.

Jerry's early stages of the battle were frightening. As he stood on the edge of death two summers ago, he was airlifted to Johns Hopkins Hospital. A surgeon saved him with a procedure that was unable to be completed because the cancer had spread to Jerry's liver and stomach.

Skilled doctors would be a second step to finding wholeness. We need able partners to help us heal -- doctors, nurses, experts in the illness we are confronting.

The third step to healing for Jerry was prayer. He relied on it daily. "I do not believe that you need to be in a synagogue to pray," he shared with me. "God listens to us all of the time."

He relied on his own prayers. He depended on those around him. The prayers of relatives, clergy, friends, and people he barely knew, all gave him strength.

The fourth step to healing was hope. Jerry knew he had a reason to live. He had family to be there for, dreamed of weddings to live for, older parents to care for.

A fifth step was surrounding himself with positive people. Jerry avoided negative thoughts and people with a negative outlook on life.

A sixth step into the metaphoric waters of healing was maintaining not only his strength of soul, but his strength of body – working out regularly, even after chemo treatments. Jerry was not going to let the cancer get the best of him.

And the seventh step was Jerry's strong belief in God. He was never really scared because he knew that God would help him through. He never feared death as he knew that even if this was the outcome, God would take care of his family and the people who were so important to him.

Seven steps into the waters towards healing: living life fully, having able healers, accepting prayer whether your own or that of others, living with hope, surrounding yourself with the positive, strengthening your body, and having faith in God.

Your steps or your friend's steps might not be exactly the same as Jerry's. Yet still, steps need to be taken towards healing. Healing takes more than time. It takes each one of us reaching out with words, with action, with song, with spirit, with prayer.