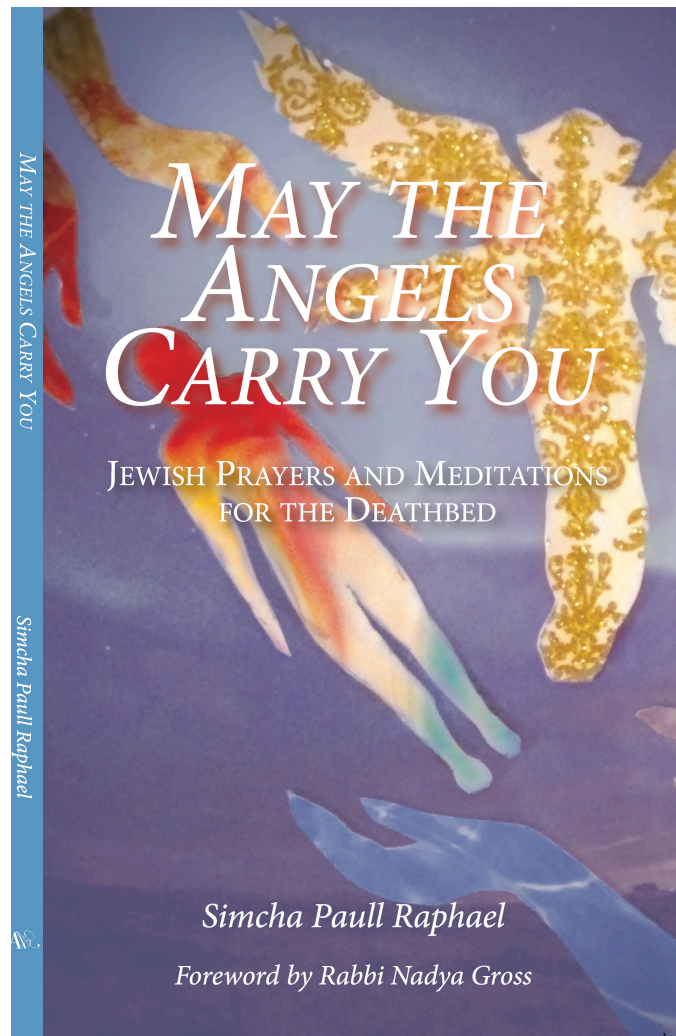


“What Does It Mean To Pray for Someone Who is Dying?”

by Simcha Paull Raphael

***Excerpted from May the Angels Carry You -
Jewish Prayers and Meditations for the Deathbed, pp. 1-19***



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*May the Angels
Carry You*

*Jewish Prayers
and Meditations
for the Deathbed*

Simcha Paul Raphael

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*“The old shall be renewed,
and the new shall be made holy.”*

— Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO PRAY FOR SOMEONE WHO IS DYING?

THIS PRAYER BOOK is designed to be a practical resource for people approaching the end of life, and for family members and professional caregivers who companion them on the journey. It is, as the title suggests, a spiritual resource of Jewish prayers and meditations for the deathbed.

But what does it mean to offer prayers on behalf of one who is dying? When reciting Psalms or singing prayers at the bedside of a person whose life force is waning because of a serious illness, or one who may already have been given a terminal diagnosis, how do we understand our goals and imagined outcome? As citizens of the 21st-century who recognize the complexity of medical science, can we assume our prayers will bring someone back from death's door? When feeling powerless in the face of devastating diseases such as cancer, stroke, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, heart disease, etc., do we really believe our prayers will make a difference? What is the function of prayer?

I recall times when serving as a pastoral chaplain in hospice and chronic care settings, it was common for family members to ask “Rabbi, will you say a prayer or a blessing?” While it was easy enough to find the words of a Psalm or a healing prayer to offer on behalf of someone who was sick, speaking with family members about prayer, differences between healing of the body and healing of the soul, and having conversations about God, if people were open to such dialogue, was often even more poignant than the prayers themselves. Today, in addition to words and melodies of prayer, people often need a framework and context to see the deeper processes involved in the act of praying, especially at the deathbed.

In offering these reflections on the function and efficacy of deathbed prayer, my intention is to help make the words and prayers in this book more meaningful to you and those around you. While I recognize that there are no final answers to the ultimate mystery and enigma of human mortality, I hope my thoughts on this complex subject will invite you to reflect on what it means to provide prayer, spiritual support and companionship to loved ones who are “on the runway” preparing for a departure from this world.

*Prayer As Dipping Into the
Well of God's Blessings*

In exploring the meaning and function of deathbed prayer, it is important to know that the Hebrew word for blessing, *brachah* (plural *berachot*), is derived from the root word *berech*—which also means “knee.” The formula that often begins traditional Jewish blessings is *Baruch Atta Adonai*—“Blessed are you God.” Interpretatively we can translate this to mean “I bend my knees before you, O God!” The central notion here is that prayer itself is a bending or surrender to divine power or God’s potency. Thus, in dealing with sickness and death we surrender our sense of being in control in asking God to be an agent of the healing that we cannot do ourselves.

Taking this traditional point of view one step further: another understanding of the word *brachah*, blessing, is connected to the Hebrew word *bereichah*—a “pool” or a “channel of water flowing down.”⁸ Thus praying for another person can be seen as dipping into the pool of divine blessing, to bring forth protection or healing to the person for whom we are praying.

In traditional religious language, the notion here is that God’s grace and blessings are always available for each person to draw down into their

own life, whether we are praying for healing of the body or healing of the soul.

While this is the starting point-of-view for thinking about the function of prayer on the deathbed, the inter-weaving of traditional and contemporary ideas about prayer are much more complicated and diverse.

Prayers for Healing of Body

The traditional Jewish prayer for healing—the *Mi Shebeirach* petitions:

May the One who blessed our ancestors,
Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,
Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah
bless and heal the one who is ill . . .

Even more, we call upon God as the Merciful One and ask for “a complete healing from the heavenly realm, a healing of body and a healing of soul.” So if someone sick and frail is lying in a bed before us, do we really believe our prayers to God can heal them? Oddly enough, modernity and secular rationalism notwithstanding, the answer is a resounding “yes!” In the face of illness of a loved one, we hope against hope, and

we pray for their healing. That is certainly one of our conscious or unconscious expectations of prayers for the sick.

As it turns out, our expectations are not completely unfounded.

In recent years there have been somewhat unorthodox, scientific studies demonstrating the potency of healing prayers. American physician and researcher Dr. Larry Dossey has investigated the impact of the human mind and spirituality on physical healing. In his book, *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*, Dossey cites research indicating that intercessory prayers offered on behalf of another person can be efficacious in the healing process. For example, in a famous double-blind study at San Francisco General Hospital in 1988, 192 randomly-chosen cardiac patients were prayed for by home prayer groups which were simply given the patients' names. A second group of patients of a similar size did not have any prayer directed their way.

Follow-up study over ten months demonstrated that the prayed-for patients had significantly less deaths, and no one in that group ended up having to use a mechanical respirator. In the second group, however, there were more deaths, and twelve patients required use of a ventilator.

In a similar vein, in a second study with non-human organic matter, twenty specimens of identical bacteria were divided into two groups. The group that had people praying for the speedy growth of the bacteria in the test tube, grew at a more rapid rate. The implications of Dossey's research, based on scores of similar studies, suggest that a loving, caring mental attitude towards another living organism, human or not, has a beneficent healing effect.⁹

Cutting edge scientific research suggests that it is within the realm of human expectations that our prayers can be effective agents of healing. Today, it is very common for families to put out requests for prayers for loved ones undergoing treatment for illness, and particular websites, such as Caring Bridge, have become popular outreach tools that families can use to both communicate news on the medical journey of a family member, and to ask others to offer prayers for healing. While we cannot always guarantee that our prayers will be effective for healing, we do hold out hope that our prayers are "heard" in the highest realms. In this sense, one function of reciting some of the prayers in this book is so that there can be, as the *Mi Shebeirach* says, "a healing of body, a healing of soul."

Prayers for Healing of Soul

A question to ask here is when is it time to recognize that our prayers might not work to save someone's life. Not all prayers for "healing of body" are effective, and often in spite of prayers offered on behalf of someone ill, people still die. Thousands and thousands of individuals all across the planet can say a *Mi Shebeirach* healing prayer for someone with cancer, with no obvious results for physical recovery.

Sometimes people hold a simplistic theology that imagines an all-powerful God who is supposed to answer all of our prayers, all of the time, in all circumstances. And it is certainly not uncommon for a person to think, 'If God has not answered my prayers for healing a loved one, then I can no longer believe in that God.'

But just because prayer *can* be efficacious, it does not mean all prayer for physical healing *is* efficacious. In fact, talmudic tradition even suggests that sometimes prayer for someone who is dying is contraindicated.

A story is told of the death of the sage Yehuda HaNasi, who was frail, suffering and close to death. As the end of his life drew near, his students continued to pray assiduously for their teacher to live. The Talmud records how Rabbi

Yehuda's handmaid, upon seeing the pain and physical discomfort of her master, ascended to the roof of his house and intentionally threw a jar from the roof that shattered as it hit the ground. Startled by the noise, the students were momentarily distracted from their praying, at which time "the soul of Rabbi Yehuda departed to its eternal rest." (BT Ket. 104a) This story is often cited to demonstrate how Judaism does not support extraordinary measures in death care; it also reminds us that sometimes prayer needs to turn from healing of body, to healing of the spirit in preparation for death, and to prayers for the graceful transition of the soul as it leaves the body.

The petitionary prayers of the traditional *Mi Shebeirach* healing ask for a "healing of soul." But what does it mean to pray for "healing of the soul"? Simply put, it means to pray for peace, wholeness, and completion for an individual, whether they live or die. This notion is consistent with Jewish custom: if someone is sick, it is traditional to wish them "*refuah shleimah*"—a Hebrew phrase that translates as "a complete healing." Interestingly, the word, *shleimah*, is a derivative of the Hebrew word, "*shleimut*"—wholeness; similarly, the English word for "healing" is related to the Anglo-Saxon word, "*hal*," which means to make whole. Thus,

to be healed is to become whole. And praying for the “healing of the soul” is a supplication that, even if unable to have a complete physical recovery, a person may be able to experience a sense of inner wholeness, and a connection with the fullness of their soul.

To explore this a bit further: we know from experience with hospice over the past forty years, in addition to physical needs, people who are dying have a wide range of emotional, psycho-social, and spiritual needs.¹⁰ Thus, “healing of the soul” can also be understood as cultivating a sense of wholeness and healing of the emotional, psycho-social, and spiritual dimensions of a person.

In the face of sickness and death, the *emotional needs* of one who is dying consist of being able to find peace within: to forgive themselves for their shortcomings; to see the grand panorama of their life with a sense of equanimity; and ultimately, to transform fear and confusion about dying into a sense of peace, harmony and acceptance.

The *psycho-social needs* for one who is dying is to end life feeling resolution and completion in relationships with the people around them; to let go of old resentments and regrets with family, friends and colleagues; to forgive those who have disappointed them; and to forgive themselves for

their shortcomings and inter-personal failings. All of this refers to what Elisabeth Kübler-Ross called “finishing business”—making peace with the various strands of the emotional and psycho-social reality of our lived life.

And further: we know that through the dying process many people—although certainly not all—discover they have deeper *spiritual needs*, having to do with meaning-making, acceptance of death, and spiritual surrender. More specifically, those various spiritual needs encompass (but are not limited to) encountering the existential reality of death; wrestling with finding a deeper meaning and significance to life; feeling finished with the work of this life time; surrendering with spiritual equanimity to the unknown death has in store; and opening up to move on to the next phase of the journey beyond death.

There is no “one size fits all” in arriving at spiritual resolution in the face of death—each person must walk their own journey, and today, the options people chose for meaning-making are varied and multi-dimensional. Whether it is through a traditional path of faith in a religious tradition, a connection with God or spirit, belief or hope in an afterlife or some kind of existence beyond death, a sense of mystical connection with the spirit of the universe, or in a multitude

of others ways, ultimately the process of “healing of the soul” allows one to die with acceptance and at peace. In praying for another, we hope our prayers are effective to help a loved one achieve such a state of mind and being at the end of their life.

Prayer as an Anchor to Tradition

The roller coaster ride of life-threatening illness that consists of perplexing symptoms of deteriorating health, trials and tribulations of identification and diagnosis of disease, multiple trips to the hospital for tests and treatments, and the complexity of dealing with the health care and medical insurance system, leaves everyone—patients and their family member care-givers—physically exhausted and emotionally depleted. At those times when the fear of death gnaws silently in the background, evoking intermittent waves of distress and despair, interspersed with hope and heroism, reaching for Jewish tradition can be, for some at least, spiritually comforting and grounding.

The prayers in this book are specifically intended to provide an anchor to the rubrics of Judaism, whether or not one has an extensive background of Jewish knowledge or a familiarity

with Jewish practice. Found within these pages are essential prayers of the Jewish tradition: *Shema Yisrael* and the *V'ahavta*; the Priestly Blessing; the traditional *Mi Shebeirach* for healing; Psalm 121; the deathbed confessional or *Vidui*; and other selections which comprise the primary building blocks of Jewish healing practices and deathbed rituals.

Hearing the very sound of these prayers—in Hebrew or English—can have a powerful, grounding effect, connecting a person with the legacy of Judaism, whether in the middle of a highly technological, sometimes dehumanized medical environment, or in the quiet of one's own home.

While there are also newer, contemporary Jewish prayers in this book, many of the Hebrew prayers are ancient, recited by spiritual seekers for millennia. In moments of traditional praying, one might imagine all the generations of people who have recited these words. Images come to mind of all the sons and daughters, husbands and wives who have ever stood next to a dying loved one, praying for their healing, reciting Psalms on their behalf, or escorting their soul as it leaves the body. Ancestral generations of old struggling with the mysteries of life and death were comforted by the resonant words of Jewish prayer. Even with the passing of time,

and the development of highly technological contemporary medical settings, traditional Jewish healing prayers continue to have the ability to provide comfort to the heart and a balm for the spirit. It is my hope that both the reader and those hearing the words and melodies of the prayers within this book will be blessed with connection to the strength, wisdom, and mystical power of the Jewish tradition.

*Prayer as a Source of
Comfort and Connection*

Another function of deathbed prayers is to provide comfort and connection for both patients and care-givers who are companioning the dying. As it sometimes turns out, regardless of the ever-expanding array of doctor's deliberations and procedures, the extensive protocols around the use of pharmaceutical potions and concoctions, and the trials and tribulations various traditional and experimental medical options, at some point in the seemingly never-ending journey of patient care, it may well be that death is inevitable. "To everything there is a season, a time to be born, a time to die," and sometimes after months, perhaps years, of medical intervention, it is time to turn from

treatment and healing to preparing for death.

Under such circumstances, people who are feeling their own death imminent, and caregivers, supportive family members, as well as professionals involved in chronic, palliative and hospice care, experience a profound vulnerability and powerlessness. As Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi writes:

Every one of us has a little space we go to . . . when we are sad, when we feel lonely, when we need to lick our wounds . . . We are the most vulnerable beings when it comes to that space. But that is also the space where we can create a sanctuary for God.¹¹

In that vulnerable, liminal space on the edge of death's door, one yearns for comfort, consolation and connection with the divine. As Abraham Joshua Heschel says of those moments of darkness, "we grope for solace, for meaning, for prayer."¹²

In the language of traditional theology, one might say that through prayer one can experience God's comforting presence. Rabbinic and Kabbalistic tradition affirm this notion in the teaching that *Shechinah*, the Divine Presence, is present both at the bedside of one who is sick (BT Ned. 40a), and at the time of a person's

death (Zohar III, 88a; Zohar I, 98a). Thus we can say that, aside from the idea of praying for a specific outcome for a sick person, the very act of praying opens one up to be comforted by God's immanent presence, *Shechinah*.

Thus, deathbed prayer is a functional method that acts as a key to the doorway in which we invite God or spirit inside of ourselves. The more time we spend in prayer, the more we deeply attune to that space, the larger that space inside of ourselves. Thus deathbed prayer is also a process of attunement and alignment with *Shechinah*, with divine Presence.

Prayer As Soul-Guiding

One final element of deathbed prayer is what can be called "soul-guiding." If we start with the assumption that consciousness survives bodily death, as Jewish tradition has always held, then the process of dying is one of the soul gently leaving the body. And the work of companioning someone who is dying is to offer loving thoughts while reciting or chanting prayers to escort the soul as it exits the body.

While all the prayers in this book can fulfill this "soul-guiding" function, in particular there are a number of prayers designed specifically

for this process. There are different versions of the *Vidui*, the deathbed confession, that can be seen as “soul-guiding” prayers; there are also three different *Vidui* meditations. The goal of these *Vidui* prayers and meditations is to help a person feel resolved in their life and to leave the body behind.

The function of offering soul-guiding prayers is similar to what a midwife does in bringing a child to birth into the world, except soul-guiding on the deathbed aims to help the soul transition more gracefully to the world beyond.

As written in A Techinah for the Deathbed (found in this book):

As the midwives, Shifra and Puah
brought forth new life,
may I help birth this soul
into the luminosity of the world beyond.

Companioning somebody who is dying is a holy act. May we all be worthy of the calling to escort others in the transition between life and death.

— SIMCHA PAULL RAPHAEL, PH.D.

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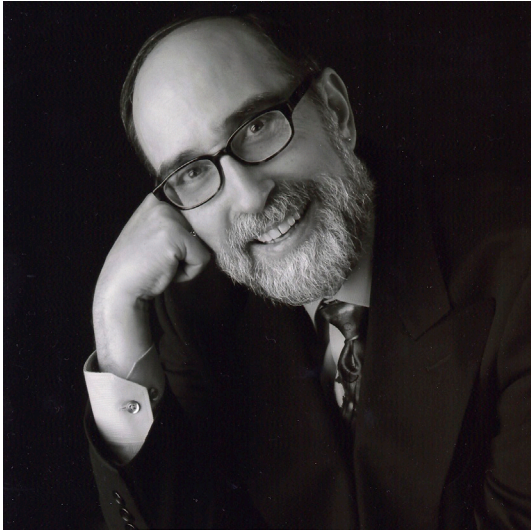
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