

Reading verses that inspire faith can heal the soul



A SON reads psalms for his father in Shaare Zedek Medical Center. (Flash90)

Can reciting psalms provide healing?

Prayers during a time of illness are a natural religious instinct. In times of distress, when one's fate or that of a loved one feels particularly uncertain, we turn to the Almighty with the hope that He might provide salvation.

In the Bible, we see this with figures like Moses, who prays for his sister, Miriam. "Oh God, please heal her" (*Numbers* 12:13). We even see the success of such prayers from figures like Hagar, the wife of Abraham, who beseeches God for the salvation of their baby Ishmael.

The sages added that the heartfelt prayers of the sick themselves – even the wordless cries of a baby – are most impactful in heaven. As these stories indicate, no set text is necessary to beseech God.

Over the centuries, however, the book of *Psalms* has been utilized as a text for many Jews to express their feelings to God. Some of the chapters seemed to have been composed for specific occasions, like war. "How long will my enemy have the upper hand," the psalmist declares in Chapter 13. The powerful words of the psalms, nonetheless, are frequently utilized for other circumstances, especially when the texts are more generic. Prayers like "Out of the depths I call to You, God" (Chapter 130) can be applied to many circumstances.

The phenomenon of Jews utilizing psalms for healing, however, seems to go against a Talmudic ruling: "One is prohibited from healing himself with words of Torah." Some, like the Tosafists, asserted that this prohibition didn't apply when a person's life was endangered. This position was shared by Rabbi Yosef Karo.

Others seem to limit the prohibition to cases in which a person was whispering invocations over an open wound. Utilizing scriptures in such a manner would be heretical because it treats words like a holy potion, akin to soothsaying. This is particularly true

when one further spits into the wound. Otherwise, the prohibition would not apply. As many have noted, figures ranging from Rabbi Hai Gaon, Rashba, and Rabbi Chaim David Azulai have all designated different psalms for therapeutic purposes.

Maimonides seems to have understood the stricture more broadly. He writes, "A person who whispers an incantation over a wound and then recites a verse from the Torah, who recites a verse over a child so that he will not become scared, or who places a Torah scroll or *tefillin* over a baby so that it will sleep is considered to be a soothsayer or one who cast spells."

Furthermore, such people are included among those who deny the Torah because they relate to the words of the Torah as if they are cures for the body, when, in fact, they are cures for the soul, as stated in *Proverbs* 3:22, "And they shall be life for your soul."

Maimonides' critique is theological: The words of the Torah cannot be manipulated for physical healing, just as the Torah scroll in *tefillin* or a *mezuzah* cannot serve as an amulet. Torah treats the soul, not the body. As such, he asserts that healthy people may recite biblical verses or psalms so that the merit of reading them will provide protection from becoming ill. This constitutes prayer for the soul, not the body.

Some struggled to reconcile Maimonides' ruling with public practice. Rabbi Menachem Hameiri suggested that perhaps reciting psalms or other verses is only problematic when they are utilized as the sole therapy. If they are only supplementing more conventional healing medicine, then this remains acceptable.

Others stressed the importance of recognizing that the ultimate goal of reciting psalms is to inspire a connection with God, the true healer. Reading verses that inspire faith can heal the soul and provide merits to those who need it.

Does it matter which psalms are recited, or can they

be randomly selected or simply read in order of the book? One might argue that by singling out specific texts, one is inappropriately claiming that only these chapters have healing powers. As such, it is better to simply recite or learn any chapter.

However, this might be problematic, since by selecting random chapters with no concern for their meaning, as if they were randomly chosen, one might be utilizing psalms as an amulet. In this vein, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach convincingly taught that people must understand the words that they are reciting. They should comprehend these words of the Torah just as they should have had they been learning a Jewish text for inspiration. After all, the goal is to inspire heartfelt expressions of trust in God.

Toward this goal of creating a meaningful prayer experience, my organization Ematai has produced a *tefillah* project that guides people in the appropriate prayers to recite during times of illness. These include prayers before and after medical treatment, for the critically or terminally ill, and final *viduy* (confession).

We also provide the texts of psalms that are most appropriate for these occasions, alongside an English translation. The web page also includes a brief explanation of why these chapters were chosen and what makes them most meaningful in this context. The prayers may also be downloaded and printed for use on Shabbat and holidays.

It is my belief that heartfelt prayers recited with greater understanding can be a source of solace and inspiration. ■

To learn more about the project and see the beta web page, visit ematai.org/prayers.

The writer is the executive director of Ematai and author of *Ethics of Our Fighters: A Jewish View on War and Morality*.