

Helping a Friend through Breast Cancer: OUR EXPERIENCE

by Bonnie Resnick, Margy Hirsch and Sara Hoppe
on behalf of HAVURAT HALEV, Minneapolis/St. Paul.

When Margy, one of the women in our Rosh Hodesh group, shared with us that she had breast cancer and had decided on a bilateral mastectomy, our group gathered together to create a healing ceremony for her, and for us as well. Margy did not participate in the planning of the ceremony (she was still overwhelmed by her medical news, and was coming to terms with its implications), but the group knew that she was comforted by the fact that we were doing this for her.

Planning the mastectomy ceremony was almost as gratifying as performing the ritual itself. We met early one morning in Laurel's dining room, and we started by talking about our own connections to breast cancer, and grappling with the ways in which our mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters, aunts, friends, grandmothers and some of us ourselves had dealt with breast cancer. It was shocking just to realize the extraordinary prevalence of breast cancer in our lives.

Eventually we started to brainstorm about what we thought would be meaningful and healing for Margy. She had grown up in the High Plains of Kansas near the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, so one of us suggested the song "River" by Bill Staines that reflected these roots. Margy had mentioned in previous Rosh Hodesh celebrations that water had special meaning for her as a source of life, and so we decided to include a prayer from Penina Adelman's book, *Miriam's Well*, about how women are like rivers. As Jewish women, we wanted to elicit both women's and Judaism's healing powers. We paged through Jewish feminist prayer books and traditional *siddurim*. Shellie, a woman in the group, had brought to the meeting an English-language Jewish prayer for healing, and the group feminized it for use.

Our final composed ceremony

consisted of lighting candles, singing, doing a healing meditation (led by Sara Hoppe), and reading a few poems and prayers. The latter included an excerpt from the poem "Prairie" by Carl Sandburg; the prayer "Mothers of Israel" from *On Our Spiritual Journey: A Creative Shabbat Service*, edited by Jacquelyn Tolley (published by the Women's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education); and a prayer by Elaine Starkman from *Women Speak to God: The Prayers and Poems of Jewish Women*, edited by Marcia Cohn Spiegel and Deborah

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Lipton Kremsdorf (also published by WICJE). We ended by singing the *Mi Shebairach* (the traditional prayer for healing), using Debbie Friedman's well-known melody.

The most moving piece of the ceremony was, of course, the part that arose unplanned. After Margy read a prayer she had written for her own healing—which was intimate, vulnerable, revealing and powerful—in which she pleaded to find the strength she would need for the crucible ahead, we all found ourselves, spontaneously, moving towards her in a circle. Some of us held her hands or touched her shoulders or arms; others reached out to her with words. We were all

responding to how real and undisguised her prayer had been, and our gathering close to her was a felt response, an assurance that we would continue to reach out to her.

The evening ended with a light vegetarian meal, as we spoke of Margy's cancer and others with cancer, of children, synagogue, sexism, religion, and of our next Rosh Hodesh gathering, during which time we would return to our monthly ritual of welcoming the new moon. Laurel passed around a sheet with the dates of Margy's chemotherapy and asked everyone to select a time to bring dinner to Margy, her husband and two children. The commitment to prepare meals was important, carrying our ritual into Margy's own home, and fulfilling the mitzvah of *bikur holim* [visiting the ill].

In reflecting back on the ceremony, Margy said that it decreased her fear, that it helped her know that no matter what happened with her cancer, she wasn't going to be alone. During the ceremony, she said she felt everyone's healing energy directed at her, and she sensed herself gathering the fortitude necessary to face the long months of chemotherapy ahead. She experienced a deep kinship with the women present, she said, and with all women everywhere who have ever had cancer.

After the ritual the group felt bonded in a new way. It was difficult to leave that night, but each of us, finally, walked out the door with a sense of empowerment and mutual connection that is still with us almost two years later. □

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