



INTRODUCTION

Dr. Barb Levin, Wellness & Learning Chair

Wellness and Learning: A New Women's League Project for a New Year

Traditionally, Elul, the sixth month of the Jewish calendar (by biblical reckoning), is set aside as a time to look back on the activities of the preceding year and get ready for the month of Tishri and the High Holidays. This year, Women's League for Conservative Judaism enhances these considerations with this new **Wellness and Learning** project. Each month we will present opportunities for women to learn about their own health and wellness as well as to engage in Jewish study.

Two years ago, the Southern Region of Women's League started on a journey to explore its members' health and wellness. Challenged by their region president, Anne Greenbaum, they began to look at their health needs and the resources available for healing and growth. The Wellness and Learning Project was born from the understanding of the importance of bringing together one's physical, emotional and cognitive selves. The program encouraged women to strive for personal wellness through changes in behavior and expanded Jewish knowledge through study. As part of this journey, they recognized spirituality as an essential piece of personal well-being.

At Convention 2012, a larger group was involved in workshops discussing wellness and spirituality. An additional 100 members were involved in a survey of the impact of religious activities on well-being. In spring 2013, the Women's League board of directors established a Wellness Committee composed of health professionals, female clergy, educators and lay leaders. They have developed a list of health and wellness topics, ranging from Torah Yoga to the physical need and the spiritual dimensions of water.

A new set of readings will be presented every Rosh Chodesh. Members of Women's League will be notified each time they are available. On Rosh Chodesh women will be encouraged to take a minute for themselves to focus on their own health needs and to consider a piece of Jewish study on the subject.

As the project moves ahead, we welcome suggestions, contributions and involvement. If you would like to participate, please email lkogen@wlcj.org. This is an organic and growing project, and your ideas are important.

The month of Elul has begun and with it a special time for reflection and rededication. As you make your own preparations, consider the discussions of the Wellness and Learning Project as guideposts or challenges in your own growth and well-being.



Elul: A Month for Preparation and Reflection

Each year near the end of summer, the reality of the High Holidays becomes clear. They are either early or late, but always right around the corner. In Jewish tradition, the month of Elul, the month that precedes Tishri, is set aside for personal preparation and reflection, a time to consider larger questions of teshuvah and commitment. What we have done this year? Are we on the right path? What things do we choose to change in the year ahead? Central to the month's goal is efforts to making amends.

There are traditional activities ascribed to the month of Elul, such as blowing the shofar and reciting Psalm 27 daily. Each focuses on our past and future behavior toward God and others. Reconciliation is key. The steps for teshuvah are laid out: recognition, acceptance, direct involvement with the individual, and commitment not to err again.

The spelling of the month (alef-lamed-vav-lamed) also forms an acronym of *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li* (I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine), a quote from Song of Songs. The central importance of relationships to the healing process – both spiritual and physical – should not be underrated. Jews are asked to consider their actions and lack of action during the previous year. Specific offenses toward individuals need to be rectified. Forgiveness by God is secondary to making things better between individuals. This requirement to make amends is quite health promoting. Recommitment to our relationships is the goal.

Present research is overwhelming on the positive impact of forgiveness on our health. The data shows that both the process and the outcome of forgiveness are beneficial. Not only are stress and anxiety reduced, but the course of physical illnesses may be altered. In an article in the Mayo Clinic Newsletter, the impact of forgiveness on one's psychological state and ongoing health and is discussed.

In addition, several articles corroborate the value of the process itself. Headaches, depression, insom-

Psalm 27: A Psalm for Elul

Psalm 27 is recited daily from the first of Elul until Hoshanah Rabbah. In this Psalm, the speaker confronts a variety of emotions and concerns and invokes trust in God that he/she will be safeguarded from enemies and will find solace and shelter in the presence of God and within the precincts of the Temple. God is steadfast in support, so even if abandoned by parents or surrounded by those wishing harm, the psalmist is comforted that the Divine parent will provide constant and eternal protection.

The Psalm's connection to the penitential season is found in Midrash Tehillim (27:4) in which the Rabbis interpret the first line of the psalm as referring specifically to these holidays.

"The LORD is my light" – on Rosh Hashanah, the day of judgment, as it is said: 'He will cause your vindication to shine forth like the light (Psalm 37:6). 'and my help' on Yom Kippur, when He saves us and forgives all our sins."

[cited in Or Hadash by Reuven Hammer]

During Elul, we invite you to experiment and recite this psalm daily or once a week or at some other regular interval. Notice what ideas and feelings arise as you say it. Does it bring you comfort and/or assurance? Can it help in your process of teshuvah? Try it and see.

Psalm 27

*The LORD is my light and my help
whom should I fear?*

*The LORD is the stronghold of my life
whom should I dread?*

*When evil men assail me
to devour my flesh**

*it is they, my foes and my enemies,
who stumble and fall.*

*Should an army besiege me,**
my heart would have no fear;*

*an idiom for harmful or malicious speech. In the Machzor a large percentage of sins are those that are spoken.

**while the language here is militaristic, the psalmist is speaking metaphorically about any one, or thing, that causes harm or fear.

nia, and abdominal pain all are impacted by seeking forgiveness for known failures. Specifically, data on human biological markers and the forgiveness process confirm the positive impact of such activities.

The traditional process of seeking out the person offended and accepting responsibility for one's action is the actual therapy model discussed as part of the Stanford Forgiveness Project. Carl Thoresen, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Stanford University, is studying methods to help people forgive in order to reduce hostility and anger. Thoresen finds that people who replace anger, hostility and hatred with forgiveness will have better cardiovascular health and fewer long-term health problems. The study incorporates gender differences in forgiveness.

The health impact of positive relationships has been understood for quite a while. It is well documented that married men on average live longer than unmarried men. Information from the Institute of Health shows multiple studies demonstrating that both social relationships with individuals as well as involvement in community and religious organizations improve health. For example, a 1983 study showed that greater overall involvement with formal (e.g., religious organizations) and informal (e.g., friends and relatives) social ties was associated with more positive health behaviors over a ten-year period. Being married, having children and ties to religious organizations have all been linked with positive health behaviors. Interestingly, marriage and parenthood contribute negatively to physical fitness and weight.

Discussing the value of each of these studies is less important than understanding the need to move ahead with one's own relationships. The positive side of the Elul experience is deepening relationships and recommitting to family and friends. The yearly process of forgiveness is one requirement that allows these relationships to grow and mature. Setting a new path and maintaining it is the hardest step in the overall process of forgiveness.

As the Women's League Wellness and Learning Project develops, we will suggest new and old ideas to improve health and wellness. At each juncture, there will be conflicting data and information. In the end each individual must make her own decision. In this first presentation, the message is clear; both from a religious point of view and from medical research, seeking forgiveness and reconfirming relationships are positive choices in improving health and well being.

May your Elul be filled with friends, family and the positive outcomes of forgiveness.

Barb Levin, *Wellness & Learning Chair*

Psalm 27 *continued*

*should war beset me,
still I would be confident.
One thing I ask of the LORD,
only that do I seek:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD,
to frequent His temple.
He will shelter me in His pavilion
on an evil day,
grant me the protection of His tent,
raise me high upon a rock.
Now is my head high
over my enemies roundabout;
I sacrifice in His tent with shouts of joy,
singing and chanting a hymn to the LORD.
Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud;
have mercy on me, answer me.
In your behalf my heart says:
"Seek My face!"
O LORD, I seek Your face.
Do not hide Your face from me;
do not thrust aside Your servant in anger;
You have ever been my help.
Do not forsake me, do not abandon me,
O God, my deliverer.
though my father and mother abandon me,
the LORD will take me in.
Show me Your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my watchful foes.
Do not subject me to the will of my foes,
for false witnesses and unjust accusers
have appeared against me.
Had I not the assurance
that I would enjoy the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living ...
Look to the LORD;
be strong and of good courage!
O look to the LORD!*

Additional information about forgiveness research:

www.mayoclinic.com/health/forgiveness/MH00131
www.forgiving.org/campaign/research_indiv_1.asp
www.apa.org/international/resources/forgiveness.pdf

Additional information on relationships and health:

www.jstor.org/stable/2965087
www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3150158