

Weeklong event explores Judaism and wellness

by Rachel Heller

April 18, 2013 | 1:56 pm

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When Rabbi Laura Geller learned that her father had Alzheimer's disease, she struggled with the news. He was only in his 70s, after all, and it was painful for her to watch the man who had raised her — who she said had been "important and powerful and wonderful" in her life — lose his ability to perform daily tasks.

For solace, she turned not to a doctor, a psychologist or any other health care professional. Instead, she found her coping strategy in the pages of the Talmud.

Geller recalled the story of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. Both sets of tablets — those that Moses smashed when he saw the Israelites worshipping the golden calf, and the second set he received as a replacement — were placed in the ark for safekeeping. Why keep the broken set? Rabbinical commentary says they represent the broken among us, the sick, those who have forgotten the Torah. They, too, remain sacred.

The story gave Geller strength as she cared for her father. She now tells it to her congregants at Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills so they can draw meaning from it.

"The fact that we have this anecdote in the Talmud shows that in a text that old, they were wrestling with the same issues we are," Geller said. "Because we're part of this larger community — one that exists across generations — there's a sense of accumulated wisdom. Other people have walked these paths. Maybe we'll handle them in different ways, but we're not alone."

That's the idea behind Jewish Wisdom and Wellness: A Week of Learning, a wide-ranging conference to be held next week at venues across Los Angeles and elsewhere in Southern California. Organized jointly by the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) and Cedars-Sinai, the event is designed to draw thousands of local Jews together to explore the question: What does Judaism have to say about living a whole and healthy life?



Participants can sign up for more than 60 lectures, workshops and classes April 21-27 taking place at synagogues and Jewish institutions around the city. Topics will include yoga, elder care, sexual health and meditation, among many others, and will involve a combination of text study, conversation and movement. Nearly all sessions are free and open to the public.

What attendees might find, said Joel Kushner, interim director of the Kalsman Institute, is that Judaism offers a surprising volume of guidance on wellness, healing and living with gusto.

"Our purpose is to raise the dialogue of Judaism and healing in the community and show everyone that we have all these resources," Kushner said. "So many people turn outside of Judaism for their spiritual practice, when really, we have it in our tradition — it's just about accessing it. We're trying to take what's already there and share that with Jewish L.A."

Audiences might be ready to listen. A recent surge of interest in Jewish spirituality has given rise to an explosion of Jewish yoga and meditation groups, and the study of Kabbalah has been luring Jews seeking spirituality for years. On top of that, the immutable human need for healing is heightened during times of economic crisis, Kushner said, leading people to lean on faith — and on one another.

Jewish Wisdom and Wellness: A Week of Learning was a year and a half in the making. Cedars-Sinai had worked with the Kalsman Institute to expand its spiritual care program, now headed by Rabbi Jason Weiner, and the two institutions sought another way to keep collaborating.

Jonathan Schreiber, director of community engagement at Cedars-Sinai, and Michele Prince, then-director of the Kalsman Institute, decided to co-sponsor a conference that probed the connection between Judaism and health. But they knew the event would hardly register on the radars of far-flung Angelenos if they organized it the traditional way.

"We thought, 'If we want to turn that idea on its head, let's contact hundreds of people and turn this into a topic that's discussed throughout the L.A. area,'" Schreiber said.

So he and Prince asked congregations, academic institutions and nonprofits to propose programs they would like to host under the umbrella of religion and wellness, then provided micro-grants of \$250 to \$500 to about 40 participating organizations to cover their costs. The result is a crowd-sourced symposium inclusive of all ages, all denominations and Jews on both sides of the 405.

"We know in L.A. it's sometimes hard to get people to come to an event because there's so much competition for attention," said Prince, a social worker who now is the executive director of Our House Grief Support Center. "Instead of asking people to come to us, we wanted to catalyze projects happening in every corner of L.A."

The week will kick off with a panel discussion at Cedars-Sinai, moderated by Rob Eshman, publisher and editor-in-chief of the Jewish Journal, on the power of Judaism to carry those in crisis through trying times. Those participating in the panel are Geller; Valley Beth Shalom's Rabbi Ed Feinstein; Rabbi Naomi Levy of Nashuva; and Rabbi Abner Weiss of Westwood Village Synagogue.

Other offerings across the city include a workshop on Jewish-flavored art therapy, a healing drum circle, *chevra kadisha* training in Jewish burial practices, a discussion on food justice and Jewish tai chi.

"In Hebrew, there's a connection between 'wholeness,' 'healing' and 'holiness,'" Weiss said. "We didn't borrow that concept from the mystics of the East. From Maimonides to Nachmanides, there are very strong psychosomatic elements in the Jewish tradition."

Art exhibits at HUC-JIR's Jack H. Skirball Campus near USC and Shulamit Gallery in Venice will explore the connection between healing and painting, sculpture and photography. A closing concert at Leo Baeck Temple will celebrate the music of Debbie Friedman, whose tune for the healing prayer, "*Mi Shebeirach*," is sung by congregations everywhere.

Kushner hopes participants come away scratching their heads — in a good way.

"You might go, 'I didn't know Judaism had so much to offer.' "