

Rabbi Charles Sheer on serving Jewish patients on the High Holy Days

“L’Chaim” – To Life!

[Before reading this, please read “May It Be a Good Year,” by Rabbis Bonita Taylor and David Zucker (<http://www.plainviews.org/AR/c/v1n16/er.html>). It reviews the rituals and themes of the Jewish High Holy Days.]

Chaplains face unique challenges attending Jewish patients who are hospitalized on the High Holy Days. In addition to the obvious sources of patient malaise—being away from family, home, synagogue and the “normal” holiday routines—the principal rituals of these days are almost impossible to observe in most hospital settings. Chaplains can arrange for a *Hanukkah* Menorah lighting, Passover *seder*, or the giving of *Purim* treats in the hospital. *Rosh Ha-Shannah* and *Yom Kippur* entail the sounding of the *Shofar*, full days at prayer in synagogue, and fasting. All are impossible or inappropriate in the hospital.

But the larger burden on the sick is the impact of the concepts that underlie these Days of Awe. These are not days of national memory or celebration; they are Days of Judgment, dedicated to self-examination, reflection, and repentance. Some of the medieval liturgical poems in the prayer book are petitions for life, health and survival in the coming year. One of the motives repeated throughout the liturgy is the petition that “God will inscribe us in the Book of Life!” What patient needs to be reminded to pray for life, and that God “might enable us to reach the coming year”?

Despite the optimistic tones of many prayers, liturgical melodies and the grand *Yom Kippur* finale, which concludes—“Next Year in Jerusalem”—a sensitive chaplain will readily understand that the flip side of “L’Chaim” is the most dreaded possibility that accompanies all who are ill. There are no dark sides to Passover or Hanukkah that could depress and dispirit the sick like these Days of Awe.

There is one delightful custom which, although folkloric, has endeared itself to Jewish observance and might be just what the doctor ordered for hospital use. On the evening of *Rosh Ha-Shannah*, Jews eat an apple which is dipped in honey and, together with the usual “*B'racha*” (blessing) for the fruit of the trees, one states: “May it be Your will that the coming year be a good and sweet one.” Before the somber tones of the day-time service introduces awe, penitence and other serious themes, Jewish custom initiates the New Year with sweetness and physical pleasure.

In the hospital setting one could distribute to patients either small apples or pre-cut slices with small jars of honey or, when glass could not be distributed (as in some psychiatric wards), in honey packets, with a card with good wishes, “From your chaplain.” If it is not appropriate for a patient to receive the food items, then a card with a cheerful picture of an apple, honey, and the good wishes convey the same hopeful theme.

Chaplains should be attentive to the fact that some, especially those who are quite knowledgeable and/or devout, might find it difficult to contemplate the theme of “judgment” at this time. The sick do not need High Holy Days to introduce the theme of one’s mortality. However, Jewish wisdom has cast these Days of Judgment as a helpful and necessary undertaking, not a death sentence. In pastoral conversation, it is appropriate for chaplains to remind their Jewish patients that these holy days open with apples and honey, and conclude with a prayer for “Next Year.”

We are on solid Jewish ground when we urge our patients to reflect upon the sweet parts of their lives, and thank the Giver of Life for what they have...and what they will encounter...in the coming New Year.

Rabbi Charles Sheer is the Director of the Department of Studies in Jewish Pastoral Care at HealthCare Chaplaincy. In this role he develops educational programs for Jewish seminarians, including hospital rotations and a multi-denominational seminar, Compassionate Jewish Leadership, as well as seminars for rabbis and cantors to enhance their pastoral skills within their congregational settings. He has special interest in the interface between Jewish law and thought and medical ethics; he has been lecturing on organ donation, end-of-life issues, and the Jewish concept of Bikkur Holim (the sick visit). He served for 34 years as the Jewish Chaplain at Columbia University, where he chaired the multifaith campus ministry group and was extensively involved in pastoral issues on campus. He has an M.A. in Talmudic Literature and Ordination from Yeshiva University.

