

## **The Healing Circle**

### **A New Model for Nurturing Spirituality in Jewish Family Service Agencies**

Marjorie Sokoll

*Director, Jewish Healing Connections, Jewish Family & Children's Service,  
Waltham, Massachusetts*

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This article examines a new model of self-care for human service professionals working in Jewish Family Service agencies. The Healing Circle was designed to alleviate the pervasive effects of work-related stress. Human service professionals are constantly in service to others and are as much in need of spiritual support as those they serve. Research has shown that agencies that are open to the role of spirituality in the workplace may see improvement in job performance and satisfaction.

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*"There is nothing so wise as a circle"*

Rainer Maria Rilke

Rabbi Hiyya fell ill and Rabbi Yochanan went in to visit him. Rabbi Yochanan asked him: "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" Rabbi Hiyya replied: "Neither they nor their reward." Rabbi Yochanan said to him: "Give me your hand." Rabbi Hiyya gave him his hand and Rabbi Yochanan raised [healed] him.

Rabbi Yochanan once fell ill. Rabbi Hanina went in to visit him and asked him: "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" Rabbi Yochanan replied: "Neither they nor their reward." Rabbi Hanina said to him: "Give me your hand." Rabbi Yochanan gave him his hand and Rabbi Hanina raised [healed] him. Why did Rabbi Yochanan need Rabbi Hanina's help? They replied: A prisoner cannot free himself from jail (*The Outstretched Arm*, 1998, p. 4).

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The Talmud describes Rabbi Yochanan as a healer, and yet, when he fell ill, he was not able to heal himself. Human service professionals, constantly striving to heal others, often confront feelings of stress and isolation. This intriguing story from the Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 5B, is a profound reminder of the importance of also being able to accept help.

With this story in mind, this article focuses on a new model for providing a reservoir of spiritual support for professional caregivers working in Jewish Family Service agencies. This new model, the Healing Circle, is a product of two significant trends of the last 20 years—the birth of a Jewish healing movement and a new openness to the role of spirituality in the workplace.

The creation of the Healing Circle in a Jewish Family Service agency represents a unique convergence of these two trends. They help nurture an atmosphere of spiritual support and provide an opportunity for people to come together within a spiritual context to reduce the stressful nature of the work/life balance.

## PERSPECTIVES ON SPIRITUALITY AND HEALING

From the colonial period through the early 20th century, social work was influenced by Christian and Jewish thought on charity and communal responsibility. However, during most of the 20th century, social work moved away from its spiritual roots. It was only in the 1980s that “many publications called for a return to the profession’s historic commitment to spirituality, but to address it in a way that includes and respects the diverse range of religious and nonreligious spiritual perspectives among clients” (Canda & Furman, 1999, p. 90). In 1990, Edward Canda founded the Society for Spirituality and Social Work (SSSW) “in order to create connections and mutual support among social workers of many contrasting spiritual perspectives” (SSSW Web site). Discussions about the role of spirituality in social work have since become commonplace (Canda, 2003).

In the 1990s the Jewish healing movement also began to gain momentum (Barnes & Sered, 2005, p. 232). Rabbi Nancy Flam and a small group of women founded the modern-day Jewish healing movement. In 1996 she wrote, “Five years ago we would not have found discussions about Jewish healing on the Internet. We would not, for that matter, have found discussions of Jewish healing in synagogues, General Assemblies of the Jewish Community Federation, or within the major rabbinical assemblies. But today we find talk about Jewish healing in all those places and more” (Flam, 1996/97, p. 487). According to Susan Rosenthal (personal communication, November 2006), coordinator of the National Center for Jewish Healing, there are now more than 30 Jewish Healing Centers located across North America, and most are housed within Jewish Family Service agencies.

Healing, as opposed to curing, is defined by Flam as a “sense of wholeness, perspective, reintegration, and not the removal of the tumor or clearing of infection. We al-

ways made this distinction, sort of as a disclaimer, but also to address the dimension of the person that was suffering and not just the disease” (Barnes & Sered, 2005). The founders of the Jewish healing movement “specifically chose the word healing to emphasize their focus on providing solace, hope, and support for people facing the challenges of illness or loss” (Rabbi Amy Eilberg, personal communication, November 2006).

This growing receptivity toward spirituality and healing is evident in the words of another Jewish healing movement pioneer, Rabbi Rachel Cowan, who writes, “From working with the spirituality of brokenness, women took the lead in understanding more deeply the spirituality of wholeness, *shleimut*. [Rabbi] Amy Eilberg went on to co-create the Yedidya Center for Jewish Spiritual Direction . . . and Nancy Flam and I helped to found the Institute for Jewish Spirituality” (Jewish Women’s Archive, n.d.).

Canda and Furman (1999, p. xv) powerfully summarize the need for social workers to be open to spirituality to effectively help others: “Spirituality is the heart of helping. It is the heart of empathy and care, the pulse of compassion, the vital flow of practice wisdom, and the driving force of action for service. Social workers know that our professional roles, theories, and skills become rote, empty, tiresome, and finally lifeless without this heart, by whatever names we call it.” And as Rabbi Yochanan teaches us, social workers must also seek this source of strength for themselves.

## SELF-CARE FOR HUMAN SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

Social work literature is replete with articles on the importance of self-care in mitigating the severity of work-related stress. Professional caregivers encounter several types of stress (Renzenbrink, 2004): *occupational stress* (Vachon, 2001), *burnout* (Freudenberger, 1975), *compassion fatigue* and *secondary traumatic stress* (Figley,

1995), and *vicarious traumatization* (Pearlman & McCann, 1990). Strom-Gottfried and Mowbray (2006, p. 14) emphasize, "It may be incumbent upon social workers and their fellow caregivers to initiate and institute organizational changes, such as the development of rituals, policies that encourage self-care, and improved organizational structures."

Two noted authors and pioneers in the field of death and dying have written passionately on the importance of self-care, and their findings are relevant for human service professionals exposed to the constant demands of caring for others in despair. As J. William Worden notes,

There is much current interest in the problem of burnout and stress management among health care providers. . . . Mary Vachon has compared staff stress among those working in a hospice setting and those working with the seriously ill in a general hospital. She finds stress in both settings and concludes that the best care can be given if caregivers are cognizant that they too have needs (Worden, 2002, p. 177).

And Rachel Naomi Remen writes,

The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet. This sort of denial is no small matter. The way we deal with loss shapes our capacity to be present to life more than anything else. The way we protect ourselves from loss may be the way in which we distance ourselves from life. Protecting ourselves from loss rather than grieving and healing our losses is one of the major causes of burnout (Remen, 1996, p. 52).

### PRECURSORS TO THE HEALING CIRCLE

It is nearly a decade since an interdepartmental focus group comprised of eight staff members at Jewish Family & Children's Service (JFCS) of Greater Boston began meeting to discuss ways to integrate the relatively new concept of Jewish healing into the agency and the community. It was during this time period that the program, Jewish Healing Connections, was created

and Jewish healing programs and services began to be offered in the Boston community. Looking internally, the group believed that agency staff would be receptive to the new idea of Jewish healing and that staff might also benefit from these healing practices.

A revelation happened during one focus group session when a member was sharing her sadness about the death of one of her beloved clients. She poignantly described the woman's life and spoke openly of her own sense of personal loss. Members spontaneously gave her space, support, and time to share her feelings of grief. In those dramatic moments every member of the group became deeply aware of the need to care for one's own spiritual needs while caring for others. It was in that moment that the first Healing Circle was created. "Although all people need to pay attention to the quality of their spiritual lives and the nourishment it brings them, those who work with the sick and dying need even more. The bottom line is that we can't give what we don't have. Or in the words of Rabbi Hillel from Pirke Avot, 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me?'" (Friedman, 2005, p.221).

The focus group drafted a vision statement and sent a memo to all staff announcing that a new monthly Healing Circle could provide them much-needed spiritual support. The memo emphasized that "the nature of our work is often stressful, and too often we forget to replenish ourselves—self-care is essential especially when working with individuals who are suffering, whose health deteriorates, or who die. The Healing Circle is a gathering for shared support and self-renewal."

Since that watershed session, I have had the privilege of facilitating nearly 100 Healing Circles for the staff of JF&CS. In my role as director of Jewish Healing Connections, I have received support from senior management who view the Healing Circle as a positive force and innovative model for nurturing spirituality in the workplace.

## CIRCLES THAT HEAL

To alleviate the pervasive effects of work-related stress, human service professionals have traditionally turned to such avenues of support as supervision, case conferences, regular peer interaction, and staff development. In addition to these traditional sources of support, Healing Circles offer a new model for reducing the potential stressful effects of caring for others. Jean Shinoda Bolen, a psychiatrist and Jungian analyst, devoted an entire book, *The Millionth Circle: How to Change Ourselves and The World* (1999), to the impact of circles on relationships. Although she focuses on the psyches of women, the archetypal form of the circle is applicable to men as well. However, because most human service professionals are women and the majority of people who attend the Healing Circle are women, this model is a natural fit within Jewish Family Services agencies. "When the circle is taken into the workplace or community by women—often modified to be acceptable and unthreatening to men . . . it enhances collaborative undertakings and brings people who work together emotionally closer and in a less hierarchical relationship to one another" (Bolen, 1999, p.6).

Bolen's description of the healing effects of circles continues with a vivid description of the supportive nature of the group experience.

Listening, witnessing, role modeling, reacting, deepening, mirroring, laughing, crying, grieving, drawing upon experience, and sharing the wisdom of experience, women in circles support each other and discover themselves, through talk. Circles of women supporting each other, healing circles (Bolen, 1999, pp. 14–16).

Susan Sered, an anthropologist at Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions, attended one of our Healing Circles. She was interested in observing the Healing Circle as part of her academic research on the contemporary American Jewish healing movement. Like Bolen, her

observations highlight the communal and supportive nature of the Healing Circle (Barnes & Sered, 2001, p. 45).

Caring for the professional caregiver has had a ripple effect within the agency as a whole. Since the Healing Circles began, we have faced times of transition, change, and loss at JF&CS, including the death of a colleague and the collective national devastation of 9/11. The Healing Circle can be particularly effective during these times in promoting a caring workplace environment. Just as the Jewish healing movement endeavors to provide clients safe places to give voice to the emotional and spiritual side of their illness or grief, so Healing Circles aspire to provide a safe place for staff.

The mission of Jewish Healing Connections at JF&CS is to "help ensure that people in the Jewish community feel a sense of connection when facing illness, loss or isolation. '*It is not good for people to be alone*' (Genesis 2:18)." Many staff members take advantage of its diverse programs and services to provide support and connections for themselves, as well as their clients. Support for clients is available through spiritual counseling, bereavement groups and volunteer support, volunteer home visitation for frail elders, celebration of Shabbat and Jewish holidays for those who are isolated and ill, end-of-life services, and spiritual support from Rabbi Karen Landy, the full-time rabbi of Jewish Healing Connections.

## CREATING A HEALING CIRCLE

At JF&CS in Boston, the Healing Circle takes place in a conference room. To transform the atmosphere of the conference room, the overhead fluorescent light is turned off and a dimmer lamp is used. A blue cloth with pictures of the moon and stars is placed on the table. Soothing music is playing while people enter the room. In the center of the table a candle shines brightly, and a bowl of water with stones becomes a focal point.

After some trial and error a ritual format

has developed. However, any new innovations that people suggest are always welcome and encouraged. Participants are invited to close their eyes, if they feel comfortable, and take a moment to notice their breath. After a few minutes the silence is broken with an inspirational reading. Then the Healing Circle is opened for discussion on whatever topics participants wish to bring up. Some months there is more silence than discussion, as silence is another way to feel a sense of connectedness. At the close of the Healing Circle the *Mi Sheberach*, the Jewish prayer for healing, is offered, and participants are asked to share names of those in need of healing. Once again, participants are invited to close their eyes and take a few moments to share in being together. The silence is broken with the haunting sound of a Tibetan bell, and the candle is extinguished. And as Sered observes, (Barnes & Sered, 2001, p. 45) "[Staff members] return to the work of caring for, advocating on behalf of, and serving others."

No two of the nearly 100 Healing Circles that have taken place have been alike. Each is a unique experience shaped by the people who participate in any given month. Of the approximately 150 staff people who work on site, between 8 to 14 staff members from various departments participate in each Healing Circle. A schedule is set up four to six months in advance so people can plan accordingly, and dates are listed in the staff newsletter. The day of the week rotates so that different staff members, some of whom work part-time, can attend. On the day of the Healing Circle an e-mail reminder is sent to the staff.

Each work environment is different, and to avoid potential pitfalls, one must take into consideration the demands of one's specific work setting. For instance, the Healing Circle is offered for 30 minutes during the lunch hour, a time when most staff members have some flexibility. It is critical to start and end on time as this shows respect for colleagues' precious time. Sometimes, however, depending on the na-

ture of the discussion, participants linger in the conference room and continue to provide support to their co-workers after the closing of the Healing Circle. If staff members require additional support, depending on the nature of the issue, either I or another participant will meet with them after the Healing Circle and, if needed, suggest other avenues for support.

Client confidentiality is of paramount importance. Because of the confidential nature of the work, it is very important that participants refer to clients only in very general terms and never use their names. In addition, confidentiality for the co-workers is also very important; information discussed in the Circle is to stay in the Circle. However, because it is impossible to enforce this guideline, participants may filter their discussions.

Topics vary from month to month, but almost always include professional *and* personal issues. Some of the topics that have been touched on over the years include work/life balance; the impact of 9/11; caring for an ill spouse; working with a client who is seriously ill; the death of a spouse, friend, parent, co-worker, client, or pet; divorce; miscarriage; chemotherapy treatments; saying goodbye to a co-worker; and self-care techniques. We also share moments of joy that are significant in our personal and professional lives. And we typically incorporate themes associated with the approaching Jewish holiday, as well as with non-Jewish holidays, such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. Doing so is important for honoring the spiritual diversity that exists in a nonsectarian Jewish Family Service agency.

Participants come from different faith traditions, as well as no faith tradition, and so we endeavor to be respectful of the spiritual diversity that exists among staff. For this reason, the inspirational readings that are offered at the beginning of each Healing Circle are eclectic in nature. The *Mi Sheberach*, the Jewish prayer for healing, is the only overtly religious ritual. To create an inclusive feeling while the prayer is sung,



we invoke our common ancestors, Abraham and Sarah. James Griffith and Melissa Elliott Griffith caution that religion and spirituality can be destructive with clients, which seems relevant for staff members as well. Their basic premise is that religion and spirituality can be harmful when it violates the “relatedness on which spirituality is based. Spirituality comes into being as one’s commitment to relatedness—to other people, the environment, one’s God or the numinous, one’s heritage” (Griffith & Griffith, 2002, pp. 219–220). Ongoing feedback from staff members regarding their experience of the Healing Circle indicates that they feel a sense of inclusiveness and feel respected and supported, regardless of their religion or cultural background.

Because the majority of staff members in a Jewish Family Service agency are women, with a significant portion being social workers, psychologists, and Jewish communal professionals, it is vitally important to make a special effort to encourage male staff and administrative and fiscal staff to attend. The most effective way to encourage attendance is for the facilitator and others who regularly attend the Healing Circle to personally invite them. It is important to let them know ahead of time that they do not have to speak in the Healing Circle. This is especially true for interns who may feel self-conscious about speaking in the presence of more seasoned professionals. Having participants from all departments within the agency helps foster a sense of connection across departments and disciplines and can have a positive impact on relationships within the agency. *The Healing Circle reinforces the role that all staff, regardless of their job description, play in fulfilling the Agency’s mission.*

### **ADAPTATIONS AND MODIFICATIONS FOR OTHER SETTINGS**

A motivated facilitator can easily modify and replicate the Healing Circle in other workplace settings in which stress among

workers is an issue. For example, the Healing Circle was modified for use in a workshop entitled “Taking Care of Yourself as You Take Care of Others,” which was designed for Jewish communal professionals and sponsored by Boston’s Jewish Federation, Combined Jewish Philanthropies. It was also adapted for therapists from different faith traditions who were volunteering in a pastoral counseling center located in a Boston church. Tracey Lipsig Kite, director of the Jewish Healing Network of Chicago, administered by JCFS, began using the Healing Circle, with some modifications, based on our experience in Boston. As a result, in 2004, Kite and I were invited to present a paper at a Canadian conference on spirituality and social work. Most recently, a Healing Circle was facilitated at a local school of social work to educate students about innovative methods for self-care in the workplace.

### **SPIRITUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE AND ITS IMPACT ON STAFF**

Much of our life is spent at work. In Jewish tradition, one of the teachings particularly relevant to a discussion on spirituality in Jewish Family Service agencies is that the Hebrew word for work, *avodah*, is also the word used for prayer and service:

The greatest window into the rabbinic way of understanding work is through the rabbis’ vocabulary. One word, *avodah*, came to mean not only “work,” but also prayer, Torah study, and sacrifices in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. What all these meanings had in common was their potential ability to lift each of us out of ourselves and to let us touch something deeper and higher in the world (Salkin, 1994, p. 43).

This inspiring sentiment, describing the potential transcendent nature of work, is not always easy to actualize. The truth is that there are many pressures and stresses of 21st-century life. Whether parenting a young, teenage, or ill child; being a single parent; or serving as caregiver for a parent,

we bring our whole selves and these very real anxieties to work.

Ian Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton conducted the first survey of spiritual beliefs and practices among corporate executives and managers. They did a “spiritual audit” of corporate America that emphasized the importance of a sense of interconnectedness in the workplace. The audit concluded,

Overall company performance is actually higher in companies where company values and spiritual values coalesce. First, *contrary to conventional wisdom, the respondents in our study did not have widely varying definitions of spirituality. . . .* In brief, according to our respondents, spirituality is the basic desire to find ultimate meaning and purpose in one’s life and to live an integrated life.

Second, *people do not want to compartmentalize or fragment their lives.* The search for meaning, purpose, wholeness, and integration is a constant, never-ending task . . . They especially want to be acknowledged as whole persons in the workplace, where they spend the majority of their waking time (Mitroff & Denton, 1999, pp. xv–xvi).

Adds Rick Csiernik (Csiernik & Adams, 2002, pp. 35–36), “That [spirituality] should also help in ameliorating workplace stress and be important in one’s working life should then be no surprise,” and Elmes and Smith (2001, p. 35) note that “spirituality-in-business suggests that a spiritual basis for working enables workers to feel whole and complete and their organizations to prosper.”

These findings support a basic human desire to seek a less fragmented, more holistic life by bringing one’s whole being to the workplace. Agencies that are open to Healing Circles or other models for nurturing spirituality in the workplace may see improvement in job performance, productivity, and satisfaction. Feedback from participants in Boston’s JF&CS Healing Circle, supports these assertions.

“For me the monthly staff Healing Circles feel like an oasis in the midst of our extremely busy workdays, their value confirmed by the consistently high attendance. Each is a half-hour of peace and calm, and a space for genuine conversation about the pain we all con-

front in our professional and personal lives. They are re-energizing.”

“I wish I had a Healing Circle in my previous jobs—I would have felt more connected to my co-workers and the agency.”

“[This is a] much needed focus on our own mental and spiritual health as a way to make us better people and probably more productive workers!”

“The Healing Circle has been a wonderful opportunity to connect to myself and to engage with staff in new ways. It’s a little like before one goes into a therapy session, you take stock and sometimes that’s as important as the work itself. I think that the validation of silence can’t happen enough—even if the entire time is spent in silence. It’s such an active silence.”

“The Healing Circle gave all of us a place to deal with the pain of September 11<sup>th</sup>. From a business perspective, the Healing Circles have not been disruptive to the work environment, in fact people come back to work more centered, less stressed and better able to focus—the Healing Circles have been a great addition to our working environment.”

“I find great personal benefit from the Healing Circle as a ‘spiritual fix’ during my hectic life. It offers me a chance to connect to my spiritual self in ways I rarely get to do.”

“The Healing Circle provides me with the opportunity to carve out time during a hectic day to focus on myself in a spiritual way. Since we work in an environment in which we are constantly focusing on others who are in need, it is important that we ourselves feel replenished.”

These quotes attest to the ways in which Healing Circles not only help the staff but the client as well. When feeling more energized, connected, and replenished, staff members are more productive and more available to help clients. Although we have not systematically tested the impact of Healing Circles on treatment skills, anecdotally we can assume that by offering a place for staff members to “connect to themselves” we help them become more centered and more available to their clients.

## CONCLUSION

Professionals working in a Jewish Family Service agency spend their workdays serving others. Human service professionals

must deal not only with the spiritual pain of their clients but their own as well. This article has attempted to show that spiritually centered professionals can be more effective in helping others. The hope is that readers will find inspiration from this experience to bring some meaningful aspect of the Healing Circle into their lives, as well as to those with whom they come in contact each and every day.

The mission of Jewish Family & Children's Service of Greater Boston is to "care for individuals and families by providing exceptional human service and health care programs, guided by Jewish traditions of social responsibility, compassion, and respect for all members of the community." In an effort to provide exceptional service, JF&CS has understood the importance of nurturing the spiritual lives of the professionals who provide that care—or as Mitroff and Denton stated, "company values and spiritual values coalesce." As we learned from the story of Rabbi Yochanan, a prisoner cannot free him- or herself, but through workplace Healing Circles we can lift up each other while we strive to lift up others.

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