

International Jewish Healing Retreats (IJHR)

Challenges that Accompany Serious Illness

When facing serious or life threatening illness, one's world often becomes fraught with confusion, pain and anguish. In addition to the impact of the illness itself, individuals from the early stages of diagnosis and throughout the various phases of illness and treatment can find themselves lost in the complexities and bureaucracy of the medical system.

Many people going through and recovering from serious illness experience a sense of disconnection from community, from social networks, from family, even from God or their own internal sources of spirituality, strength and resilience. This isolation can be exacerbated by strained or ineffective communication between patients, their loved ones, members of the larger Jewish community, and/or health care professionals and clergy.

The disconnection and isolation experienced by those suffering illness and their loved ones often colors the frightening path of serious illness and its aftermath in a way that leaves people frustrated, exhausted, or overwhelmed. Feelings of disappointment, self-diminishment, and abandonment are common. Many feel that they are journeying in uncharted territory, just as their spiritual, emotional and interpersonal needs for "anchoring" and relational connection are heightened.

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In response to these needs, three non-profit organizations - Life's Door-Tishkofet (LDT), The JBFC National Center for Jewish Healing (NCJH) and The National Association of Jewish Chaplains (NAJC) - have come together to sponsor International Jewish Healing Retreats for individuals and their loved ones facing a life-threatening illness. Brought together by UJA-Federation of New York in their pathbreaking support for the growth of Jewish spiritual care in Israel, these three entities envision these retreats as providing a supportive healing environment, respite from the stresses of a life beset by a serious illness, and support for spiritual growth and renewal in the context of caring relationship.

IJHR will take place in pastoral and peaceful settings in Israel and will welcome English-speaking couples - spouses, partners, or other caring loved ones -- from North America, other English-speaking countries, and Israel. The first retreat will take place in July 2008 and will be modeled after healing retreats carried out over the last two years for Israeli patients and their families by Life's Door-Tishkofet, The JBFC National Center for Jewish Healing and members of the National Association of Jewish Chaplains (NAJC).

Why Israel?

IJHR aims to assist those whose lives have been impacted by serious illness in utilizing Jewish spirituality, pastoral care and identity as a means of successfully grappling with the challenges posed by suffering, mortality, and loss. Israel is a particularly powerful setting in which to kindle Jewish spiritual renewal by connecting individuals to the land and heritage of the Jewish people and by establishing a more meaningful link to the larger and diverse Jewish community. By participating in IJHR in Israel, participants will build a strong sense of connection to their own Jewish communities back home as well as to an international network of Jewish spiritual

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and pastoral care. It is hoped that with pre- and post-retreat programs in their home communities, North American couples who join in this experience will form a kind of *havurah* and may become a leadership cadre for furthering caring Jewish communities and deepening Jewish spiritual programming around illness and healing locally.

Program Goals

- * To enable participants to form a spiritual bond with Jews from Israel and around the world, thereby reducing their sense of isolation and fostering relationship, connection, and purposefulness;
- * To promote participants' spiritual growth, thereby helping them to more effectively cope with the challenges and legacies presented by serious illness;
- * To empower participants to access untapped inner and communal resources during times of change and crisis, augmenting their bank of tools and strategies;
- * To prevent ongoing spiritual trauma due to life-threatening illness; linking participants and their loved ones with caring organizations and individuals thus reducing the potential long-term emotional trauma that illness may cause.

Program Highlights

- * Six-day International Jewish Healing Retreat in Israel during July 2008 for 80 participants from diverse Jewish backgrounds. The program is designed not only to draw on Jews of all backgrounds, from highly traditional to secular, but to utilize the diversity as a resource for healing and a source of strength.
- * Individuals facing or having faced serious illness as well as their loved ones from North America, other English-speaking countries and Israel will participate in the retreat.
- * Jewish textual sources, customs, traditions folkways, music and ritual -- as well as spiritual, religious, natural, cultural, and historical elements of the Land of Israel - will be utilized to cultivate hope and meaning in participants and deepen their connection to the Jewish community.
- * Interactive workshops, supportive group meetings and one-on-one consultations, visiting sites of inspiration and Jewish heritage, and presentations by leading professionals in health care, psychology, Jewish studies and spiritual care will all be integrated in the program curricula.
- * An optional Shabbat program will be offered at the close of the week which will further build on the themes of growth and healing in the context of Jewish spirituality.
- * American and Israeli social workers, therapists, physicians, nurses, chaplains and other spiritual care providers will staff IJHR.

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Program Impact

This multi-faceted program is structured so that participants will return having experienced spiritual growth a sense of strength that they will carry with them throughout the rest of their journey. Previous retreats held by program partners have assisted participants in:

- * Sensing deeper levels of spirituality and purpose in life, and opening to new avenues of creative expression and spiritual fulfillment;
- * Developing more effective modes of communication with family, friends and health care professionals;
- * Finding greater happiness in their lives;
- * Rediscovering love within marriage/family and acquiring new skills for couples conflict resolution;
- * Enhancing coping mechanisms for managing stress;
- * Forming profound and supportive relationships with members of the extended Jewish family, in Israel and the Diaspora;
- * Establishing (or re-establishing) Jewish identity and a connection to the Jewish community.

Role of BAJHC:

Strengthening Participants' Connection to One Another and to their Local Jewish Community

This program aims to strengthen participants' connection to their local Jewish community and is not meant to function as a one-time, uncontextualized event. Jewish communal leaders are encouraged to bring groups from their local communities to join in the retreat, thereby creating a catalyst for further communal connection, support and programming after the groups return home. As a local partnering agency with the three sponsoring organizations, Bay Area Jewish Healing Center's involvement assures that the retreat is part of a continuum of pre- and post-retreat services provided on the local level. These services include support groups for program participants and, potentially, consultation and support around spiritual care issues for referring community leaders such as pulpit rabbis, chaplains and lay leaders.

Program Partners

Life's Door-Tishkofet, The JBFCS National Center for Jewish Healing and The National Association of Jewish Chaplains began collaborating on various innovative programs in 2004, with IJHR representing the most recent of these collaborations. Below are short descriptions of each of these organizations as well as their respective roles in the implementation of IJHR:

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- **Life's Door** (LD - www.lifesdoor.org), a United States non-profit organization, is committed to transforming the experience of life threatening illness and loss from one of anguish, confusion and denial to one that encourages collaboration, growth and healing for patients, families and professionals. Through its Israeli counterpart, Tishkofet, LD offers spiritual care retreats, seminars, support groups and workshops throughout Israel. Tishkofet has developed strong collaborative relationships with leading Israeli organizations which deal with illness and loss. These include Shaare Zedek Hospital, Kupat Cholim Clalit, JDC-Eshel, Maagan, Herzog Hospital and others. LD will be responsible for all aspects of IJHR program planning and implementation within Israel, including recruiting Israeli patients and their families for program participation.
- **National Center for Jewish Healing** (NCJH - www.ncjh.org) is a program of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (JBFCS) in New York City, the nation's premier mental health and social service agency serving over 65,000 New Yorkers annually. NCJH helps communities better meet the spiritual needs of Jews living with illness, loss, trauma, and other significant life challenges by drawing on the spiritual resources of Jewish tradition and community. NCJH offers consultation, resource material, publications, training and referrals to community services and supports a network of over 36 Jewish healing programs throughout North and South America. NCJH has provided technical assistance and support during the retreat planning process, and is assisting with recruitment and support for pre- and post-retreat programming in North America.
- **National Association of Jewish Chaplains** (NAJC - www.najc.org) is the international umbrella organization of professionally trained Jewish chaplains and pastoral/spiritual caregivers in hospitals, nursing homes, geriatric centers, Jewish healing centers, hospices, psychiatric facilities, correctional centers and the military. NAJC's mission is to enhance the skills of Jewish chaplains in order that they may provide quality Jewish, religious and spiritual care to those in community and institutional settings. NAJC's role parallels that of NCJH.
- **Bay Area Jewish Healing Center** (BAJHC - www.jewishhealingcenter.org) is a JCF beneficiary providing Jewish spiritual care to those facing illness, death, and bereavement to individuals and their loved ones and caregivers throughout the SF Federation region, regardless of affiliation or ability to pay, through direct service, training and education, and information and referral. BAJHC is serving as local program partner assisting in local recruitment and direct individual and group support to retreat participants from initial intake/assessment through post-retreat group meeting(s).

As mentioned above, in terms of both constituents, leaders, and partner organizations in the U.S. and Israel, a concerted effort is underway to involve Jews of all denominations and religious backgrounds and commitments. Part of the healing of the participating Jewish individuals and couples relates, in a profound way, to the healing of the broader Jewish community and the sensitive and substantive reach across various internal communal 'divides.'

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Cost

Although additional fundraising efforts are under way, the current fee per participant is set at \$1,700, including registration, hotel, and all other ground costs. Thanks in part to the support of UJA-Federation of New York, this figure represents roughly one-half of actual program participation costs.