A Letter From Rabbi Jason Weiner, Jewish Chaplain

WITH EVERY PASSING DAY I FEEL MORE and more blessed to have the opportunity to serve as the Jewish Chaplain of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. The profound opportunity to play a small part in our patients’ healing is humbling and indescribable; the dedication of our staff is incredible, and the excitement in our Spiritual Care office is unbelievable.

People often ask me if I find it depressing to constantly work with people who are ill and suffering. I am surprised by this question because I find chaplaincy work so meaningful and inspiring. Since this question is asked so often, I have reflected on four reasons why our work in chaplaincy is anything but depressing:

First, the opportunity to provide assistance to people who need it the most and recover. Second, the opportunity to provide tremendous feeling to work with people who are not well and watch as they improve and recover. Third, the opportunity to introduce several new programs in the past year. Finally, while it is true that we encounter many very difficult situations, these actually help me recognize the fragility of life and appreciate the preciousness and importance of every moment of every day.

This year was an exciting and busy year for Cedars-Sinai’s Jewish Chaplaincy. Our primary focus remains the spiritual well-being of our patients, their families, and our staff. To that end we are thrilled to have been able to introduce several new programs in the past year.

HOLIDAYS

It is important to offer strong Jewish programming in the hospital around the holidays. That is why in addition to our annual Parim megillah readings, Chanukah party, Yom HaShoah event, and High Holiday services, this year we added:

• A beautiful new Sukkah,
• A Yizkor service on Shabbat and Shemini Atzeret.
• Classes before every Jewish holiday about the themes of the day.
• A new Cedars-Sinai Machzor (prayer book) for our High Holiday services, which includes a contemporary English translation and transliteration, as well as clear commentary and instructions.

The dedication of our staff is incredible, and the profound opportunity to play a small part in our patients’ healing is humbling and indescribable.

EDUCATION

Our program shares the mission of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center to train and educate, so in addition to my weekly Torah class in the Chapel, and our strong volunteer and internship program, this year we added:

• A rabbinic intern from American Jewish University; in addition to continuing to have interns from Hebrew Union College and the Academy for Jewish Religion, which means that we now have interns from all of the three major Los Angeles rabbinic schools.

• A volunteer program allowing yeshiva students from Mesivta Bircchas Yitzchak to visit patients on Friday afternoons and deliver fresh challah and electric Shabbat candles.

• The Kalsman Institute was brought on board to conduct a hospital-wide Spiritual Care Assessment, to help us find ways to improve the job we do.

• During the winter months, we held a daily traditional mincha minyan in our Chapel for staff members who need to pray each afternoon.

• I had the privilege of becoming a member of the Executive Committee of the Board of Rabbinis of Southern California, and as part of our goal of partnering with the local Jewish community, we hosted an Executive Committee meeting at Cedars-Sinai.

We deeply appreciate the contributions of the entire Cedars-Sinai family and the community beyond, with whom we have had the pleasure of partnering in 2010/5770. We are excited about strengthening these bonds and enhancing our programs in the years ahead.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Jason Weiner
Jewish Chaplain
Cedars-Sinai Medical Center
**The PJ Library: A Head Start on Jewish Identity**

Why wait until your child is approaching Bar or Bat Mitzvah age to start thinking about Jewish literacy? Why not begin a bit earlier, say at 6 months? Such an early start is already possible, thanks to Cedars-Sinai’s participation in a special program offered through The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles called The PJ (PJ as in pajamas) Library. The goal of The PJ Library is to help families build, strengthen, and preserve their Jewish identity through stories and song. This book-gifting program has been so successful that it is now expanding from the five valleys (Antelope, Conejo, San Fernando, Santa Clarita and Simi) to include families who live on the city side of Los Angeles. Thanks to the generosity of local funders, The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles will now offer The PJ Library for free to the first 1,800 children ages 6 months to 5½ years to register on the city side of Los Angeles on a first-come, first-served basis.

Each child enrolled in The PJ Library receives a monthly gift of a high-quality, age-appropriate Jewish book or CD, as well as a reading guide carefully selected by a team of experts. To date, 131 families of Cedars-Sinai newborns have signed up for the program after receiving a personal invitation from the Medical Center. For more information on The PJ Library, contact Risa Goldstein at The Jewish Federation at 818-464-2852 or RGoldstein@jewishLA.org.

**Persian Jewish Genetics Project: Partnering for Prevention**

CEDARS-SINAI HAS INITIATED AN IMPORTANT GENETIC SCREENING program for the local Persian Jewish community, designed by Dr. David Rimoin, Steven Spielberg Family Chair in Pediatrics and the Director of the Cedars-Sinai Medical Genetics Institute. Dr. Rimoin explains: “No one group has more mutations [that increase the risk for developing specific conditions] than another. These mutations are simply more easily identifiable—because they are more common—in groups with a strong tradition of intramarriage.”

Couples who plan to have children may want to know whether they both carry particular gene mutations for conditions that can be serious if left unchecked, but are easily treated or prevented once the couples are screened. Within a few months of the program’s launch last summer, 1,000 men and women had already come forward to be screened anonymously and for free – thanks in part to a grant from the Jewish Community Foundation. These screenings were held at Sinai Temple, Nessah Synagogue, Eretz Cultural Center, and Cedars-Sinai Medical Center after a comprehensive outreach effort attracted participants from many sectors of the community. Rabbis and community leaders spoke about the program during Shabbat services; Farsi and English brochures were distributed at synagogues and major Los Angeles venues; e-mails were sent out, and electronic social networking was leveraged through Facebook, YouTube, web sites, blogs, and community calendars.

Dr. Rimoin hopes that at least 10,000 of the 50,000 or more Persian Jews in Southern California will be tested through this vital project. For more information, contact Dr. Rimoin’s office at 310-423-4461.
Visions of Hope

During patient visits, the members of our Jewish Chaplaincy team encounter the full spectrum of human emotions— from despair to euphoria.

WHEN AN ELDERLY HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR was recently rushed to the hospital, she understandably felt isolated and afraid. However, she later explained, “When I saw the Star of David on the side of the hospital building as I was being wheeled in, I felt a little more relaxed and at home.” Then, as she was waiting to be transported to a patient floor, she noticed a sign explaining that there was a special Shabbat elevator. The sight made her feel more at ease, and even a little hopeful. A few moments later, as she was being escorted into her hospital room, she looked up and saw the Mezuzah on the door. She felt uplifted. At that moment, she explained, “When I saw the Star of David, I felt as if I were in a special room, a sacred space. It gave me strength.”

ONE AMAZING PATIENT I MET BEGAN TO tell me about her difficult treatment for a blocked artery. “Thank God!” she added. I was surprised that she would be so thankful for an illness. When I probed further, I discovered that she was grateful for her heart condition because during her hospitalization, a blood test revealed that she had an early stage cancer. While this is not traditionally regarded as good news, she was overwhelmingly thankful that her cancer had been found early on, when it was still treatable. She is the first person I ever met who was grateful for heart disease and she taught me a profound lesson.

RECENTLY, A MIDDLE-AGED PATIENT shared that she was staying with a relative who was in poor health. She explained that her relative was, however, holding up well because she was a CPA. When I looked confused at why simply being a CPA would help anyone deal with this situation, she explained that a CPA is someone who is “Constantly Practicing Appreciation.” She continued, “With that approach to life, a person can get through anything.”

A WOMAN IN DECLINING HEALTH ASKED me to come to her room to discuss end-of-life issues. She and her husband, who sat by her side, proceeded to ask me about Jewish rituals and customs that apply under such circumstances. I described a number of meaningful traditions, including family members asking for forgiveness from one another for any perceived wrongs ever committed. The elderly husband was silent for a moment, then slowly drew himself up from his chair and stood erect next to his wife’s bed. In a voice filled with emotion, he said, “We have had more than sixty years of a loving and devoted marriage, and I can tell you with all my heart that we have nothing to forgive each other for.” His wife nodded in agreement as her eyes filled with tears. Then, they reached out to one another and silently embraced.

Medical Ethics: Different or Not? The primary texts and case studies they presented elicited many questions and comments and sparked lively discussions among the participants.

EXPANDED JEWISH COMMUNITY OUTREACH

CEDARS-SINAI’S TRADITION OF SERVICE to the community will expand even further this year as it reaches out to additional synagogues and Jewish organizations throughout the city with new health and wellness programs. Under the direction of Logan Williams, the Department of Community Health and Education has selected four sites to pilot this expanded partnership, including Temple Beth Am, Young Israel of Century City, Wilshire Boulevard Temple, and Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles. The program will offer lectures on nutrition, caring for the elderly, advance directives, safe medication practices, health promotion, and health education. Adult and child immunization services will also be provided.

INFORMATION FOR JEWISH PATIENTS AND VISITORS TO CEDARS-SINAI MEDICAL CENTER

As part of our commitment to the Jewish community, we are pleased to offer:

- Electric Shabbat candles
- Mezuzot on all doorways
- A library of Jewish books and ritual items such as Tefillin
- Kosher food is in the Employee Cafeteria and the Plaza Café. Patients are offered a kosher meal plan, featuring fresh food cooked in our kosher kitchen, certified by the Rabbinical Council of California.
- The Shabbat elevators (#13, North Tower and #38, Saperstein) that stop at every floor of the Medical Center on Shabbat and Jewish holidays.

The following television programs may be viewed in patient rooms on Channel 19:

- “Healing Through Jewish Songs and Stories” at 1:45 and 2:30 p.m. daily.
- Shabbat services – every Friday at 3:30 p.m.
- Havdalah (end of Sabbath) services – every Saturday night at 9:00 p.m.
- Rabbi Weiner’s Studio Session – broadcast live from our Chapel – every Tuesday at noon.

Ask for Jewish Chaplaincy at 310-423-5550 or internally at ext. 35550.