

# THE JEWISH CHAPLAINCY REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY

5769 | 2008-2009



Jewish Chaplaincy  
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## AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR NEW JEWISH CHAPLAIN: RABBI JASON WEINER

I WOULD LIKE TO TAKE A MOMENT TO introduce myself. However, I would much rather greet you in person, so if I don't get to you first, please come over to say hello.



My primary intention as Jewish Chaplain is not to instill the fear of God into people, but rather the hope of God. An example of this occurred one afternoon when I was called to visit a warm, but distraught family. A woman explained to me that her 97 year old father had a major heart attack that morning. While speaking with the family, I discovered that the patient's dream was to be present at his granddaughter's wedding, which was to take place in only a few months.

After some discussion about the gravity of the man's medical situation, we decided upon holding a spur of the moment wedding in the hospital so that the grandfather could participate. Hurried phone calls were made to the immediate family, inviting them to a wedding that evening at Cedars-Sinai.

An hour later both family and physicians were gathered outside of the patient's room in a somber mood. The patient's son explained how dire his father's condition was becoming and that we might not have as much time as we had previously thought.

We entered the room to speak with the patient and asked if he wanted to see his granddaughter get married in his presence. He immediately responded "I would like that very much!" We jumped into action. I rushed out to retrieve poles for the *Chuppah* (wedding canopy), a silver Kiddush cup, and grape juice for the ceremony. As friends and family arrived, we set up the groom's *Tallit* (prayer shawl) on the four poles of the *Chuppah*, poured a glass of grape juice, and entered the room to perform the ceremony.

The *Chuppah* was draped high over the bed, held by the parents on all four corners, so that the grandfather could be underneath the canopy along with his granddaughter and grandson-in-law to be. The room was full but completely silent; a sense of awe at this sacred moment was palpable through everyone's tears. The patient watched the proceedings closely and smiled as the groom placed a ring on the bride's finger. I sang the seven blessings over the grape juice, and the groom broke a plastic water bottle instead of the traditional glass. We then all burst out into loud cheers, clapping, singing and celebrating this special moment. The mood in the room had been transformed from grief and stress, to joy and celebration.

The patient passed away later that night. His life had ended after being surrounded by family, enjoying the blessing of taking part in his granddaughter's wedding at his bedside. The family's last memory of their beloved grandfather was incredibly special and uplifting. We were not able to recite the traditional Viduy (end of life) prayer, but actions speak

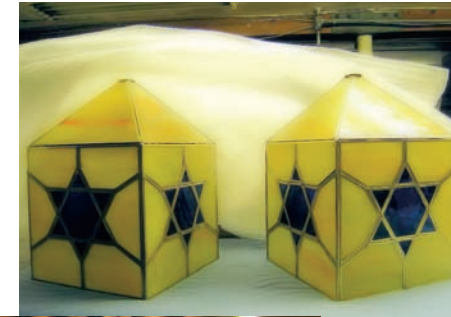
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louder than words. God's name was sanctified in that room, and a potentially devastating event was transformed into cherished memories of love and inspiration. This is why I feel so privileged and honored to be doing such meaningful work.

*Rabbi Jason Weiner earned his rabbinic ordination from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School in New York City, and a master's degree in Jewish History from Yeshiva University. He and his wife Lauren were both raised in Los Angeles, and currently live in the "Pico/Robertson" neighborhood with their three children, Kayla, Koby, and Ayden. Before becoming our Jewish Chaplain he served as the Assistant Rabbi at Young Israel of Century City.*

## REPORT TO THE JEWISH COMMUNITY | Rabbi Jason Weiner

ALTHOUGH I JUST BECAME Cedars-Sinai Jewish Chaplain this past July, I have had the tremendous privilege of serving this community on a part-time basis as Adjunct Jewish Chaplain since 2007. I came on staff at Cedars-Sinai just after Rabbi Meier, of blessed memory, became ill. Though I knew him before I assumed this role, it afforded me the opportunity to get to know him in a meaningful way.



Construction of the new Cedars-Sinai *sukkah*.

When spending time in the Cedars-Sinai Chaplaincy office or visiting patients on Rabbi Meier's behalf, I was struck by the degree of respect and appreciation that patients and staff had for him. I was inundated with messages of concern and well wishes for him, in addition to countless stories of the life-changing kindness that he provided. That deep affection has

been the greatest testimony to the impact and lasting impression that he had on so many.

Under the leadership of Rabbi Meier, the Jewish Chaplaincy Program developed a broad range of offerings including: A Kosher kitchen • Mezuzot • Special holiday programs and services • Electric Shabbat candles and Shabbat elevators • A Traveling Torah • A communal *Sukkah* • Jewish programming broadcast on patient televisions.

Rabbi Meier set incredibly high standards for the Cedars-Sinai family. The entire Jewish chaplaincy team strives to continue this legacy by providing quality spiritual care to all.

### Reflecting on 5769 | 2008-2009

WHILE OUR PRIMARY CONCERN is to ensure the spiritual well-being of patients, staff, and the entire Cedars-Sinai family, our mandate is much broader than that alone. Over the past year, we successfully accomplished the following:

- **Re-established a Rabbinic Internship Training Program.** By actively reaching out to local and national rabbinic seminaries, we provided educational opportunities for three interns spanning the Jewish denominational spectrum, including:

- ~ Academy of Jewish Religion, Los Angeles, CA (*Non-denominational*)
- ~ Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles, CA (*Reform*)
- ~ Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, New York, NY (*Modern Orthodox*)



- **Implemented “WebVS” application** for use by the Jewish Chaplaincy team, enabling us to systematically chart and monitor patients during and following their hospitalization. This technology has resulted in an increased ability to serve patients by keeping track of their progress, concerns, and requests.
- **Created a weekly seminar: *The Fundamentals of Jewish Thought*** attended by people of all faiths and backgrounds and broadcast live to all patient rooms.
- **Actively reached out to local synagogues, Jewish organizations, and rabbinic leaders from across the denominational spectrum** to connect with their clergy and determine how the Cedars-Sinai Jewish Chaplaincy program can best serve them and their constituents.
- **Initiated a hospital-wide Chanukah party** (see page 6), and continued the annual Purim Megillah reading – filling the Chapel on both Purim evening and morning, and also broadcasting it live to all patient rooms.
- **Carried out a small fundraising effort for the acquisition of new books and ritual items for the Chapel.** To date, dozens of new Siddurim (prayer books) and printed Torahs of various sizes and styles, as well as general Jewish reading material, have been purchased and made available for all patients and Chapel visitors.

### Vision for the Future

- Enhance and promote the Jewish identity of the Medical Center.
- Work closely with the Department of Volunteer Services to increase the organization and effectiveness of the volunteers who work with the Jewish Chaplaincy. (Please contact x35291 if you are interested in volunteering.)
- Improve communication and collaboration with the nursing staff, social workers, and Emergency Department professionals.
- Improve outreach and service to patients whose primary language is not English.
- Increase outreach to Maternity Services by increasing visits and follow-up with new parents.
- Develop specialized prayer and informational booklets for patients.
- Create programs to attract rabbis and Jewish communal professionals to the Medical Center to forge stronger working relationships between the Chaplaincy team and the broader community.
- Introduce periodic classes (in addition to the weekly seminar) before every major Jewish holiday, open to everyone in the Medical Center.
- Expand our library of traditional and modern prayer books and relevant reading materials for patients and their families.
- Purchase of *shiva* (the first week of mourning) equipment for families in need of our services after a patient has left the Medical Center.



### TREASURING OUR LEGACY | Paula Van Gelder

RABBI LEVI MEIER, PH.D., of blessed memory, continues to be our great teacher and guide. His life motto, “And be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2), remains our inspiration and challenges us in all that we do.

I find myself quoting Rabbi Meier on a daily basis. One of his most important lessons was that there is no one “correct” way to help a patient in any particular situation. He taught us to recognize the uniqueness of every human, remaining sensitive to individual needs, circumstances, emotions, and dreams; to listen to “the voice of the [person] in his/her present state” (Genesis 21:17). His was a living Torah, rich in its understanding of human behavior and applicable to all people, places, and times.

He showed us how to be fully present with another, whether by listening, speaking, singing, praying, or sharing moments of profound silence. In such an authentic, engaging encounter, everyone in the room might even shed tears, when words alone no longer suffice.

Rabbi Meier had both intellectual and experiential wisdom and understood the difference

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between the two. He always reminded us of the universal human experience, the sad reality that at some point, we each experience a “dark night of the soul.” That is why we view the hospital as “a place where those who are temporarily well care for those who are temporarily ill.”

Rabbi Meier taught us to appreciate Chaplaincy work as tremendously rewarding and satisfying, to recognize the privilege of speaking and listening from the heart, forging close bonds

with people who a short while ago were complete strangers. In that process, during which we learn so much about the other, we always learn more about ourselves.

When I visited a Holocaust survivor recently, he told me: “Life is so precious. People don’t realize what a gift it is. We have to make every day count.” Rabbi Meier always appreciated the gift of each moment and used it productively.

I have met many people who are living examples of deep and abiding faith, no matter what their life challenges. One woman told me, “I have absolutely no fear of death.” Her faith helps strengthen mine, which has not yet attained her level of understanding and acceptance.

For Rabbi Jason Weiner, Joshua Spiegelman and myself, Rabbi Meier is a living presence whose teachings continue to educate, inspire, and heal. Just recently, for example, a lovely young woman asked Rabbi Weiner to conduct a baby naming ceremony for her newborn child. In the course of speaking with her, he learned how important and influential Rabbi Meier had been in the life of her family. When it came time to select a Hebrew name for the infant, a name was chosen that honors Rabbi Meier. For her and her family, as well as for the entire Chaplaincy Department, Rabbi Meier’s name and legacy continue to live on and to illuminate the world.

For all who were privileged to know and learn from Rabbi Meier, working in Chaplaincy is an ongoing experience of appreciation, learning and personal growth. For us, it is indeed a blessing.

*Paula Van Gelder has served as Associate Jewish Chaplain at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center for many years. Rabbi Meier (z”l) was her beloved teacher, mentor, and friend.*



## MENORAH LIGHTING

MORE THAN A HUNDRED PEOPLE gathered in front of the Chapel on the hospital's Plaza level for a Chanukah menorah lighting ceremony on the third night of Chanukah, December 23, 2008. Rabbi Weiner led the ceremony, which included

lively music performed by the YULA High School Ensemble, conducted by Lior Kaminetsky, an Israeli violinist who now teaches in Los Angeles. Following the lighting of the menorah, guests enjoyed Chanukah treats such as jelly doughnuts and chocolate gelt (coins).

It was the first time that the new menorah was used in a public ceremony. This unique art piece was recently donated to Cedars-Sinai by Cesar

Gonzalez and Alex Peña, who designed and built the *chanukiah* that was inspired by one of Mr. Gonzalez's dreams. The menorah was donated to Cedars-Sinai in gratitude for the compassionate and lifesaving care provided to their close friend, Cassandra Sampson's grandchild who was a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit patient.

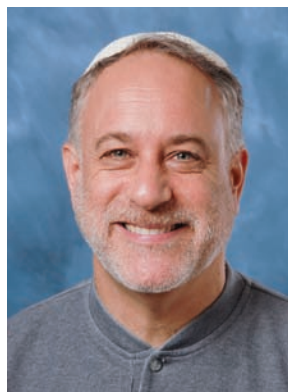


## BEDSIDE STORIES | Joshua Spiegelman

THE TORAH TELLS US THAT God will bring us to “a land of streams of water and springs” (Deuteronomy 8:7). “Water” can refer to life and “streams” to a fresh perspective. When visiting patients here at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, it is my primary intention —with God's help — to bring this sort of hope into the room.

One morning, I was called to visit a middle-aged cancer patient who was distraught about her health situation and was on the verge of giving up. This woman had also recently converted to Judaism, but wasn't feeling the close connection to her new community that she had once felt in her former community. After speaking with her about the value of life and learning that her first grandchild was due shortly, I was able to help her recapture some lost perspective. We brought our small Traveling Torah to this patient's room, affirming her connection not only to the Jewish people, but also to her family and sense of self. The next day her mother informed me that if I had told her that it was okay to give up, she would have, but by providing her with an opportunity to focus on healing, she was empowered to see things differently and to “choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

I also try to utilize the inspiring qualities of music in many of my chaplaincy visits. Recently, I visited a young boy who was crying in pain. I played the flute for him, which brought a huge smile to his face. His parents informed me that it was the first time their son had smiled in several days. It was truly an honor to be able to play a role in this young patient's healing process.



*Joshua Spiegelman assisted Rabbi Levi Meier (z"l) with services and patient visitation on Jewish holidays for nearly twenty years, and has served as an Associate Jewish Chaplain at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center since 2001.*

## HOW I FOUND GOD IN A HOSPITAL ROOM: AN INTERN'S PERSPECTIVE

*Ilana Mills*

WORKING AS A RABBINICAL STUDENT FOR Jewish Chaplaincy at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, I spent my summer discussing subjects we don't usually face. Most of the time, we talk about family, work, the economy. But this summer, my days were filled with words of hope, strength, and prayers.

My days were spent facing fears. I sat with people as we explored anxiety about a surgery or life after a hospital stay. I witnessed people face death — their own or a loved one's.

This summer I witnessed a strength that no words can describe. I was in awe of a mother's resolve to fight cancer. I met Holocaust survivors who never gave up. I watched as people found the courage to talk about being sick.

My summer was filled with talking about God. I witnessed a patient, who initially told me she did not really believe, weep as I asked God to heal her. I watched as a man found the courage to cry for the first time during his five-day stay at the hospital when we prayed. I helped a woman find the words she wanted to say to God, but never knew how. For the first time, I understood Moses' words when his sister Miriam was sick. Moses did not have a prayer book in front of him. In his time of need, he

spoke with compassion out of fear, hope, and love. “*El Na Refa Na La. Heal her now, Oh God, I ask of you.*” (Numbers 12:13) He did not know if the words were right, but he knew he needed to cry to God. This summer, I heard that cry.

In looking to a future career as a rabbi, I will sit with people in the hospital. I was fortunate enough to spend time on every floor, so I will now have better skills to talk to people as they face hard times. I was so touched this summer that I may change the focus of the last three years of my studies to issues of sickness and healing. More than anything else, this summer will stay with me personally and spiritually. I will speak with people with a little more compassion and love, knowing how precious life is. I will carry my patients' stories of hope, triumph, sadness, and despair with me whenever I pray.

*Ilana Mills is in her fourth year of rabbinic school at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where she is also studying for a Masters Degree in Jewish Education. She grew up in Sherman Oaks, CA, and currently lives in Los Angeles with her husband Colby and son Samuel.*



### CEDARS-SINAI STATISTICS\*

Number of licensed patient beds	952
Average daily number of inpatients	802
Average daily number of Jewish patients	250
Number of Jewish births per year	1,400
Jewish Chaplaincy visits per year	14,000
Kosher meals served to patients per year	29,200

\*Data is approximate