

The Role of the Rabbi in An Orthodox Long-Term Geriatric Hospital*

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THIS article discusses the role of the rabbi in the orthodox long-term hospital serving aged patients in need of extensive nursing care and medical supervision. The rabbi's role will be better understood, however, if a brief statement were first given describing certain needs of long-term aged patients and explaining some beliefs and aspects of Orthodox Judaism.

The following are among the needs of the long-term geriatric patient —:

1. *The need to play a significant role.* This need is felt by the geriatric patient with particular acuity because of the many roles he has lost in life as a consequence of old age and illness. He no longer holds a job; he is no longer a householder; he is no longer the guide to his children who are grown and lead their own lives and he is frequently unable even to care for his own physical needs without assistance.

2. *The need to love and be loved by others.* The geriatric patient has usually outlived many friends, his spouse and many relatives including often, his children. Thus he may feel quite lonesome and abandoned.

3. *The need for enjoyable activity in the company of people.* Physical frailty and illness have made it difficult for the sick aged person to be mobile and have placed limitations on the kinds of activities in which he is able to participate.

The following constitutes a summary of some beliefs and aspects of Orthodox Judaism —:

1. G- is a distinct personality who takes a direct interest in the affairs of

each person.

2. Because of the interest G- takes in mankind, He revealed His commandments to the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai, through that greatest of all prophets and rabbis — Moses. These commandments, called *mitzvot* in Hebrew, are set forth in the written work known as the *Torah* and have been elucidated further by generations of rabbis in the gigantic work called the *Talmud*, as well as in later rabbinic writings.

3. The commandments or *mitzvot* which every Jew must follow are classified into two categories: (a) those governing the manner in which people should treat each other. (b) Those defining procedures which bring a person into a state of relationship with G- without necessarily involving another person in the process. In his relationships with other people one should be kind, understanding and forgiving thereby emulating G- who exemplifies these characteristics. "And you shall love your neighbour as yourself," is a cardinal principle in the *Torah*. Thus, dealing properly with people constitutes a major way of serving G-.

4. Living in the land of Israel is a *mitzvah* or commandment in itself. This is the land promised by G- to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, fathers of the Jewish people. In it the great ideals of Judaism matured and were brought to fruition. Only as Jews live within it as a sovereign people will they be able to create a life based fully on the *mitzvot* of the *Torah*.

5. Concern for the welfare of other Jews, no matter where they be in the various lands of their dispersion, is a

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mitzvah. The national aim of Jews, as set forth in the Torah, is to live an exemplary life in accordance with the mitzvot. To help other Jews is to preserve them, to the end that they may carry out, as a people, G-'s design in the world.

6. The study of the *Torah* and the *Talmud* which explains it, is one of the greatest of all mitzvot, for through such study a person is in a state of direct contact with the word of G- and learns what G- requires of him.

7. The *Mitzvot* must be performed directly by each individual, who thereby is aware that he is carrying out the will of G- and feels himself to be in a state of relationship with Him. There can be no intermediary between the individual and G- in the performance of the mitzvot. Thus prayer, which is also a mitzvah, must be pronounced by the individual. No one can pray for him.

Having described some of the needs of long-term geriatric patients and some of the beliefs and aspects of Orthodox Judaism, it is important to realize that the needs of these patients can be satisfied through the performance of the mitzvot. Illustrations of this point will be made in the course of the discussion that follows. However, one may require guidance concerning the manner in which a specific mitzvah is to be performed. One may also need help in creating the special conditions necessary for the performance of a particular mitzvah. Some of these conditions may be of a purely physical nature while others may be of a social nature. Thus, certain mitzvot require for their performance the presence of a specific number of individuals and the assumption by some among them of well-defined roles within the group.

The rabbi is the person who carries the responsibility for seeing to it that the guidance and special conditions, to which reference has just been made in

the preceding paragraph, are provided. We will now see how the rabbi fulfills this responsibility and how in the process of doing so he helps patients satisfy some of their important emotional needs.

Let us consider first the mitzvah of prayer. A Jew prays three times daily — in the morning, in the afternoon before sundown and at night after the sun has set. For the aged person who has lost so many relatives and friends through death, who has suffered the loss of important social roles and whose health is impaired, the need for the sympathetic ear of one prepared to listen to his problems, is obvious. He finds this attentive ear when he pours out his heart in prayer to his Father, the Creator. One has only to observe many of the aged Jewish patients at Maimonides Hospital and Home for the Aged during prayer to realize that their sense of communion with G- is real and intense.

According to Orthodox Jewish law, the morning prayers must be recited before one has eaten breakfast. However, at Maimonides Hospital and Home for the Aged, which is conducted in accordance with the Orthodox Jewish tradition, the nursing staff who begin their work on the morning shift at 7:00 A.M., cannot possibly give the extensive personal care required by many of the patients, in sufficient time for the latter to attend synagogue services in the morning and complete their prayers there before breakfast commences at 8:00 A.M. This problem was brought before the rabbi by both patients and staff. As one knowledgeable in Jewish law he rendered the opinion that the patients, given the problems they faced, may recite the morning prayers even after they had eaten.

While a Jew may pray alone, it is considered that the name of G- is more

sanctified when prayer takes place in a group. However, the group must consist of at least ten individuals. In this connection a problem arises at Maimonides, because many patients are confined to wheelchairs. Unless they were brought to the synagogue by the staff they could not attend services there. In order to gain the full cooperation of the nursing staff in transporting patients to the synagogue, it was important that the rabbi interpret to them the full significance of prayer to the patients. The relationship the rabbi has with the nursing staff at Maimonides is excellent because of his sympathetic understanding of their needs. They gave the necessary cooperation willingly.

Prayer in the synagogue requires the assumption of certain roles by participants. All participants may assume these roles which confer a great deal of recognition and honour upon them. There is for example, the role of cantor whose duty it is to recite certain verses of each chapter of the prayers and, in the instance of the central prayer of each service, known as the "eighteen benedictions," repeat this prayer in its entirety after all congregants have first uttered it silently.

There is the role which involves the solo chanting of a blessing while standing before the *Torah*, a portion of which is read in the synagogue three times weekly and on holidays.

Another role involves the removal of the *Torah* scroll from the ark in which it is kept in order that the reading of the appropriate portions may take place.

Because these roles are a source of recognition and honour, the competition for them is great. The rabbi must help the group therefore, develop policies which ensure that roles are assigned to all patients participating in synagogue services with sufficient regularity to meet their needs. To guide the

patients in developing these policies requires a good degree of knowledge of personality dynamics and group behaviour.

Certain synagogue roles, however, demand knowledge which is difficult to acquire. One such role involves reading the *Torah* before the entire congregation. In this reading, the words must be chanted in accordance with a system of musical notes, each word having its own note. The difficulty in chanting the *Torah*-reading lies in the fact that the musical notes are not permitted to appear in the text, hence must be memorized — a truly great task. Because it is not always possible to find a patient capable of chanting the *Torah*, this role is assumed usually by the rabbi himself.

The importance of the *Torah*-reading for patients cannot be overestimated. This is the living word of G- to man. Patients listen to it in the utmost reverence, experiencing an intense closeness to G- and a feeling of belonging to the entire Jewish people to whom the *Torah* was revealed for all ages by G- through the rabbi and prophet, Moses, at Mt. Sinai.

Another role which requires much knowledge is that of teacher who clarifies and interprets the words of the *Torah*. This role too, is assumed by the rabbi. In the talks he delivers to patients during synagogue services, he usually emphasizes the importance of each patient as a person created in the image of G-, who participates on par with other Jews, even though he is sick and incapacitated, in bringing to realization the serious national purpose of the Jewish people — leading a life in accord with the precepts of the *Torah*.

By making it possible for patients to participate in group prayers in the synagogue, the rabbi also helps them to develop a sense of striving together to achieve a common aim. Each one

knows that his presence in the synagogue helps make it possible for the others to enjoy the benefits of prayer in a group. Hence a feeling of camaraderie and mutual affection grows among patients who come together to pray. For individuals suffering from lonesomeness, the value of such camaraderie and affection is obvious.

Because the synagogue is a physical structure which must be maintained properly and because certain supplies and equipment are required for its proper administration, the rabbi has the opportunity to help patients make recommendations pertaining to physical improvements and the purchase of needed equipment. To achieve this purpose, the rabbi meets regularly with patients to consider synagogue problems. Patients have made excellent suggestions which have been accepted by the hospital administration. One such suggestion was the installation of an additional bannister on the few stairs leading to the ark, a piece of equipment of patent importance to aged people. Another suggestion was the installation of a clock in the synagogue in order to assist in the exact scheduling of the prayers. The rabbi, of course, had to interpret these suggestions to the chief of the maintenance department, the director of finance and the executive director to obtain their acceptance of the patients' recommendations.

The process of joint planning and decision-making in a group, in relation to structural alterations to the synagogue and the purchase of equipment, also contributes substantially to the development among patients of a feeling of belonging to and being accepted by the group. In addition, the acceptance by the hospital administration of their recommendations induces in patients a sense of confidence con-

cerning their ability to think and act creatively.

Let us now consider another *mitzvah*, the observance of the Sabbath which involves the following elements.

1. *Refraining from performing creative work.* Included in such work is the kindling of fire and the activation of electricity. Hence smoking and playing television and radio are forbidden on the Sabbath. By refraining from engaging in creative work, a Jew demonstrates his awareness and acceptance of the dominion of G- in the world. During the course of the other six days of the week, man dominates the world about him through the work he performs. On the Sabbath, by denying himself the privilege of doing such work, he says in effect that he is willing to live in accordance with the laws given to him by G- who alone truly dominates the universe.

2. *Celebrating by preparing the most delicious of foods and getting dressed in the finest of clothing.*

3. *Special cleaning and decorating of one's home.* Tables, for example, must be covered with fresh white table-cloths.

4. *The recital of special prayers* both in the synagogue and at home. Women pronounce certain prayers while kindling candles on Friday night in order to welcome the Sabbath, while men pronounce *Kiddush* over wine before the meal commences. Other prayers, as *zmirot*, are always sung, usually in a group, at the termination of each meal.

On Friday, just before sundown, the women patients pronounce a blessing over an electric candelabra with which each one is provided in her room. Observation of these patients leaves little doubt that they feel themselves in a sense of direct communication with G-. The nursing staff will have requested of the maintenance staff that all deficient light bulbs in the candelabras be replaced. Both staffs have received

from the rabbi a thorough grounding in the meaning to patients of candle-lighting on the Sabbath.

Immediately following sundown, patients go to the synagogue dressed in their finest clothing. The nursing staff will have made certain, in conjunction with the laundry department, that this clothing was ready for use. Furthermore, they will have seen to it that patients, to the extent possible, had been bathed on Friday in honour of the Sabbath. They will have arranged that wheelchair patients were brought to the synagogue. They also will have made every attempt to bring brain-damaged patients there, since the synagogue experience has much therapeutic value for them too.

The housekeeping staff will have taken particular pains to clean the synagogue in preparation for the Sabbath.

Having completed synagogue prayers, patients proceed to the dining rooms of their respective floors where all tables will have been covered with white table-cloths by the dietary staff in honour of the Sabbath. The cooks will have prepared special delicacies associated with the Sabbath. Male patients, each one at his own table, pronounce the *kiddush* over wine, an act which fills them with much pride.

Following the meal, all patients gather together in one large room on the ground floor where the rabbi leads them in the Sabbath celebration, *Oneg Shabbat* (Sabbath Pleasure). At this time *zmirot* prayers are sung and refreshments are served. These activities constitute the most enjoyable of experiences for the patient from a social as well as a spiritual point of view. The rabbi delivers a talk on a *Torah* topic, which provides patients with intellectual stimulation and induces in them the feeling that they are communicating with G- through the study of the

Torah given them.

On Saturday morning at 9:00 A.M., patients come again to the synagogue where, because of the greater length of the Sabbath prayers, they remain until 11:30 A.M. The dining room atmosphere during lunch is a repetition of the Friday night supper atmosphere.

Following the afternoon service and just prior to sundown, the patients led by the rabbi, again gather together for the Sabbath celebration, *shalosh seudot* (the "third meal"), which is really a repetition of the Friday night *oneg shabbat*. The Sabbath day is then terminated with the evening prayers.

During the Sabbath the staff will have carefully refrained from smoking in public. Public playing of radio and television also will have ceased.

This restraint is a measure of the effectiveness of the teaching program which the rabbi has carried out among the staff concerning the meaning the Sabbath has for patients. It is also a measure of the staff's regard for the rabbi and reflects the concern they have for the feelings and well-being of the patients.

The practices associated with the observance of the Jewish holidays constitute additional forms of *mitzvot*. The additional prayers recited in the synagogue, the *Torah* reading which takes place there, the lighting of candles by the women, the reciting of *kiddush* by the men, the festive clothing, the white table-cloths and the well-prepared food are characteristic of the holidays as well. Each holiday however, has its own unique *mizvot* which serve basic psychological needs of patients. The rabbi, with respect to these *mitzvot* too, must give appropriate guidance and help create the conditions required for their performance.

On the High Holy Days, the fate of every living person and the fate of the people of Israel as a whole, are decreed

by G-. A sense of awe grips the Jew in which he feels strongly the presence of G-. He also feels the common fate he shares with his neighbours and with Jews throughout the world, a feeling which creates in him a keen sense of belonging to an entire people whose sufferings and joys are his. In his sermon during the High Holy Days, the rabbi consoles and encourages the patients. He also blows the "shofar" during the synagogue services, an act which calls forth memories of G-'s eternal love for Israel and expresses well the patients' earnest request for His mercy.

On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, fasting during a 24-hour period is necessary. This *mitzvah* however, would constitute a hazard for many aged patients. Working in conjunction with the medical staff, the rabbi speaks to every patient whose capacity to fast is questioned by the medical staff, in order to reassure him that the *Torah* does not demand of him that he place his life in jeopardy. On the contrary, doing so, would be considered sinful; hence he *must* eat even though it is Yom Kippur.

The holiday of Sukkot commemorates the fact that the Jewish people, after having been freed from slavery in Egypt dwelt in wooden huts or *sukkot* in the desert of Sinai. The rabbi supervises the maintenance staff in the construction each year of a *sukkah* on the ground floor level of Maimonides. The occupational therapy department guided by the rabbi, helps patients in the decorating of the *sukkah*. The rabbi also guides the dietary department in relation to the serving of food and wine in the *sukkah*, since every Jew must eat and drink something there during this holiday. *Sukkot* helps patients feel the concern which G- has for human beings. Did he not provide their ancestors with shelter in the desert for forty

years? *Sukkot* is also the harvest holiday, a visible indication that G- provides for people today too. Working together to decorate the *sukkah* and eating and praying together therein, evoke in each patient strong feelings of belonging to and being accepted by the group.

Several weeks prior to the onset of Passover, the rabbi meets with the patients and the heads of the dietary, housekeeping and maintenance department to review the procedures which guarantee that all traces of *chometz* will be removed from the hospital premises. These procedures involve a great deal of work on the part of staff, a fact which is not lost on the patients who realize that the staff is concerned about and respect their feelings.

Community praying and singing take place during the Seder in all patients' dining rooms, one of which is located on every floor of the hospital. The rabbi leads the praying in one of the dining rooms and arranges that individual patients endowed with knowledge and ability, or specially invited guests, lead the praying in the remaining dining rooms.

Passover in particular, arouses in patients a powerful consciousness of G-'s concern for them. On this holiday He freed their ancestors from slavery. Each Jew moreover is obligated to view himself as one who *personally* was freed from this slavery. Hence patients feel not only the closeness of G- to them but the closeness of their immediate neighbours and the entire people of Israel who have shared and continue to share a common fate.

Simchat Torah (Joy in the *Torah*), celebrates the completion of the reading of the *Torah*, in its entirety, in the synagogue during the course of the year. Since the *Torah* is considered the greatest gift of G- to man, the patients feel exhilarated by His act of kindness.

They join with the rabbi in dancing all over the synagogue floor, while holding the *Torah* scrolls in their arms. Restraint is thrown to the winds and joy reigns supreme. Patient is drawn to patient as in one big family.

Other *mitzvot* can be listed at length. We mention a few more: The laws of *kashruth* elevate the consumption of food from a purely biological to a spiritual act. They remind the individual that G- is ever present.

Furthermore, one may not eat anything without first pronouncing a blessing, thanking G- for His bounty. At the termination of each meal, grace must be said. In the saying of grace, certain responses are not permitted unless three individuals say grace together. Here again, a patient feels the presence of G- while simultaneously feeling a sense of his own importance to the group. Without him, the responsive prayers during the saying of grace, could not be pronounced.

Teaching the staff the meaning of the laws of *kashruth* and helping them understand the behaviour of patients in the dining rooms as they carry out religious customs pertaining to food require the qualities of patience, understanding and the ability to communicate clearly. This job must be done by the rabbi.

The laws of *kashruth* apply equally to the staff dining room. The fact that these laws are accepted by the staff at Maimonides, Jewish and non-Jewish, is a tribute to the personality and teaching ability of its rabbi.

Giving personal help and showing respect to another human being are among the most important of *mitzvot*. The rabbi helps the patients plan activities such as visiting those among their number who may be acutely sick at a given moment, either at Maimonides or at one of the general hospitals in Montreal; or activities relat-

ing to attendance at the funeral of a departed patient. Patients who perform these *mitzvot* are aware not only that they serve G- by serving people but that they continue to be useful in giving of themselves to others.

The rabbi helps patients, too, in planning fund-raising activities for Israel. Assisting Israel financially means to participate in the Divine plan of having the Jewish people develop the high form of moral living required by the *Torah*. Such a life can be developed to its highest degree only in a land where Jews live as a sovereign people. This land can only be the land of Israel promised by G- to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the fathers of the Jewish people. Hence patients who contribute financially to Israel feel that they are performing an act of supreme importance. They are helping to build a sovereign nation while simultaneously carrying out the will of G-.

As Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, was drawing to a close on October 6th, 1973, the rabbi mounted the pulpit to inform the patients that Israel had been attacked during the morning by its enemies. News of this attack was not known until two hours prior to sundown, because radio and T.V. had not been used during the day. The rabbi explained to the patients that their prayers at this moment when Yom Kippur was terminating, were of crucial importance since they would be asking G- to preserve the people of Israel and the land of Israel. The patients were visibly moved. In the hour that preceded nightfall, one could sense that the tie which each patient felt with G-, *Torah*, the Jewish people and the land of Israel was deep and intense.

The psychiatrist at Maimonides Hospital has been so impressed with the rabbi's warm relationship with patients, he recommended that he also lead

small group-therapy sessions among them. This the rabbi has been doing successfully. In addition, he participates in meetings held regularly on each floor of Maimonides Hospital, attended simultaneously by both patients and staff. At these meetings everyone present is encouraged to express his feelings towards other people who either live or work on the floor and offer constructive criticism concerning the manner in which services are administered to patients.

From what has been said it is apparent that the rabbi of an Orthodox long-term hospital for the aged must have a thorough understanding of the needs of geriatric patients, an understanding of hospital organization and an understanding of staff members. He must also be a warm individual who feels comfortable in his relationships with both patients and staff. However, in order that he be able to do his work effectively, he must be given the status commensurate with his important function. He must be recognized as a full-time professional department head on a par with other professional depart-

ment heads.

In summary, this paper, after outlining briefly some of the needs of geriatric patients and some of the beliefs and aspects of Orthodox Judaism, describes how the rabbi of a geriatric long-term hospital conducted in accordance with the Orthodox Jewish tradition, gives guidance in relation to the *mitzvot* of Judaism and helps create the special conditions required for their performance, in the process making it possible for the patients to satisfy some of their basic emotional needs as they carry out the requirements of the *mitzvot*. The rabbi, in helping create the special conditions needed for the performance of the *mitzvot* must do so in cooperation with other department heads. Hence he must understand hospital organization and be able to work effectively with colleagues. He must understand personality structure and be capable of developing warm relationships with patients. In order to carry out his work effectively he must be engaged on a full-time basis as the head of an important professional department.