



Forum probes link between religion, health



At a program at Rutgers University, Rabbi David Ellenson, left, and Dr. Jeff Levin discuss the intersection of spirituality and health in Jewish tradition, with moderator Dr. Deborah Carr of Rutgers. *Photo by Debra Rubin*

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Spiritual approaches to mental and physical health may seem faddish but have always had their place in Judaism, said a leading figure in the Reform movement.

“There is a direct relationship between the realm of physical and the realm of the spiritual,” said Rabbi David Ellenson, president of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Discussions of that relationship, he said, permeate the talmudic and rabbinic commentaries.

Ellenson was among the speakers at a Dec. 4 program on spirituality and health sponsored by Rutgers University’s Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, held at the Douglass College Center in New Brunswick.

He was joined by Dr. Jeff Levin of Waco, Texas, where he is director of the Program on Religion and Population Health at Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion.

The intersection of religion and health care, in concert with modern medical ethics, has in recent decades spawned the Jewish pastoral care, chaplaincy, and hospice movements, said Levin. Healing services and liturgies have become the norm in Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative synagogues across the country.

Levin, an epidemiologist, is coeditor of *Judaism and Health: A Handbook of Practical, Professional and Scholarly Resources*.

“Our institutions and synagogues have much more interest in exploring things that are no longer weird or marginal,” he said. “Jewish meditation is no longer new-agey; it’s not something just in the Jewish Renewal movement.”

Ellenson said that Jewish tradition and the Talmud viewed prayer as a way to assist in healing and health. However, even they realized its limits.

Ellenson cited a passage from Talmud about the death of Judah haNasi.

The fervent prayers of his students “were keeping the sage alive. However, seeing the rabbi was in agonizing pain, his maidservant took a jug and threw it off the roof. The noise momentarily interrupted the praying, allowing his soul to depart,” said Ellenson, who is also the I.H. and Anna Grancell Professor of Jewish Thought.

Ellenson said the Gemara praises the maidservant “because she had compassion.” The tale has modern parallels: “Respirators make it possible to keep people alive for years,” he said, likening them to the students’ prayers, and today’s practitioners and clergy must balance technology with compassion.

From a traditional Jewish standpoint, said Ellenson, medical personnel are given their skills “directly from God.”

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