

Reprinted from Moment Magazine, February 2007, "Ask the Rabbis" column

What healing alternatives to modern medicine does Judaism offer?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

We know very personally that illness is upsetting, debilitating, scary and, *the big word*, unfair. The physical pain notwithstanding, one often suffers more from the assault on our psyche. Our sense of safety is shattered, even when illness is not life-threatening. The real aim of healing – beyond turning to medicine as the first line of defense – is to tend to this psychic blow.

A starting point for many secular Jews is an acceptance that the premise – "that life is supposed to be fair" – is, in fact, a myth. Instead, we believe we live in an amoral universe that plays no favorites and deals out suffering indiscriminately to all – not to test us, not to punish us for transgressions, not to give us a wake-up call – but because capricious nature, not an intelligent overseer, is in control. A first step towards healing is accepting, not fighting, this unalterable reality. We get here not with remedies or alternative practices but with clear thinking and existential honesty.

For secular Jews, while the idea of prayer to an "other" may be a foreign concept, the notion of private self-talk and introspection is quite familiar. We believe in the power of positive affirmation. We believe in our ability to find inner strength, resolve, and even courage to face life's ordeals. In this quest for inner peace, secular Jews eschew mystical solutions or others that smack of too much New Age spirituality. But they are likely to welcome non-religious techniques from Eastern cultures, or our own traditions, that teach about meditation and regulated breathing.

We also know we can not do it alone. We need the support and compassion of family and friends who call to chat, who email a joke, who come to visit. We do not want their prayers. We do not put much stock in them. But we welcome their presence and appreciate their concern. When someone says, "I'm thinking about you," nothing could be more healing.

Rabbi Peter Schweitzer presents a view of Humanistic Judaism as a regular contributor to Moment Magazine's "Ask the Rabbis" column. The response printed here may be slightly altered from the version that first appeared in the magazine. You can find Moment Magazine on-line at www.momentmag.com.