



Rabbi Dr. Vanessa Ochs' Woocher Fellowship Project Update

In the late spring and summer of 2019, as the inaugural Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah's Jonathan Woocher Research Fellow, I explored how particular Jewish Sensibilities (as described in my work) were active in the context of healthcare. Through personal contacts, I approached Jewish individuals in the US who either worked in the field of health care or were training to do so. In this preliminary work, I sought out individuals who were somewhat diverse in age, Jewish connectedness, Jewish life stories, geography (NJ, MD, VA, NM, MN), and professional identity. My interlocutors were nurses, doctors, clinical researchers, social workers; there was one exercise physiologist, one hospital clown, and one chaplain who brought a therapy dog on her visits.

Beforehand, I explained to my interlocutors that I was exploring the connections Jewish people make between the work they do in healthcare and aspects of Jewish wisdom they have picked up, not from books, but from life (from childhood or since conversion). I had hour-long conversations with 18 people, in person or by telephone/facetime; the individuals were assured of anonymity. Early on in my research, I made specific reference to the Jewish Sensibilities, asking people, for instance, how a Jewish understanding of say, Honor (*Kavod*) or *Tikkun Olam* played out in their lives as healing professionals/trainees. It was soon clear that this was not a productive approach, for I saw that people wanted to give me the "right" answer that would show their Jewish literacy or, at least, would not be an embarrassment. I quickly shifted course and offered initial (and intentionally vague sounding) questions that allowed for a more open-ended response. Thus: "How do you turn to aspects of your Jewish self when it comes to patient care/research/training? How do you, as a Jew, think about your healthcare role, the decisions you make, matters you must reflect upon, and difficult conversations your work requires you to engage in?" Sometimes, I asked: "How does your Jewish identity play out in your work/engagements?" Once our conversations began, it became immediately clear that my interlocutors had so many rich examples of how Jewish ways of being/feeling/judging/reasoning (etc.) played out in the full range of their healthcare experiences.

In their responses, those who were trained in Jewish texts or Jewish ethical precepts sometimes used Jewish terminologies in their responses: terms such as *pikuach nefesh* and *tikkun olam* were most frequently referenced. Those without a ready Judaic vocabulary, as my write-up will demonstrate, coined their own original terms. As a matter of fact, hearing those original terms coined repeatedly by various interlocutors has led me to conclude that when using Jewish Sensibilities to study the experiences of Jewish healthcare professionals, there are two that should be appended to my original list and two that need subcategories.

The additions:

1. “Respectful unknowing”—a belief that in many situations, the unknowns overwhelm the knowns. This encourages, in the practitioner, a desire to know more, to find the truth, all while remembering to be humble in the face of all that is complex and elusive. The Hebrew term I might use is *derash* (inquiry). *An example:* This is about the distinctive ways that being Jewish – not Jewish religious necessarily, but simply Jewish – comes into play when a nursing student thinks about the situations in which she finds herself. They are not hypothetical situations, things you learn about in books – they are the situations we find ourselves in when we are on the floors of the hospital when we begin our clinical training. The student explains: “I find myself responding to death differently than my Christian classmates. I will hear them saying to a patient, ‘You have an angel looking over you’...or someone will say about a person who dies, ‘She is in a better place.’ Phrases like this would never come to my mind. From where I stand, comforting people like that seems inadequate. Does God really need another angel? Are they REALLY in a better place? If anything, I am more passive in conversation; I don't want to take away my patient's pain. I just want to be there, not to rationalize, not to find a silver lining. It takes courage to conclude, ‘God didn't want that to happen.’ When hard things happened to me once, and I spoke with my rabbi, she didn't say, ‘Well at least so and so is happy...’ She just listened, validated me. Jews allow for questioning God, not knowing that God has a plan. Judaism gives me the space to be mad at God.” As Jews, we inherit what I think of as a “respectful unknowing,”--uncertainty, but the belief that we can grapple with it together.
2. Community (*tzibur*)—this includes the desire for connectedness. The importance of community was illustrated by an ENT doctor (who performs cochlear implants) who said, “While vision connects us to the world, hearing connects us to each other.” Linking his thoughts to the word “*Sh'ma*,” he went on: “People say they would rather lose their sight, but they don't know that hearing loss leads to depression, social withdrawal. From Jewish community, I know we need each other; it binds us to each other.” This doctor then added that when he stands at the sink and scrubs his hands before an operation, he says, “Dear God, guide my hands and use my knowledge to help this patient.”

The two additions of subcategories:

1. *Teshuva* needs to include: “Learning from mistakes while not being oppressed by them;” this can also be phrased as “acknowledging imperfection;” perhaps the right term in Hebrew is *Yom Kippur*. As one doctor said, “Every day is like Yom Kippur. You try to take account of what you did and didn't say and see how you can improve....Self-criticism is very Jewish (not self-laceration.) You have to step away from yourself and look at your mistakes in a detached manner. I am trying to be a better person...” In medicine, doctors said, consistent

perfection isn't possible; there must be an acceptance of imperfection and a capacity to learn and move on.

2. *Being a mensch/or Tikkun olam* needs to include: specific mention of compassion (*chesed*). One nursing student said of her work on the floors, "Everything I do medically has to be supervised, but there is much I can do to meet (a patient's) basic needs, making them feel more comfortable. It's a little 'tikunning' I can do at this point. It makes me happy when I see I can meet their needs and I know I am in the right field." Another story, from an exercise physiologist who works in an assisted living facility: "I have an extraordinarily difficult man I work with. He is hateful, not a nice man; he is mean! After a stroke...I got him walking with a cane. His family says, 'You are the only one who will deal with his junk!' He tells me his dreams. I can see why he is frustrated; he can't get the answers for his issues. He is so grateful for the little things people will do for him; bringing toothpicks to floss, a razor."

In my detailed write up, I shall provide specific details about what I learned about how Jewishness plays out in the lives of my interlocutors.

For the time being, I want to note that the people I spoke with did more than provide me with useful information. They often thanked me for the conversations, saying that by speaking and being heard, they derived insights into how their Jewish selves and Jewish influences were playing out every day, informing them, strengthening them, and giving them work/life balance. They also derived some clarification into how their Jewishness might be a (sometimes productive) source of tension/resistance in their work. I suspect that I will conclude that a significant part of my project will be both the information gleaned, and the experience of reflecting and speaking that the individuals I spoke with had.

In the Spring of 2020, one of my UVA undergraduates, Sophie Dornfeld, an advanced nursing student as well as a Jewish Studies major, carried out more conversations (with practitioners, and I hope, more students in training) under my tutelage as part of an independent study. She followed this up in the Fall of 2020 with a full research team of seven UVA undergrads that conducted 29 conversations. Consequently, a set of "new sensibilities" emerged. With the help of a UVA Jewish Studies 2021 summer research grant, I am currently reviewing the transcripts of these conversations and reflecting on the new sensibilities proposed by the Dornfeld team.