



# Exorcism in Baltimore

By Steven M. Fink

I recently received the most unusual request of my 30-year rabbinic career. Phyllis\*, a longtime congregant, phoned to tell me that her husband Mark\* was going to have surgery in a week to remove a malignant tumor near his left hip. She then hesitated for a moment and asked: “Rabbi, do you do house blessings?”

“Sure,” I replied, “all the time. When families move into a new house I do a dedication of the home ceremony and we place a *mezuzah* on the front door.”

“No, Rabbi, that’s not it. Do you bless a house to get rid of all the sickness within it?”

Phyllis explained that in addition to Mark’s malignant tumor, she was in the hospital the previous week with internal bleeding from an undetermined cause. An Orthodox friend had suggested she ask her rabbi to bless the house to purge it of all illness.

“Rabbi,” Phyllis asked again, “Would you come over and bless our house?”

I didn’t know what to say. Phyllis was asking me to do an exorcism!



The expulsion of evil spirits or demons through herbal remedies, incantations, and music was practiced in biblical and Talmudic times, and later among the Kabbalists. Such rituals entered modern times in some Chasidic circles of Eastern Europe. Perhaps the best-known Jewish exorcism is portrayed in *The Dybbuk*, a play by S. Ansky, who traveled through the Ukraine from 1911 to 1914 recording

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the folklore of shtetl Jews.

I weighed the options. Phyllis was obviously afraid for her family’s future, and was turning to me for support. If I, her rabbi, did not agree to perform this ceremony, she would likely turn to a Chabad rabbi to do it instead. Should I let my congregants’ need for comfort and hope be met by a Chasidic rabbi?

I thought for a moment and then responded, “I haven’t done this before, but I would be happy to do it for you.” We set up a date before the surgery.



I kept thinking about Phyllis’ request for a house blessing. Would such a blessing be theologically different than the *mishberach*, the blessing for healing the soul and the body, many Reform congregations, including ours, recite at every service? Most Reform Jews don’t believe in intercessory prayer, the idea that God will necessarily give us what we ask for. When most of us ask God to heal those who are ill, we do not expect the Eternal to automatically grant cures; we are really asking God to give them and their healers strength, courage, and hope. This house blessing would then be a personalized

*mishberach*. I would simply be asking God to bring health to a family in need of healing, and try to bring some light into the darkness that surrounds them.

To be meaningful, the ceremony had to be participatory and include symbols that would speak directly to the family’s needs. My wife, Sally, who has had a long relationship with this family, suggested incorporating salt—which, when used as a weed killer, can be a metaphor for eliminating sickness from a home. She also

recommended using a broom to symbolically sweep sickness out of the house, and a candle to represent God’s light.

I still needed a suitable Torah verse to recite at the ceremony. Rabbi Scott Nagel, our congregation’s associate rabbi, proposed that I invoke Leviticus 14:48-53, in which the *Kohen* (priest) examined a house and, upon finding it free of the plague, sprinkled it seven times with a protective mixture of bird’s blood, fresh water, cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson stuff (cloth or yarn). The priest then pronounced the house pure and fit for human habitation. I had these ingredients. I would just substitute a bird’s blood with the juice of red grapes.

On the day of the ceremony, Phyllis, Mark, their daughter Amy\* (who came home from college to partake in the ceremony), Phyllis’ Orthodox friend, Sally, and I gathered at the front door of their house. Mark and Phyllis dipped their fingers into a sterling silver bowl, and, while reciting “*El Na Refa’eni Na*, God please heal me” (the healing prayer modeled after Moses’ plea for Miriam in Numbers 12:13), sprinkled the blood/water/wood/hyssop/crimson

\*Names have been changed to protect privacy