

L'Chaim: Jews, Medicine and Preserving Life

Dr. Natalie Berger edited a fascinating book, *Jews and Medicine: Religion, Culture, Science*, which was based on an exhibit held at the Nahum Goldman Museum of the Jewish Diaspora in Tel Aviv, Israel. In this book you can learn, for example, that in 1932, of the 52,000 physicians in Germany, 6,000 were Jewish and 2,000 more were of Jewish origin. In Vienna, the ratio was even more striking: of the 4,900 doctors, 3,200 had some kind of a link to Judaism (p. 167). Today, Jews continue to be attracted to medicine out of all proportion to their numbers in the population.

I believe this is because unlike some religions, Judaism does not place ultimate responsibility for healing in divine hands. I share with you the following story from the Talmud (BT Avodah Zarah 55a) which tries to make this point in its own entertaining fashion.

A man named Zunin said to Rabbi Akiva, "How is it that sick men enter a shrine full of idols and leave cured? Perhaps idols have the power of healing?" Rabbi Akiva rejected this notion explaining, "When someone gets sick, the disease takes an oath to afflict the person at such and such a time and to leave him at such and such a time." Once, the time arrived for an illness to depart just as a person entered a shrine. What happened? The disease pleaded, "It would be better that I not depart now and make the man think that the idol cured him. But just because the man is a fool, should I break my oath?"

Idols don't heal people. People heal people. With God's help.

This is why the Jewish preponderance in the medical field in modern times has ancient roots. By one estimate, in the Islamic Golden Age (8th – 12th century CE) approximately half of the doctors were rabbis. Is it any wonder then that 213 of the 613 of the enumerated mitzvot have to do with care of the body in one way or another? Indeed, healing is considered a commandment that overrides all others. As Dr. Sherwin Nuland writes in his biography of Maimonides: "...the rabbis of the Talmud taught with the conviction that the preservation of life is a basic teaching to be carried out by human action and existing as an instrument of Divine will... God is not to be used by mankind as medicine. When sickness occurs, a doctor is to be sought out, a dictum clearly articulated by Maimonides in his Commentary on the Mishna, 'One who is ill has not only a right but also the duty to seek medical aid.'"

Admiration for doctors long preceded Maimonides. Ben Sira was a Hellenistic Jewish scribe who lived during Second Temple times (2nd century BCE) likely in Egypt. His is an early, important statement on Jews and medicine. It reflects the theology that humans are partners with God.

Make friends with the physician, for he is essential to you;
Him also God has established in his profession.
From God the doctor has wisdom,
And from the king he receives sustenance.
God makes the earth yield healing herbs,
Which the prudent should not neglect.
God endows humans with the knowledge
To glory in his mighty works,
Through which the doctor eases pain
And the druggist prepares his medicines;
Thus, God's creative work continues without cease
In its efficacy on the surface of the earth.

We shouldn't think of doctors as God. But we should be grateful for all those involved in the healing process: doctors; nurses; pharmacists; administrators; researchers; regulators and more. These men and women, endowed by God with wisdom, are dedicated to bringing healing to our world.

As medical researchers around the world race to develop a vaccine for Covid-19, we can be proud that many Jewish and Israeli researchers are playing significant roles in finding a breakthrough. While we may not be able to directly assist their efforts, we can offer a prayer for the wisdom and skills of medical scientists, researchers, and public health officials around the world fighting the novel coronavirus. This one was written by the Israeli liturgist and poet Alden Solovy.

Coronavirus: A Prayer for Medical Scientists

God of wisdom,
Bless medical scientists and researchers around the world
With insight and skill, dedication and fortitude,
As they combat coronavirus,
So that their work yields knowledge and understanding,
Speedily finding a vaccine, treatments and deterrents to its spread.

Source of life,
Grant public health and government officials
The strength to act swiftly and decisively,
With compassion and understanding,
In service to humankind,
Fighting this outbreak
And the other diseases that still plague the planet,
Diseases threatening the lives of our brothers and sisters,
Nations and communities,
Young and old.

Rock of Ages,
Bring an end to disease and suffering,
So that all may know
Your compassion and Your grace.

Praised are You, God, healer of flesh, maker of wonders.

Let me add, may they be blessed with success speedily in our day. Until that day arrives, it is our obligation to follow the deceptively simple guidance given near the end of the Torah (Deut. 30:19): "Choose life" by adhering to guidelines given by public health officials in order to safeguard human health and slow the spread of the contagion. Our decision to "choose life" will literally create the difference between life and death for many of our vulnerable beloveds.

Think of yourself and others as we support those on the frontlines. Together we can do God's work of preserving life.