



THE WINGS OF THE SUN

Traditional Jewish Healing in Theory and Practice

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Section 2

The Jewish Healing Tradition

Chapter 2

Hezekiah and the Book of Remedies

"Even if a sharp sword is pressing on your neck, don't despair of pleading for God's mercy!"
(Berakhot 10a)

At one of the most critical junctures of Jewish history, with Assyrian King Sennacherib's vast army closing in on Jerusalem, Hezekiah King of Judah suddenly fell mortally ill. His entire body was covered with horrible sores. The prophet Isaiah came to him and said, "Thus says the Lord: Set your house in order, for you will die and not live" (Isaiah 38: 1; Kings II, 20: 1).

With God's prophet telling him to make his will and prepare to die, a lesser man might have given up the fight. Not Hezekiah. He had a tradition from his ancestor, King David: "Even if a sharp sword is pressing on your neck, don't despair of pleading for God's mercy" (Berakhot 10a). Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed: "Remember now, O God, I beseech You, how I've walked before You in truth and with a whole heart: I did what is good in Your eyes." Hezekiah wept bitterly.

Hezekiah's turning his face to the wall was more than a physical movement. It was a movement inwards. The "face" he turned was his inner awareness. He focussed his mind on the walls of his heart in order to break through his inner armory, the rationalizations, the accumulated insensitivity (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #39). The sick Hezekiah turned to God with all his heart, pleading for life. That didn't mean mere chest-thumping. Hezekiah searched within himself not so much for his guilt as for his merit. Just as he had walked before God and done good in the past, so now he begged to be allowed to continue. And his prayer found favor.

God told Isaiah to return to Hezekiah and inform him that not only would he be healed, but he would have another fifteen years added to his life. Isaiah ordered figs to be laid on Hezekiah's boils - a miracle within a miracle, because normally figs cause raw flesh to become putrid - and the king was healed. On the third day Hezekiah went up to the Holy Temple, while an angel passed through the Assyrian camp, killing one hundred and eighty-five thousand men. Sennacherib retreated to Nineveh, and was murdered by his own sons as he worshipped in his idolatrous temple.

The Book of Remedies

The Midrash throws light on the meaning of Hezekiah's illness. "Rabbi Levi said: Hezekiah mused, ' It isn't good for people to enjoy constant good health until the day they die. This way they'll never think of repentance. But if they fall sick and then recover, they'll come to repent their sins.' God said to Hezekiah, ' This is a good idea. And I'll start with you!'" (Bereshit Rabbah 65:9). Hezekiah saw that illness can have a positive side if it prompts us to examine ourselves. What have we been doing with our lives? How have we been using our bodies? What is our true purpose in this world? How can we attain it?

As Hezekiah lay in mortal danger, he asked the prophet where he had gone astray. Isaiah explained that he had failed to carry out the first commandment of the Torah, to be fruitful and multiply. Hezekiah said this was because he had seen with holy spirit that his offspring would be unworthy. But Isaiah said this was not his business: he had an obligation to have children. Hezekiah understood his mistake and undertook to marry and have children.

That sickness is a prompt from God to examine ourselves was a lesson Hezekiah, spiritual leader of his people, had long wanted to teach. The point is brought out in a rabbinic comment on Hezekiah's prayer as he lay sick: "I did what is good in Your eyes." Enumerating Hezekiah's achievements during his reign, the Rabbis said he was alluding in his prayer to two major innovations: he "joined Redemption to Prayer, and he put away the Book of Remedies" (Berakhot 10b; Pesachim 56a).

"Joining Redemption to Prayer" literally refers to Hezekiah's institution of the rule that during the daily prayer services no interruption may be made between recital of the blessing of Redemption that follows the Shema and commencement of the silent Amidah prayer. But what about the Book of Remedies? What was it, and why did Hezekiah ban it?

Extant clay tablets and papyruses indicate that the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt possessed a vast body of medical knowledge. Hundreds of therapeutic plant, mineral and animal substances were in use, as well as a wide variety of surgical and other treatments. It would be easy to speculate that the Book of Remedies included medical techniques borrowed from other cultures with which the Jews had contact. On the other hand, Rabbi Shimon bar Tzemach (the TaShBaTz, 1361-1444) states that the source of the book was supernatural: when Noah was in the ark during the flood, destructive spirits injured his sons, but an angel took one of them to the Garden of Eden and

taught him all the remedies in the world (Seder HaDorot #1657). The Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman of Girondi, 1194-1270) opines that the Book of Remedies was composed by Hezekiah's ancestor, King Solomon, whose God-given wisdom enabled him to deduce the healing properties of the various trees and plants from allusions buried in the Torah (Ramban, Commentary on the Torah, Introduction).

By any account, the Book of Remedies contained the accumulated healing wisdom of the Jewish People. Why then did Hezekiah put it away? It was not that the remedies were ineffective. On the contrary, in Hezekiah's view they were too effective! "When a person became sick, he would follow what was written in the book and be healed, and as a result people's hearts were not humbled before Heaven because of illness" (Rashi on Pesachim 56a). In the words of the Ramban (ad loc.): "They did not have trust that it is the Holy One, blessed be He, Who heals and binds up wounds."

Resort to the Book of Remedies turned sickness and healing into nothing but a mechanical process. Hezekiah was not seeking to withhold medical expertise because of some morbid desire to make people suffer their sicknesses to the full so as to somehow expiate their sins. Far from wanting them to be sick, Hezekiah saw that reliance on the Book of Remedies actually prevented people from being truly healed. While the remedies it contained might alleviate their bodily ailments, the very effectiveness of these physical cures allowed those who used them to avoid confronting the underlying spiritual flaws to which their bodily ailments pointed.

King Hezekiah wanted the people to understand that illness, terrible as it may be, is sent by God for a purpose. It is to prompt us to examine ourselves and our lives, to ask ourselves where we have strayed from our mission and what steps we must take in the future in order to attain genuine self-fulfilment. Concealing the Book of Remedies would encourage people to take their lives in hand and actualize their latent spiritual powers, playing an active role in their own healing process.

Putting away the Book of Remedies was thus intimately bound up with King Hezekiah's second innovation, "joining Redemption to Prayer." This was more than a technical rule of religious ritual. Hezekiah redeemed prayer itself! He taught people how to pray again. Prayer brings us to the ultimate connection with God. And precisely because prayer is so exalted, it is surrounded by endless obstacles. For many people it seems like a meaningless, tiresome burden: prayer is in exile. Hezekiah sought to tear down the barriers and reveal the new-old pathway of prayer in its true splendor. Prayer is not just a matter of asking God for favors. It is our way to channel divine power and blessing into ourselves, our lives and the whole world. Through prayer the soul rises to God and is healed, and in turn sends healing power into the body. By truly redeeming prayer Hezekiah was able to put away the Book of Remedies. There was simply no more need for it.

[NEXT CHAPTER](#)

[BACK TO WINGS OF THE SUN HOMEPAGE](#)

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