



THE WINGS OF THE SUN

Traditional Jewish Healing in Theory and Practice

By [Rabbi Avraham Greenbaum](#)

Chapter 3

Healing in the Bible

"I kill and I make alive, I wound and I heal, and there is no one that can deliver out of My hand."
(Deuteronomy 32: 39)

King Hezekiah wanted to bring the Jewish People back to the original Jewish pathway of healing through faith and prayer, Torah and mitzvot. The Torah is the Jewish path of health and healing. Directly after the Exodus from Egypt, as the Jews made their way from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, God gave them the first injunctions of the Torah code. "And He said, If you will listen carefully to the voice of HaShem your God and do what is right in His eyes and give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you that I have put on the Egyptians, for I, God, am your Healer" (Exodus 15:26).

The Egyptians, among whom the Jews had been exiled for over two hundred years, were afflicted with all kinds of ailments. Papyrus, paintings, inscriptions and mummies provide evidence of plague, smallpox, poliomyelitis, arteriosclerosis, cancer, arthritis, cirrhosis of the liver, trachoma and many other diseases. Besides seeing all this, the Jews who left Egypt had also witnessed the plagues that came upon the Egyptians because of their refusal to submit to God, including lice, pestilence and boils.

God was now inviting the Children of Israel to follow a whole new way. They were to listen carefully to God's voice, His call to man to elevate himself spiritually, step by step, through carrying out the divine will at every juncture in life. They were to give ear to His commandments, to observe them carefully and precisely, including even the statutes that seem to make no sense to the rational human mind. For the Torah code is a pathway of perfect harmony, protecting those who sincerely embrace it from illness: "I will put none of the diseases upon you." True, we are only human. We are often neglectful and easily lay ourselves open to sickness. Even so, "I, God, am your Healer" - "I am teaching you Torah and mitzvot in order that you may be saved from these diseases, like a doctor who says to a person, 'Don't eat such and such because

it will make you ill.' And so it is written (Proverbs 3:8): ' [The Torah] will be health to your navel and marrow to your bones'" (Rashi on Exodus 15:26).

"When a human being prescribes a medicine it may be good for one person but harmful to another. Not so the Holy One, blessed be He. The Torah He gave to the Jewish People is an elixir of life for the whole body, as it is said (Proverbs 4:22): ' and health to all his flesh'" (Eruvin 54a).

In the words of one of the classic Bible commentators, "At first this pathway may be unfamiliar and its meaning and purpose unclear. It may be difficult and even bitter. But in the end it is very sweet. It is like the medicines given by an expert doctor. The patient may not understand their purpose or enjoy taking them. Some of them may be very bitter. But if the patient has faith in the doctor and follows his prescriptions faithfully, he will be cured and have his health restored" (Kli Yakar on Exodus 15:26).

The injunctions of the Torah are not, of course, mere health guidelines. The purpose of the dietary and other prohibitions goes far beyond protection from physical health hazards, though careful observance of the letter and spirit of the Torah code does in fact keep people from the avarice, immoderate physical gratification, sexual licentiousness and other abuses that are among the major causes of physical disease in our society. But the path of Torah and mitzvot leads beyond the physical world to the ultimate joy of genuine connection with God. It is this spiritual fulfilment that is the true guarantor of health, giving immunity against the physical excesses, the lack of balance, the loss of meaning and purpose, the depression and despair that lie at the root of so many diseases.

Avimelech's dream

For the idolators of antiquity, the vagaries of illness were thought to be in the hands of a pantheon of capricious deities who had to be placated in order for healing to come about. The human was merely their helpless plaything, just as he felt himself to be the passive victim of his own inner urges. But the Torah teaches us that we are free. We have the power to rise above the dictates of our physical natures and choose our own destiny. The Torah reveals a pathway of true fulfilment and happiness, and warns that straying from it will lead to pain and suffering in the end. It is up to us to decide which way we will go, and we must therefore take responsibility for the consequences of our actions. Illness is not a quirk of fate or chance, but rather a heaven-sent response to free human choices.

The moral dimension of physical illness is evident in the first direct reference to sickness and healing in the Bible (Genesis 20:1-18). Abraham and Sarah had come to sojourn in the land of the Philistines. Avimelech, king of the Philistines, instead of concerning himself with the welfare of this caravan of visitors, immediately enquired after Sarah. Informed that she was Abraham's sister, he

seized her for himself, whereupon he and his entire court were smitten with a mysterious plague. All the orifices of their bodies were closed up, making it impossible for them to pass water, ease themselves, cohabit or even clear the mucus from their noses and wax from their ears (see Rashi on Genesis 20:9). Avimelech and his court were in mortal danger.

The key to the mystery was revealed to Avimelech that night, when God came to him in a dream. In the dream Avimelech protested that he had acted innocently and had not touched Sarah. But God sees into the heart and replied that this was because God Himself had held him back. Although Avimelech had not carried out a criminal act, his intentions had not been pure and innocent. Only by making amends would Avimelech and his court be healed. "And now return the man's wife. He is a prophet and will pray for you, and you will live" (Genesis 20:7). Avimelech restored Sarah to Abraham, who prayed to God, and Avimelech, his wife and maidservants were healed.

Consciously Avimelech rationalized his action by telling himself that, as far as he knew, Sarah was Abraham's sister. But the truth was that if he had known she was Abraham's wife he would have had no qualms about killing him. Abraham realized this, which was why he concealed the truth about his relationship to Sarah in the first place. Avimelech saw nothing wrong with kidnapping a visitor to his kingdom. This was because he let his lower urges blunt his moral sensibility, and instead of taking responsibility for his choice he covered it over with a specious excuse.

The plague was not just a punitive visitation. It was an invitation to Avimelech to be more honest and search beneath his conscious rationalizations. What he most needed to release himself and his court from illness was insight, and this was sent to him in a dream. In the ancient world sick people would often go to sleep in cult temples in the hope of being sent a dream that would reveal the cause of their illness. For the Torah, idolatrous cults are abhorrent, but the dream state is accepted as one that can open us to levels of understanding that are presently beyond us, as can prayer and meditation (Sha'arey Kedushah 3; Derekh HaShem 3:1:6). Avimelech was forced to realize that he was in the wrong. Healing came not through physicians and medicines but by Avimelech's rectification of his own error and through Abraham's intercession with God.

Leprosy

Physicians were known figures in the world of the Bible: for example, Joseph called in Egyptian doctors - though not in this case to heal the living, but to embalm Jacob's body (Genesis 50:2). Yet significantly, there is no mention whatever of either doctors or medical treatment of any kind in connection with the illness that receives the most attention in the Bible: (tzara'at) (Leviticus chapters 13-15). This is usually translated as leprosy for want of a better word, but the detailed typology given in the Bible includes not only what we today would call leprosy but also a variety of other skin disorders seemingly akin to ulceration, eczema, psoriasis, impetigo, melanomas, carcinomas and alopecia (hair loss). The biblical section dealing with the laws of tzara'at is followed by a section on (ziva) - genital discharges in men, sometimes identified with

gonorrhoea, and abnormal genital bleeding in women - to which many of the same rules apply.

Someone displaying symptoms of tzara'at is called a (metzora). The metzora had to be examined not by a doctor but by a priest. The priest's task was to give not a physical but what might be termed a "moral" diagnosis. What the priest had to determine was whether the visible symptoms put this affliction into the category of a "pure" or "impure" affliction according to strict criteria handed down in the written and oral law. If the priest declared it impure, the sufferer had to go into isolation outside the city until he was healed. He was effectively in a state of mourning. He was not allowed to shave, launder his clothes or greet anyone. He had to cover his head like a mourner and inform passers-by that he was ritually impure. A drop of his saliva or urine was enough to render others impure. Any food, clothes or utensils he touched became impure, as did a chair or a bed he sat or lay on. If he entered a house, everything inside it became impure.

Throughout the biblical passages on tzara'at not a word is said regarding how the metzora was actually healed. Before he could return to normal community life, he had to undergo an elaborate procedure of purification and atonement involving ritual sprinkling, shaving of the body, immersion, sacrifices and anointment with oil. But none of this had anything to do with healing. It all took place only after the affliction was healed.

The fact that any person or object the metzora touched became ritually impure must certainly have discouraged people from having any contact with him, which doubtless served to prevent contagion. But the main purpose of forcing the metzora into complete isolation and mourning was to encourage him to "turn his face to the wall," as did King Hezekiah, to contemplate the spiritual meaning of his affliction. And this itself was what caused him to heal.

The Bible teaches that although tzara'at is unquestionably a physical disease, it is sent because of a spiritual flaw in the metzora. The slanderer becomes a (metzora) because of being (motzi ra) - "bringing out evil" about others, while turning a blind eye to his own shortcomings, until the conspicuous blemish on his own body forces him to confront it. Moses' sister Miriam was a saint and a prophetess, but she was not spared when she spoke disparagingly of her brother (Numbers 12:1-16). As in the case of Avimelech, it was through prayer that Miriam's healing came about. Moses intervened and said, "God, I beseech You, heal her now" (Numbers 12:13). Another celebrated case of tzara'at was that of King Uzziah, who usurped the priestly functions and sought to burn incense in the sanctuary. Tzara'at broke out on his forehead and afflicted him until his death (Chronicles II, 26:18-21). The Rabbis enumerate various other transgressions for which leprosy might be sent, including atheism, blasphemy, idolatry, murder, incest, immorality, robbery, perjury, jealousy and arrogance (Erkhein 16a and Yalkut #563).

Yet tzara'at should not be seen merely as a penalty for sin. When a human being inflicts punishment the intention is often simply to make the offending party "pay" for his offence. But God sends suffering "as a man chastens his

son" (Deuteronomy 8:5), "out of hidden love" (Proverbs 27:5). God wants us to take the initiative and do the necessary work to cleanse ourselves of the traits and behavior that keep us from experiencing His goodness. Long before He inflicts actual suffering He sends us hints indicating that all is not in order and that we need to make changes. Sometimes we are given a sudden shock, or we lose something that is precious to us. If we are willing to stir ourselves and take responsibility, well and good. But to those who remain obtuse to such promptings, it may be necessary to send a sharper, clearer message.

A physical ailment is something the sufferer cannot deny or ignore. It is not merely a punishment. It is a call to the sufferer to use his God-given faculty of self-judgment and ask what has gone wrong in his life. How has he strayed from the path of spiritual striving, kindness, charity and love taught by the Torah? What traits or actions may have caused this visitation? What changes must he make in order to erase the offending traits and behavior and return to his soul-path?

King Asa and the doctors

Even the most spiritual of people are sometimes unwilling to hear the message. We must be prepared to scrutinize ourselves with the utmost honesty, even if the truth is painful, as when we see things that contradict our image of who we like to think we are.

Ten generations before Hezekiah, his ancestor, the saintly King Asa, fell sick with excruciating pain in his feet. The swelling spread upwards to his whole body until he was misshapen and disfigured from head to toe. The Rabbis said Asa's sickness was a punishment for causing Torah scholars to neglect their studies by forcing them to take part in the work of dismantling the stone barriers erected by the rulers of the Northern Kingdom as part of their blockade on the Kingdom of Judah (Sotah 10a and see Likutey Moharan II, 2:3).

However, King Asa himself was reluctant to accept that his affliction was divine chastisement. "Even in his sickness he did not seek out God, but he turned to the doctors" (Chronicles II, 16:13). The saintly Asa had made it his life's work to teach the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Judah to search out God - but he was unable to see his own fault. His affliction should have moved him to repent, which might have saved his life. But he saw it as a natural phenomenon and sought to have it cured by physicians - and died. Asa was criticized because a man on his level was expected to understand that if he becomes sick it is not a chance occurrence but a providential visitation.

The mysteries of providence

Is the Bible teaching that all illness is caused by sin? This would be a gross oversimplification. What about illness in little children and babies? What about the terrible diseases that afflict some of the most saintly and spiritually-fulfilled individuals, while others who have perpetrated the worst evils often enjoy robust good health for years and years?

Why do the righteous suffer? This profoundest of all questions is the subject of the book of Job, about whom God Himself testifies, "There is none like him on earth, a pure and upright man, who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8). The book graphically portrays the excruciating agony of Job, smitten with boils from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head, longing for death. His words heartrendingly evoke the torment of protracted pain and illness.

Three of Job's friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Tzophar the Na'amatite, come to comfort him. They argue eloquently that God is righteous in all His ways and deals justly and truly with all mankind. "Whoever perished, being innocent, or where were the upright cut off? ... Those who plough iniquity and sow mischief reap them back...." (ibid. 4:7-8). If God sends a person suffering, it is because he has transgressed, and he must repent. If Job is sick it must be because of something he has done.

The three friends' powerful assertion of faith in God's justice are the basis for some of the fundamental tenets of Judaism. Yet their lofty moralizing is no salve for the anguished Job. For him these friends are "physicians of no value" (ibid. 13:4). Again and again Job protests that he is not guilty of any of the transgressions his friends are talking about. He refuses to accept that his trial can be explained through a simple schema in which all suffering is sent because of sin. That Job is right is confirmed in the prologue to the book, where the reader is taken beyond the confines of normal human perception and is allowed a glimpse of the inner workings of Providence. When God praises Job in the heavenly court, Satan objects, saying that he has not been tested. God challenges Satan to torment Job in every way short of killing him in order to prove that he will remain unshakable in his faith. This is the reason for Job's suffering.

Why the test? Why the agony and torture? For what purpose? These are questions we cannot help but ask in the face of apparently meaningless suffering, children's illness, the diseases that suddenly strike at those in their very prime, cases of protracted pain and torment, disability, debilitation, helplessness and degradation, where smug moralizing is offensive.

After all the eloquence and wisdom of Job and his friends we are still left only with questions. This indeed is the lesson of the whole book: ultimately God is utterly inscrutable. Puny man cannot hope to comprehend the secrets of providence. In the end God Himself answers Job out of the whirlwind: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare if you have the understanding" (ibid. 38:4). In one of the most awesome passages in the entire Bible we are reminded of the staggering grandeur and unfathomable mystery of Creation - the mountains, deserts, seas, planets, stars and constellations, the wondrous variety of life-forms and their weird and amazing ways (ibid. chapters 38-41). "Who is able to stand before Me? Who has given Me anything beforehand that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is Mine..." (ibid. 41:2-3).

At last Job confesses his insignificance and ignorance. "I know that You can do everything and that no purpose can be withheld from You.... I spoke, but I did

not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know..." (ibid. 42:3).

God is infinite, supreme in majesty, beyond all the worlds. Yet in His lovingkindness He willed to create the worlds and reveal Himself to us. Our very existence is a mystery. "Against your will you were created; against your will you were born; against your will you live; against your will you die, and against your will you are destined to give an account before the King Who rules over kings, the Holy One, blessed be He" (Avot 4:29). Who can understand the mysteries of souls and their incarnations, the repairs they have to make, the suffering they must go through and the supreme goodness they will eventually come to?

Now that we have been created, our purpose is to find God in all the different situations and circumstances He sends us. "Know Him in all your ways" (Proverbs 3:6). King Asa was criticized not so much for going to doctors as for failing to seek out God in his time of distress. This was what King Hezekiah sought to correct when he put away the Book of Remedies. When illness strikes and all is rush and panic, Hezekiah asks us to take a moment to turn our faces to the wall, cry out to God and take a careful look at ourselves. "Where is God? And where am I?" Illness is sent to make us cry out to God and search for Him. "For I, God, am your Healer."

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[AZAMRA HOMEPAGE](#)

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