



# THE WINGS OF THE SUN

Traditional Jewish Healing in Theory and Practice

By [Rabbi Avraham Greenbaum](#)

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## Chapter 5

### Two Outstanding Healers

From the talmudic period until today many outstanding rabbinic scholars have pursued the art of healing with the greatest devotion. The study of philosophy, speculative science and other branches of secular learning was often discouraged by the Rabbis: not only could it lead to neglect of Torah study, but many of the axioms and values of secular thinkers are contrary to Torah teaching.

Medicine, however, was an exception. Healing the sick is an act of kindness and can save lives. In addition, anatomical and medical knowledge have a bearing on many areas of Torah law, such as niddah (menstrual uncleanness), trefot (defects rendering animals unfit to eat), the laws of damages, mumim (disqualifying blemishes of priests and sacrificial animals), tzara'at (leprosy), etc. The RaShBA (Rabbi Shlomo ben Avraham ben Aderet 1235-1310) and his rabbinical court placed a ban on the study of natural sciences and philosophy by those under the age of twenty-five. However, they explicitly excluded medicine from the decree, "even though it is based on natural science, because the Torah has given the doctor sanction to heal" (Responsa of the Rashba I:415).

As we saw in the last chapter, two divergent approaches to healing can be discerned in the Talmud. One of them accepted the use of medicines and other forms of physical treatment, while the second remained faithful to King Hezekiah's rejection of all but spiritual methods of healing. These two tendencies are also discernible in the approaches to healing taken by later Rabbis. In order to provide a broader perspective on Rebbe Nachman's teachings on healing, let us consider two towering Rabbis who can be seen as representative of these divergent approaches and who must be counted among the outstanding healers of all time: the Rambam, and Rebbe Nachman's own great-grandfather, Rabbi Yisrael, the Baal Shem Tov.

#### The Rambam

Not only was the RaMBaM (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, Maimonides, 1135-1204) the

major codifier of Torah law and one of the most influential of all the Jewish philosophers. He is also universally acknowledged as one of the greatest medical authorities that has ever lived. The Rambam expressed his attitude to the use of medicine clearly and simply. He saw no difference between a hungry person who eats bread "to heal himself of the illness of hunger" and a sick person who takes a certain herb to cure himself of his illness. "Just as when I eat I thank God for providing me with food to satisfy me and remove my hunger so that I may live, so too will I thank Him for providing me with the medicine that can heal my illness" (Commentary on the Mishneh, Pesachim 4:9).

The Rambam probably first learned medicine from his father, R. Maimon, himself a renowned scholar and dayan (rabbinic judge) of Cordoba, where the Rambam was born. The family was forced to leave Cordoba around 1154 because of religious persecution by the Moslem rulers. After several years of wandering they arrived in Fez, Morocco in 1160, and spent several years there. At the same time as he was preparing material for his Commentary on the Mishnah, the Rambam studied medicine with a variety of physicians, both Jewish and non-Jewish. In his medical writings he often refers to the knowledge and experience he gained among the Moslems of North Africa. He also studied Arabic translations of the writings of the ancient Greek physicians, especially Hippocrates and Galen, whose views on physiology and healthcare are reflected in the Rambam's own writings.

To avoid forced conversion to Islam, the Rambam and his family fled Fez in about 1165, and after a few months' stay in the Holy Land went to Egypt, where they eventually settled in Cairo. For several years the Rambam was supported by his brother David, a gem merchant, and spent the time preparing his works for publication while also serving as religious and lay leader of the Jewish community. But in 1169 his brother drowned at sea during a business trip. The Rambam rejected the thought of earning his living from the Torah and decided to support himself by practicing medicine. In 1185 he was appointed as one of the physicians of Al Afdhal, eldest son of Saladin the Great and vizier of Egypt.

The Rambam described his day in a famous letter to R. Shmuel ben Yehudah ibn Tibbon, who translated his philosophical writings into Hebrew:

"I dwell at Fostat, while the Sultan resides in Cairo [a distance of 2-3 km. away]. My duties to the Sultan are very heavy. I am obliged to visit him every morning, and when he or any of his children or the inmates of his harem are indisposed I dare not quit Cairo but must remain in the palace for most of the day. It also often happens that one or two royal officers fall sick and I have to treat them.... Even if nothing unusual happens I do not return to Fostat until the afternoon.

"By then I am dying of hunger. I find the ante-chamber filled with people, Jews and gentiles, nobles and common people, judges and bailiffs, friends and foes - a mixed multitude awaiting my return. I beg my patients to bear with me while I take some light refreshment, the only meal I eat in twenty-four hours. I then go forth to attend to

my patients and write prescriptions and directions for their various ailments. Patients come in and out until nightfall, and sometimes, I solemnly assure you, for another two hours or more into the night. I converse with them and make prescriptions while lying down from sheer fatigue, and by nighttime I am so exhausted that I can barely speak."

The Rambam prized the pursuit of medicine as one that can deepen a person's faith, knowledge and love of God through witnessing the amazing wisdom and intricacy of His creation as manifest in the human body and in the incredible diversity of healing plants and other natural wonders. Seeking to ease the suffering of the sick inculcates precious traits of kindness and patience. "The acquisition of medical skill is one of the great gateways to intellectual expansion, the development of a noble character and the knowledge of God. When a person reaches true proficiency, his quest is a great act of service" (Shmonah Perakim 5).

"The physician should make every effort to see that everyone, sick and healthy alike, should always be cheerful, and he should seek to relieve them of the spiritual and psychological forces that cause anxiety. This is the first principle in curing any patient."

(Rambam, Hanhagat HaBri'ut 3:13-14).

The Rambam's voluminous medical writings include a compendium of about three hundred and fifty herbal and other remedies, works on asthma and hemorrhoids, and a study of poisons and their antidotes that is still used in medical research today. Far more relevant to the lay student are a number of other works exemplifying the Rambam's conviction that the most important task of the physician is not so much to cure the sick as to prevent illness in the first place. His "Aphorisms of Moses" is a collection of advice on healthcare with quotations from Galen, Hippocrates and various Arabic medical authorities. His classic Hanhagat HaBri'ut ("Guide to Good Health") was written in 1198 in response to a request for medical advice by the Egyptian Sultan, who suffered from depression and a variety of physical complaints. This concise and highly practical treatise outlines the main principles of diet, exercise, hygiene and general healthcare, the key to which, says the Rambam, is emotional balance. (For selected highlights from Hanhagat HaBri'ut [click here](#).)

Most accessible of all is the chapter on healthcare in the Rambam's all-encompassing code of Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah (Hilkhot De'ot 4), the opening words of which are: "Bodily health and well-being are part of the path to God, since it is virtually impossible to know or understand anything of the Creator if one is sick. One must therefore avoid anything that may harm the body, and cultivate healthful habits" (ibid. 1). The Rambam then proceeds to give practical guidance about how, when and what to eat, physical exercise, sleep, hygiene, healthy elimination, bathing and sexual life ([Click here for further details](#)). Much of the Rambam's advice is based on passages in the Talmud and

elsewhere. The Mishneh Torah runs to a thousand chapters covering every aspect of Jewish law, and is printed with lengthy commentary material and dissenting opinions by later Sages. Interestingly, the chapter on healthcare is one of the only chapters in the entire work that appears with no questions or dissenting opinions.

The Rambam's writings on healthcare are one of the main sources of later rabbinic guides to healthcare, such as Chapter 32 of the *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh* ("Concise Code of Jewish Law") and the *Tav Yehoshua* (see Sources and Further Reading). Although the Rambam gave detailed advice about which foods are healthful and which are to be avoided, he was aware that his specific recommendations did not necessarily apply in cultures other than his own (see *Hanhagat HaBri'ut* 1:6 and 13). With the tremendous innovations in food production, supply, refrigeration, etc. since the time of the Rambam, his advice on diet cannot be applied today without modification. But his guidance on moderate living, how and when to eat, the importance of exercise and especially of positive attitudes anticipates accepted contemporary healthcare wisdom by eight hundred years.

### [Healthcare Advice from Rambam](#)

#### [Insights from Rambam on the art of healing](#)

## The Baal Shem Tov

To move from the Rambam to Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760) is to make not only a five hundred year journey through time, but also to journey into another world. To the modern, western-educated mind, the rationalistic world of the Rambam, notwithstanding the dust and teeming crowds of Cairo, may seem closer than the mystical world of the Baal Shem Tov. Besides the feudal lords, the furious priests, the uncouth peasants and the Jewish scholars, merchants, innkeepers and their wives and children peopling its towns and villages, the Baal Shem Tov's was a world in which the open hills, vast plains and forests seem to have had their own population of werewolves, witches, demons and spirits.

While some of what is told about the Baal Shem Tov may be legendary, the reliability of our main biographical source, *Shevachey HaBaal Shem Tov* (Praises of the Baal Shem Tov) by R. Dov Ber of Linetz, was endorsed by Rebbe Nachman (*Avanehah Barzel* p.29 #30), and in almost all cases it gives full details of those from whom the author heard the stories. But much of what is recounted there involves kabbalistic devotions, holy spirit, visions of higher worlds, miracles and other supra-rational phenomena that must be accepted simply on trust.

It is difficult to glean more than the most general information about how the Baal Shem Tov acquired his Torah knowledge, let alone his healing powers. Orphaned at a young age, he was for a while taken under the wing of the residents of his native town and seemed to be a promising student. But he would disappear to the forests for days at a time and before long went his own way, working on occasion as a teacher's assistant, study-house attendant or in

other capacities while pursuing his devotions. When the hidden tzaddik Rabbi Adam Baal Shem was on his deathbed, he instructed his son to seek out this young R. Yisrael and entrust him with his secret kabbalistic writings, which evidently gave directions for attaining holy spirit and also, very probably, for invoking holy names in order to achieve practical results.

In the years that followed, the Baal Shem Tov spent most of his time in the hills and forests in study, prayer and devotion. The extent of his talmudic and halakhic knowledge is impossible to gauge, though it is unimaginable that outstanding scholars like the Mezritcher Magid and R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye would have submitted themselves unreservedly to his leadership had his learning not been of the highest order. The Baal Shem Tov himself said that he reached his spiritual levels primarily through his efforts in prayer and devotion. Many stories attest to his exalted wisdom and holy spirit, his power to communicate with the souls of the living and the dead, with angels, spirits and demons, and his ability to understand the languages of birds, animals, trees and plants.

Such levels give one access to sources of information that are concealed from most people. For example, Rebbe Nachman said of the Baal Shem Tov that "he learned the names of all the different remedies in each of the seventy languages from the biblical section (Leviticus 11:13-21) enumerating the twenty-four impure birds" (Tzaddik #557). Perhaps it is knowledge of this kind that the Baal Shem Tov had in mind when he answered a prominent doctor who had asked him where he learned medicine, "God taught me!" (Shevachey HaBaal Shem Tov #15 and #206 and see below.)

In his early life the Baal Shem Tov hid himself completely, posing as an ignoramus. It was only in 1734, when he reached the age of thirty-six, that he started to show his phenomenal capacity to fire scholars and simple folk alike and inspire them to rise to the heights of fervent devotion and selfless love of others. Over the next twenty-six years he attracted the following that was to spread his message of spiritual revival throughout Eastern Europe. But even after his revelation he was known initially to many people primarily as a healer, and in later years was also involved in numerous healings.

The Baal Shem Tov treated Jews, and sometimes non-Jews as well, both in the Ukrainian town of Medzeboz, where he made his home, and when he went traveling, as he did very frequently. Besides their requests for blessings for children and livelihood, etc., people turned to him with all kinds of problems, from somatic illnesses, paralysis and blindness to cases of psychotic behavior and "possession." The Baal Shem Tov often took money for healing and sometimes went out to the villages to heal when in need of money for some purpose (Shevachey HaBaal Shem Tov #73 & #143). However, his primary intent was not to make a living but to sanctify the Name of God and reveal His power and glory. He certainly prescribed herbal remedies, but he also gave amulets and used prayer and kabbalistic formulae known only to himself.

The Baal Shem Tov's view of the relative effectiveness of spiritual and natural remedies can be seen from one of the versions of his first meeting with Rabbi

Dov Ber, the Mezritcher Magid, who became his closest disciple and the main leader of the Chassidic movement after his death. The Magid was lame and very sick. Although the Baal Shem Tov had long wanted to bring him under his wing, when the Magid first arrived the Baal Shem Tov made a show of rejecting him. The Magid pleaded with the Baal Shem Tov to heal him, but the latter retorted, "My horses don't eat matzos" (as if to say, Do you think I'm such a great tzaddik that even my horses keep the mitzvot and I'm therefore on a level where I can heal you right away?) The Magid began sweating profusely and felt so poorly that he had to leave the room. He called one of the young followers of the Baal Shem Tov and requested that he go in and ask him why he did not fulfil the commandment to "love the stranger" (Deuteronomy 10:19).

In the words of the Shevachey HaBaal Shem Tov:

"The Baal Shem Tov came out and appeased him, and wanted to heal him with words. He went to him regularly for a period of two weeks and would sit by his side reciting psalms. However the Magid asked him to give him a more immediate cure using medicines. Later the Baal Shem Tov said to him, ' I wanted to heal you with words, because this brings lasting healing. But seeing that you want to be cured quickly I have no option but to use medicines.' The Baal Shem Tov did so, and provided him with a place to live nearby. At first the Magid was unable to go to the Baal Shem Tov because he was too weak, but after a little while he began to improve and would go to him" (ibid. #41).

The Baal Shem Tov was evidently quite familiar with "orthodox medicine." The saintly Rabbi Chaim, Chief Rabbi of Byela Cherkov (Sadeh Lavan), who was chronically ill, called for the Baal Shem Tov to heal him.

"He spent an extended period with him trying various treatments, but when the Rav's sons saw that their father was not improving they sent for a well-known doctor. This doctor had already sworn that if he were to so much as catch sight of the Baal Shem Tov he would take a pistol and shoot him. The Baal Shem Tov hurriedly took his leave of the Rav and departed. When the Rav's sons brought the doctor to him, the doctor prescribed a variety of treatments. Whatever the doctor said, they replied, ' The Baal Shem Tov already did that and it didn't help.' The doctor left under a cloud. The Rav then thundered at his sons, ' What have you done? Even though I didn't get a cure from the Baal Shem Tov, I knew that the Shekhinah (Divine Presence) came with him. But when the doctor entered it was as if a galach (a gentile priest) came in'" (ibid. #15).

Another story tells of a prominent doctor who had come to visit the wife of the local lord.

"The countess lavishly praised the Baal Shem Tov as a great man and an expert healer. The doctor asked the countess to send for him. When he came, the doctor asked him if it was true that he was an

expert healer. ' True,' replied the Baal Shem Tov. ' Where did you learn? Who was your professor?' asked the doctor. ' God taught me,' replied the Baal Shem Tov. The doctor laughed heartily and asked him if he knew how to take someone's pulse. The Baal Shem Tov said, ' I myself suffer from a certain problem. You take my pulse and see if you can find what it is, and I'll take your pulse and see what it reveals.'

"The doctor took the Baal Shem Tov's pulse and could tell that he had some kind of problem but he did not know what it was, because the truth was that the Baal Shem Tov was sick - he was love-sick for God (cf. Song of Songs 2:5), but this was beyond the doctor's level of understanding. After this the Baal Shem Tov took the doctor's hand and examined his pulse. The Baal Shem Tov turned to the countess and asked, ' Have you had a burglary here?' The Baal Shem Tov listed a number of precious items. ' Yes!' replied the countess, ' It's some years since they were stolen and I have no idea where they are.' ' Send to the doctor's lodgings,' said the Baal Shem Tov, ' and open his chest. You'll find everything there, because I can feel this theft in the doctor's pulse.' The countess sent to search the doctor's lodgings and found the stolen goods, as the holy Baal Shem Tov had said, and the doctor left in disgrace" (ibid. #206. On pulse diagnosis in the Kabbalah, see [Chapter 12](#)).

An episode during the Baal Shem Tov's abortive attempt to journey to the Holy Land gives a few hints about some of his spiritual healing methods as well as shedding light on his aim of sanctifying the Name of God. While he was in Istanbul he was approached by an extremely wealthy man whose only son had suddenly become blind in both eyes. The doctors had tried all kinds of cures but none of them was of any avail, and they had given up hope of curing him.

"The Baal Shem Tov told the man he could cure his son completely. The man was overjoyed and brought him to his house with great honor. However, when the man's wife saw the Baal Shem Tov (whose clothes were somewhat the worse for wear as he had been traveling for such a long time) she looked at him contemptuously and said angrily to her husband, ' Why did you bring him to me? None of the doctors could help. What can this man achieve with incantations?' Her lack of faith in the power of God's Holy Names aroused the wrath of the Baal Shem Tov, who said, ' Where is the blind boy. Bring him to me and I'll heal him right away and he'll be able to see normally.' These words shook the man's wife, because a fraud normally avoids being tested.

"They brought him the sick boy, whereupon the Baal Shem Tov whispered something in his ears and immediately asked them to bring a volume of Talmud and told him to read. The boy read quite normally, and everyone in the house was overjoyed. Immediately afterwards the Baal Shem Tov passed his hand over the boy's eyes and he became blind as before, bringing the whole household to



tears. They pleaded with the Baal Shem Tov and offered him an enormous sum of money, but the Baal Shem Tov said, ' You wicked woman! You mocked God's Holy Names! On no account may you benefit from them. When I cured him it was not for my own honor, God forbid, or for money, but only to sanctify God's Holy Name. That is why I showed you the great power of the Holy Name in front of your eyes. But you will not benefit from it!' And with that he left" (ibid. #192).

The healing wisdom of the Baal Shem Tov was never recorded systematically and most of what we know of it has come down to us only through such stories. The underlying philosophy is revealed in the following:

"There was a certain sick man whom a great and famous Jewish doctor had given up all hope of curing. The man was unable to speak. The Baal Shem Tov was visiting his town and was asked to come to see him. The Baal Shem Tov told them to prepare the invalid a meat soup and said that as soon as he ate it he would start to speak. They gave him the soup and he recovered. The doctor said to the Baal Shem Tov, ' How did you cure him? I know that his blood vessels were irreparably damaged.'

"The Baal Shem Tov replied, ' Your approach to his sickness was physical but mine was spiritual. A person has two hundred and forty-eight limbs and three hundred and sixty-five veins and arteries corresponding to the two hundred and forty-eight positive precepts of the Torah and its three hundred and sixty-five prohibitions. When a person fails to carry out a positive mitzvah the corresponding limb is damaged, and when he contravenes a prohibition the corresponding blood vessel is damaged. If he contravenes many prohibitions many blood vessels become damaged. The blood does not flow and the person is in danger. But I spoke to his soul and persuaded her to repent, and she undertook to do so. This way all his limbs and blood vessels were repaired and I could heal him'" (ibid. #125).

[NEXT CHAPTER](#)

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

[AZAMRA HOMEPAGE](#)

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