



THE WINGS OF THE SUN

Traditional Jewish Healing in Theory and Practice

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Section 4

Simchah for Health and Healing

Chapter 10

What is health?

Billions are spent on healthcare and preventive medicine, not to speak of all the money paid out for doctors and medical treatment when things go wrong, God forbid. We are constantly being urged to make sure we get enough vitamins and minerals, cut our fat intake, quit smoking, reduce tension and do a thousand and one other things to guard our health. But what is the purpose of it all? What is health for?

At first sight the answer would seem quite obvious: health is a prerequisite for having a good life - which of course it is. As to what constitutes the good life, many would say this is not for healthcare personnel to decide. Isn't health a basic human right? One of the principles of the traditional physician's code of conduct is to provide treatment for all without discrimination. It is not for the doctor to ask what someone intends to do with his health. If the patient is sick, be he a saint or a sinner, the doctor should heal him.

The supreme value of human life is one of the cardinal principles of Judaism. For the sake of preserving life it is permissible to violate any commandment in the Torah except for the prohibitions against idolatry, sexual immorality and murder (Pesachim 25a). But for Judaism, health is more than a matter of being able to function normally in order to work, eat, drink and be merry. Life is God's precious gift, given to enable us to draw closer to Him. The importance of health lies in the fact that it is necessary in order to devote oneself to Torah, prayer and practice of the mitzvot without impediment. In the words of the Rambam: "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" (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot De'ot 4:1).

A similar idea is expressed by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto: "Man's use of the world for his own needs should be circumscribed by the limits imposed by God's will and should not include anything forbidden by God. It should be motivated by the need to best maintain his health and preserve his life, and not merely to satisfy his physical urges and superfluous desires. One's motivation in maintaining his body should furthermore be so that the soul should be able to use it to serve its Creator without being hampered by the body's weakness and incapability. When man makes use of the world in this way, this in itself becomes an act of perfection, and through it one can attain the same virtue as in keeping the other commandments. Indeed, one of the commandments requires that we keep our bodies fit so that we can serve God" (Derekh HaShem I: 4:7; cf. Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim #231 and Choshen Mishpat #427:8).

Prevention is better than cure

It is tragic that many people never learn to value their health until it breaks down. Vast numbers of people consume excessive amounts of the wrong foods, neglect all exercise, smoke, drink and abuse themselves in other ways for years, only to come running to their doctors when their resulting health problems are so advanced that it is often impossible to reverse them. It is far more difficult to restore health to a body that has been allowed to degenerate than to maintain and enhance the health of a body that is still basically sound.

Research in the U.S. suggests that two thirds of the deaths of those under the age of sixty-five are preventable. It is the height of folly to wait until illness manifests itself in actual physical symptoms before taking the decision to cultivate healthful habits. For best results, healing should start long before the body ever gets sick! It is never too early to begin taking proper care of ourselves. And if we are among those who had to become sick in some way in order to realize the preciousness of good health, let us thank God for the warning and make up our minds to live wisely and sensibly from now on!

But what are the right healthcare habits? Preventive medicine receives tremendous emphasis in contemporary society, but even those who do want to take proper care of their health often find themselves thoroughly confused because of the welter of conflicting advice on all sides. Are we supposed to be vegetarian or macrobiotic, or doesn't it matter? Is proper food combining vital or irrelevant? Are nutritional supplements necessary or superfluous? Are dairy foods good or bad? And fruits? Is it OK to take a little coffee, white sugar and refined flour? Or are they deadly poisons? What about food coloring, flavor enhancers, preservatives, aluminium pots and countless other things? Is jogging beneficial, or does it put stress on the joints? What about aerobic dance? Yoga? Tai Chi? etc., etc.

Healthcare education in schools, where it exists at all, is often only partial, and receives nothing like the emphasis given to mathematics, the sciences and other academic subjects. School fitness programs have been found to be woefully inadequate. It would be hard to find a doctor who disagrees with the basic principles of healthcare and preventive medicine. Yet in practice the majority of mainstream doctors tend to wait until their patients come to them

with actual medical problems before offering any suggestions as to how they might best safeguard their health. In the absence of undisputed, authoritative healthcare guidance, most people depend on a medley of ideas culled from grandmothers, hearsay, TV, books and magazines, favorite medicine men and other "experts."

The free society in which we live connives with the innate weakness of human nature to undermine people's best intentions of following a healthful lifestyle. Manufacturers are at liberty to sell all kinds of food and other products that pander to people's cravings and appetites regardless of whether they are conducive to their health or not. All the candies, pastries, refined, processed and other junk foods that people find most tempting are readily available, but it takes considerably more effort to find simple, wholesome foods. Bad habits take root early. What child is content to nibble at carrots and celery while all the others in the class are enjoying their gooey candies?

Today, anything and everything is advertised as being "natural" and "healthy," but manufacturers and suppliers of so-called "health foods" and other "health aids" have little incentive to supply sound information about the true value of their products. A lot of money can be made from selling expensive little bottles of exclusive-formula preparations, elaborate home exercise contraptions and the like - far more than from providing basic guidance about the fundamentals of good nutrition and simple exercise techniques that don't require equipment.

The fact is that many people would far rather seek health from a bottle or a machine than put in sustained efforts themselves. The prevalent consumerist culture of instant satisfaction militates against the self-discipline necessary to adhere to a wise regimen of diet and exercise and follow other genuinely healthful habits. People find it much more comfortable to swallow a few vitamin pills and eat a salad as a kind of sop to their consciences, and then carry on eating more or less what they please. Weeks of inactivity are followed by sudden crash-courses in fitness, which simply lead to sore muscles, stiff joints and further inactivity.

Ironically, the pursuit of "health" in our materialistic society often contains a built-in contradiction. The dominant philosophy of "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!" has turned health into an obsession for all those who are terrified that heart disease, cancer, AIDS and other terrors could cut short their pursuit of happiness. People everywhere are popping vitamins, working out and trying anything else that offers a hope of extending their youth. Producers of all kinds take full advantage: even cigarette ads show scenes of lusty, blooming youth wandering about in the glorious outdoors. The contradiction is that the very pursuits for which many people are desperate to prolong their lives are precisely those that can be the most destructive to their health: gastronomic excess, fast living, sexual promiscuity, drinking, drug abuse and the like.

What Rebbe Nachman said about...

General healthcare:

"When a person is well, he must do and do and do (in serving God). But when he is not well, he should engage in the service of God only as required by the Shulchan Arukh in accordance with his state of health, and must fulfil the mitzvah of ' Guard your soul'" (Avanehah Barzel #64 p.44)

Eating:

"One of the marks of human dignity is to eat only what one needs. Someone who eats more than he needs is like an animal, who eats and chews the whole day. This can bring on fever, God forbid" (Likutey Moharan I, 263).

"Eating properly subdues the tendency towards folly, heightening one's intellectual and spiritual faculties. But when one overindulges and eats like a glutton, folly will get the upper hand and overcome one's intellectual and spiritual faculties" (Likutey Moharan I, 17:3).

"Be careful not to gobble your food hurriedly like a glutton. Get into the habit of eating at a moderate pace, calmly and with the same table manners as if an important guest were present" (Tzaddik #515).

"What is gluttony? To be picky about food and make an issue about what is good and tasty and what isn't" (Siach Sarfey Kodesh I-12).

Drinking:

"Never get drunk. Be careful never to drink more than your capacity. A little drink may help expand the mind, but excessive drinking and drunkenness lead to harshness, anger, impurity and evil" (Likutey Moharan II, 26).

Rebbe Nachman once poured a tiny drop of schnapps for one of his followers, who said, "Nu, a little is also good." Hearing this, Rebbe Nachman said, "Schnapps? Only a little is good!" (Siach Sarfey Kodesh I-151).

Smoking:

"Don't get into the habit of smoking. It is a waste of precious time that should be spent on Torah and prayer. Smoking is of no benefit whatever and can be hazardous" (Tzaddik #472).

A good sweat:

"Sweating over a mitzvah brings joy. Depression is caused

by a build-up of impurities in the blood and spleen. The remedy is to sweat, because the illness-generating toxins in the blood are exuded in the sweat, and the blood is left pure. One then comes to joy" (Likutey Moharan II, 6).

Body, Mind, Soul

The obsession with physical health and strength for its own sake is one of the things Rebbe Nachman ridicules in his story of the "Master of Prayer," in which he caricatures the various mistaken ideas that different groups of people have about the purpose of life.

"One group maintained that the main goal was to pamper oneself with food and drink in order to develop large muscles. They searched for a man with large muscles who exercised in order to develop them. Such a person would have large limbs, thus having a greater portion in the world. The person with the largest limbs would be closest to the goal and should be king. They went and found a very tall athlete and took him as their king. They also sought a land that was conducive to this, and went and settled there" (Rabbi Nachman's Stories p.321).

Rebbe Nachman was far from being opposed to physical healthcare. Quite the contrary. He warned his followers not to smoke or drink, and told them to take good care of themselves: "Get as much sleep as you need, and eat properly. Just make sure you guard your time" (Kokhvey Ohr p.25). One of Rebbe Nachman's foremost interpreters, R. Avraham b'Reb Nachman (1849-1917), outstanding leader of the fourth generation of Breslover Chassidim, said: "Since Rebbe Nachman warned us against doctors and medicines, we must make every effort to eat only healthful foods" (Siach Sarfey Kodosh III:539). The same could be said to apply to all other aspects of preventive healthcare.

What Rebbe Nachman ridiculed was the devotion to body culture as a goal in itself: to develop large muscles in order to have "a greater portion in the world" - i.e. in this world. In the Torah view, this transient world is merely the ante-chamber to the World to Come (Avot 4:21). Even the most well-developed body must eventually die and rot, whereas the soul goes on to eternal life. To put all the emphasis on physical healthcare while neglecting spiritual growth is to have one's priorities totally wrong. The purpose of cultivating the health of the body is, as Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto expressed it, "so that the soul should be able to use [the body] to serve its Creator, without being hampered by the body's weakness and incapability" (op. cit.).

Healthcare is a mitzvah: "Guard your soul" (Deuteronomy 4:9). But even the purely physical aspects of healthcare require soul-power. It takes very strong motivation to sustain a sound routine of diet, exercise and other physical healthcare practices throughout one's life. Every day there are hosts of good excuses to eat badly, put off exercising and abuse oneself in other ways. The only way to remain firm is by keeping one's eyes fixed on higher spiritual goals. But how is this possible unless one is wholeheartedly committed to these goals

and finds true joy in pursuing them?

Moreover, physical health is directly influenced by our mental, emotional and spiritual states, positive or otherwise. The point is graphically illustrated by the Rambam:

"Everyone can see how emotional experiences produce marked changes in the body. You may see a well-built man with a strong, pleasant voice and shining face. But the moment he hears worrisome news, his face drops and loses its shine. His color changes, his posture droops and his voice becomes hoarse and weak. His strength fails, and he may become so weak that he starts trembling. His pulse becomes weak, his eyes change and his eyelids become too heavy to move. His skin becomes cold and he loses his appetite. The very opposite happens when a man with a weak body, pale face and soft voice hears joyous news. His whole body becomes stronger. His voice becomes firmer, his face brightens, his movements become faster, his pulse becomes stronger, his skin becomes warmer and his eyes exude happiness and joy.

"Similarly, fear, hope, security, tranquillity, despair, success and so on all have their effects on the body. Sometimes a person may become so dejected by misfortune that he literally cannot see because his faculty of vision becomes darkened. On the other hand, a successful person sees everything more brightly because the light in his eyes is increased. Because of this, the physicians have emphasized the importance of paying attention to emotional states at all times" (Hanhagat HaBri'ut 3:12-13).

The Rambam had full grasp of a point that was largely ignored by mainstream western medicine until quite recently. This is that our mental, emotional and spiritual states directly influence all aspects of our physical functioning both in the short- and long-term. It is now universally accepted that many cases of heart disease and other illnesses are directly related to bad diet, lack of exercise, high stress, excessive smoking and drinking, and so on. In addition, there is a growing body of scientific evidence that factors like thwarted emotion, chronic frustration and depression may play a major role in many different physical conditions, from low immunity to cancer and other diseases. But what is it that drives people to the compulsive overindulgence, drinking, smoking and other addictions that take such a heavy toll on their health as the years pass? What is it that prevents so many from relaxing and letting go of the worries and tension that shorten their lives? What is it that keeps people locked in the frustration, bitterness and anger that consume them?

Rebbe Nachman was looking to the very root of the patterns that destroy so many lives when he said: "All the illnesses people suffer come only because of a lack of joy" (Likutey Moharan II, 24). Obviously he was not talking about superficial contentment - he knew that many people's placid exteriors belie deep pain, a pain some dare not even acknowledge for fear it could engulf them. It is this profound inner unhappiness that drives people to the compulsive behavior that

eats away at their health. Whether it appears as gloom, depression, despair, bitterness, anger or in other guises, we have to conquer it - with a wholehearted, joyous embrace of life! Without this, even the strictest physical regime can never bring genuine health and well-being.

In Rebbe Nachman's view, technically sound physical functioning is of little value in itself. He said, "Even if someone dies at the age of eighty it may still be that his life was cut short - in the sense that he failed to elevate himself, and therefore all his years were empty" (Tzaddik #576). "There are many different kinds of 'life.' Some people lead very troubled lives even though it may not be apparent on the surface. Within the category of 'troubled lives' there are various gradations. The various forms of life are very different. Without doubt the life of a horse bears no comparison with the life of a man. Just as there are great differences between different forms of life on the physical level, so there are differences in the quality of people's spiritual lives. The true life is to delight in God. Some people achieve this even in this world, others not at all" (ibid. #400).

In the words of Reb Noson:

"Real life is the life of true wisdom, as it is written, 'Wisdom gives life to those who possess it' (Ecclesiastes 7:12). And the essence of wisdom is to labor and endeavor to know and acknowledge God, Who is the Life of life. The closer one comes to God, the more one's life is genuine life. The opposite is also true. This is why 'the wicked are called dead even in their lifetimes, and conversely, the righteous are called alive even after their deaths' (Berakhot 18a). The righteous are constantly attached to true life, as it is written: 'And you who are attached to the Lord your God, all of you are alive today' (Deuteronomy 2:4). This is the life for which we pray repeatedly on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: 'Remember us for life,' 'inscribe us for life,' etc. Besides this, everything else is vanity: it isn't life at all" (Tzaddik, Author's Introduction pp.6-7).

The life of delight in God is one of constant striving, starting afresh each time, applying oneself with ever renewed efforts. "Don't be old!" cried Rebbe Nachman. "It's no good to be an old chassid or an old tzaddik. Old is no good! You must remain young, renewing yourself each day and making a fresh start" (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #51). For Rebbe Nachman, it is this embrace of life that is the foundation of good health and strength, spiritual and physical. This is the essence of all his teachings on health and healing. It is summed up in a single word: Simchah!

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