

THE WINGS OF THE SUN

Traditional Jewish Healing
in Theory and Practice

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Chapter 22

Dealing with Common Problems

1. Minor Upsets

Rebbe Nachman taught that all of life is necessarily a constant succession of ups and downs. This is certainly true of our spiritual lives, which are marked by an unending ebb and flow of highs and lows. And it is also true of our physical functioning. Our ever-fluctuating states of mind and spirit are intimately bound up with all kinds of other irregularities in our lives - an unusually late night, a skipped meal, the rich food of Shabbat or Yom Tov, an unaccustomed bout of physical exertion, stressful situations in the home or at work, economic and political developments, changes in the weather and any number of other factors. They can influence our bodily functioning in all kinds of ways.

Health could be loosely defined as the body's ability to maintain a stable internal environment - "harmony among the elements" - in face of the various external changes to which we are constantly exposed. The adaptive process is not necessarily always comfortable, yet the bouts of fatigue, stiffness, minor aches, stomach upsets, constipation, diarrhea, etc. we are all prey to as part of this process are not the same as illness.

In the words of the Rambam: "Even with the utmost care and caution it is impossible to avoid constant minor fluctuations in our physical functioning. Sometimes the stools become a little soft, sometimes a little dry. One day a person may find a change in his digestion or feel a mild headache or a slight pain in some other part of his body, and so on. Don't be in a hurry to take medications for these kinds of minor problems. Nature will take care of them without any need for medicines. Follow your normal health regime. If you try treating these minor ailments, either you will do the wrong thing and cause harm or, if you do the right thing, while you may succeed in restoring the normal balance, you have also taught your body to become lazy, and it will no longer function properly without outside assistance" (Hanhagat HaBri'ut 4:3).

Despite this sage advice, multimillion dollar industries are founded on the sale of innumerable over-the-counter remedies for hosts of minor, everyday problems: heartburn, flatulence, constipation, headaches, congestion, sore throats, coughs and many more. Certainly any unusual or persistent symptom calls for a thorough assessment by a competent doctor. But we should not let drug

advertising deceive us into thinking that every minor fluctuation in our physical functioning calls for a remedy - and this would apply to herbal and other non-conventional medical remedies as well.

All kinds of minor physical symptoms may be related to poor diet, improper self-care, stress and other problems in our lives. Quick-fix remedies may bring immediate relief, but over the long term it would be far better to investigate the deeper roots of such problems, since if left unattended they may lead to more serious conditions. For example, vast quantities of antacids, digestive aids and laxatives are consumed in our societies. But when used to excess they can be counterproductive, and many of the problems they are supposed to aid would be far better tackled by a thorough review of one's dietary habits.

Headaches of various kinds may be caused by all kinds of factors, from stress, tension, repressed emotion, strenuous activity, poor posture, bad lighting and certain food substances to heavy smoking and drinking. "The heart knows its own bitterness" (Proverbs 14:10): each person must decide for himself when a headache is bearable and when to take a pill. But almost all headache drugs have undesirable side effects, and where headaches are a persistent problem it would be preferable to try non-drug techniques as far as possible, such as relaxation, massage, hot or cold pads, etc. Insomnia is a distressing problem for many people, but sleeping pills disrupt the body's natural sleep cycle and can have undesirable side effects. Sleep problems may often be bound up with dietary factors, inadequate exercise, stress, or a lack of fulfillment in life.

Once Rebbe Nachman's daughter Sarah had a bad toothache. The Rebbe advised her to be happy. "How can I be happy?" she thought, feeling that her pain was too much to overcome with positive thinking. But the Rebbe said, "Even if it's hard to be happy, you must force yourself. If you pretend to be happy despite the pain, you'll eventually come to such a state of true joy that you'll dance, and this will cure you." Sarah took her father's advice to heart. Closing the shutters of her house, she began dancing, and before long the pain disappeared (Oral tradition).

Minor cuts, scrapes and grazes can be attended to at home, but where a wound is very deep and may have hidden dirt or debris in it, or if bleeding comes in spurts (indicating that an artery may have been cut), it is vital to seek prompt medical attention. The same applies to serious burns, possible fractures or dislocations, dog and snake bites and any insect sting that gives rise to nausea, vomiting, flushing, irregular heartbeat and difficulty in breathing.

Every household should have a reliable home medical and first aid guide providing clear information about which symptoms require medical attention and what to do in an emergency. Every home should also have a basic first-aid kit, including a clinical thermometer, scissors, tweezers, antiseptic cream, antibiotic ointment, cotton, adhesive bandages, sterile gauze pads, bandages and safety pins. Emergency information should be readily accessible, including telephone numbers of local doctors, clinics, hospitals, drugstores, poison control center,

details of one's medical insurance company, and details of persons to contact in an emergency.

Reb Noson was once at an inn eating his evening meal when a bone became stuck in his throat and he started choking. He opened his mouth wide the way people do when choking. At last the bone was dislodged and Reb Noson was safe. He said to the person who was with him, "Did you notice that when the bone was stuck I looked up to Heaven? No matter what happens, the only recourse is to turn to Heaven for help. Even when one cannot speak, one should at least look upward to Heaven" (Kokhvey Or p. 71 #8).

2. Healing Crises

At some time or another almost all of us face health problems that are not necessarily dangerous but which make it impossible to continue with our normal activities: a particularly severe cold, a prolonged bout of 'flu, a bad infection, an incapacitating sprain, a torn muscle, a fracture or some other kind of problem or injury requiring medical attention, possibly a small operation, and bedrest. Work, engagements, plans and timetables all have to be suspended, and often there seems to be little one can do except lie low and put up with the pain, discomfort and disruption to one's life.

The natural tendency is to focus on the physical condition as the essential problem and view it as an unfortunate interruption - a medical problem that simply has to be treated in the appropriate manner until it "goes away" and we can return to normal life, hopefully as quickly as possible. But to look at such occurrences as purely physical phenomena is to ignore their spiritual dimension. The physical problem is often an alarm signal indicative of a more extensive malady with ramifications on the emotional, mental and spiritual planes of our being. It is the very pain and disruptiveness of the physical problem that make the message so emphatic.

"Nobody bruises so much as a finger here on earth unless it was decreed against him in Heaven" (Chullin 7b). Some may find it disquieting to think that an unseen tribunal is monitoring all our activities and imposing decrees and penalties. But this rabbinic teaching should not be taken to mean that all physical problems are simply vindictive "punishments." God may send suffering as a way of arousing us to search for Him or to cleanse us of sin. But even then, "Everything that the Loving One does is for good" (Berakhot 60b): everything God sends is planned and executed with the greatest compassion.

Godly awareness in exile

In the hustle and bustle of everyday life we are too often pushed into doing all

kinds of things that go against our own better judgment. Even when we know that what we are doing is unwise, we often drive our subliminal doubts and reservations out of our conscious minds, giving ourselves all kinds of specious reasons to justify our actions. Yet at times it's as if there is a higher power - one that is beyond us but at the same time working within and through us - that will not let us get away with our efforts at self-deception. Something brings us to a halt. It may be a nexus of external circumstances and events that conspire against us, or something we do in spite of ourselves - an impulsive act of self-sabotage - that stops us in our tracks. And at times it's an illness or injury that in some way we ourselves, or our "souls," or a "heavenly finger," bring upon us, forcing us to pause and take stock.

A sin is a prime example of an action a person takes against his better judgment, allowing considerations of short-term gain (the immediate pleasure of the sin) to outweigh those of longer-term pain (its evil consequences). This is what the Sages meant when they said that "a person transgresses only because a spirit of madness enters into him" (Sotah 3a). The "spirit of madness" is the rash injudiciousness that leads the person to make such a choice. Indeed, the superficial rationale that justifies a sin has an uncanny power to charm the person who does it until, after repeating it once or twice, it seems perfectly permissible (Yoma 86b). Every sin drives out the Godly soul from a person to some degree or other. At first he may experience the separation from holiness and feel contrition. But each time he sins he descends to a lower level of spiritual consciousness, until he is no longer even aware that he is separated from God (see Likutey Moharan I, 56:3).

Da'at is a person's awareness of God and his sense of connection with Him. This is what is driven into "exile" by a person's sins. His da'at is still there in potential, and can be restored if he repents. But until he does so, his conscious mind is numbed to the Godly dimension of existence, and a this-worldly consciousness takes over instead. Yet God wants the person to repent and return to his heritage of Godly consciousness. He may therefore send him a "slap," in the form of a physical injury or illness - a stark fact that the person cannot deny. If he recognizes it as a message, he can then make the necessary efforts to recover his da'at.

"Through the blow itself God sends healing"

The classic case of illness in the Torah is tzara'at, "leprosy". The metzora succumbed to lashon hara, speaking disparagingly about others in order to show himself in a positive light. The pleasure of not having to confront his own flaws may have been an immediate gain of his lashon hara, but the flaws remain, while the slander destroys the slanderer, the one slandered and the person who hears the slander (Erkin 15b). Someone who regularly speaks disparagingly about others develops a distorted view both of his own righteousness and of the flaw-ridden characters of others: his holy da'at leaves him, and a false consciousness comes to the fore.

But the highly visible leprous mark on the metzora's body is a flaw he cannot deny. How will he take it? Precisely because his da'at, his higher spiritual

sensibility, is in exile, leaving him in a state of mochin d'katnut, constricted consciousness, it is very possible that he will take it on its own terms as a purely physical ailment that he will try to have treated medically in the hope that it will just "go away." This is why the Torah requires him to show his mark to the priest - a moral figure - and spend a period in isolation from the rest of society in order to reflect. The physical symptom is an invitation to the metzora to search beneath the surface of his conscious mind in order to rise to mochin d'gadlut, expanded consciousness, recover his da'at, and understand that casting aspersions on God's creatures is as ugly a flaw on the soul as the leprous mark on his body.

Nevertheless, the physical symptom is no more than a hint: the person is always given the freedom to evaluate it as he will. This is because God wants us to be masters of our own good, and He gives us freedom of choice in every aspect of life. For this reason, physical symptoms can always be viewed in two ways: as purely natural phenomena, or as having psychological and spiritual ramifications. By taking the latter view we can understand the saying of the Rabbis that "the Holy One sends healing through the very blow itself" (Mekhilta Beshalach 15:25).

The blow - the injury or illness - is an invitation to the sufferer to rouse himself to do the spiritual work that will bring healing to the whole person, including the spiritual maladies to which the physical problems point. The outbreak of such a problem could be called a "healing crisis" (to borrow an expression used somewhat differently by naturopathic doctors).^{*} A crisis is a moment of climax when various interconnected problems and tensions that may have been developing over long periods of time finally come to a head. The ailment that puts a person out of action is indeed a "crisis." But it is a healing crisis - an invitation to employ the sudden rupture in one's normal routine to bring one's life to a higher level, thereby healing the deeper, spiritual malady.

^{*} Some alternative healers use the term "healing crisis" to refer to outbreaks of symptoms such as tiredness, weakness, mild fever, etc. experienced in the months after embarking on a health regime. In their view these are to be taken not as indicators of bodily malfunctioning and pathology, but rather as signs that, after so much neglect, the body is rebounding in response to the new regime and cleansing itself of accumulated waste and toxins.

When to call a doctor

This is not to say that introspection and prayer are all that's needed when a person is suffering from illness or injury. Where a condition requires medical attention, it would be dangerous and irresponsible to neglect it. Conditions that should be reported to a competent doctor include: a temperature above 103° F. (39.5° C.) or one that remains over 100° F. (37.5° C.) for three days; severe pain in the chest, stomach, head or ears; enlarged neck glands; any fever, sore throat, cough or severe runny nose that persist for more than a week; severe or persistent muscle pain, swelling or spasm; pain centered in a bone or joint; decreased mobility of a joint or inability to move it at all; stabbing or radiating pain; numbness or tingling, and any other unusual or persistent symptom. (See next chapter on [choosing a doctor](#).)

Where medical treatment is deemed necessary, bear in mind the advice of the Rambam: "If the patient can be treated through diet alone he should not be treated with medicines. If it is impossible to control the illness without medications, the first choice should be medicines that are nourishing and foods that have medicinal properties. When using medicines, one should begin with mild ones. If these are sufficient, well and good. Only if they are insufficient should one use stronger medicines" (Rambam, Hanhagat HaBri'ut 2:21-22).

Even where medical remedies are called for, we must still look to God to guide the physician as to how to restore physical balance. Ultimately physical healing depends on the amazing self-regulating mechanisms God has planted in the human body, even where these are aided and strengthened by medicines. After taking medicine or receiving treatment, we must still depend on God and wait for the healing process to follow its course. It takes time for the body to rebound, for damaged tissues to mend and normal functioning to return. This is time that can be used for the spiritual work of healing.

On taking medicine or receiving medical treatment, one should offer a short prayer:

"May it be Your will, HaShem my God, that this medicine/treatment should bring me healing, for You send healing as a free gift."

After treatment, one should say: "Blessed is the Healer of the sick" (Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim 230:4).

Spiritual strategies

The key to the spiritual dimension of healing is the attempt to transcend mochin d'katnut, the "constricted consciousness" that fills a person when his holy da'at goes into exile, and to rise to a state of mochin d'gadlut, "expanded consciousness" and manifest da'at. This is because the physical problem is itself symptomatic of the exile of the person's da'at. One of the main ways to channel spiritual healing is through seeking deeper insight into the spiritual, emotional, social, economic and other issues in one's life calling for attention and making fresh efforts to resolve them through prayer and practical action.

Someone suffering from a severe infection, fever, aching muscles or acute pain and discomfort in the wake of an injury may feel like doing very little except trying to sleep! But even simply crying out to God because of the pain and frustration is a major step towards da'at, expressing one's awareness that the trial is from God and that God alone has the power to send true salvation and healing. Fever, pain, exhaustion and the like may make sustained introspection and prayer difficult, especially when a person is taking medications and painkillers. Yet "the Divine Presence is above the head of the sick person" (Nedarim 40a), and such trials can engender a unique sense of closeness to God, drawing forth cries and prayers from the very depths of one's heart. Physical suffering can also be strangely conducive to flashes of profound insight

and self-understanding, especially during the long periods of half-waking, half-sleeping restiveness so often experienced during recovery.

Simchah

Genuine spiritual insight is hardly likely to come from brooding anger, self-reproach and the like. On the contrary, these make the Godly soul cringe and wilt. The subtle, delicate Jewish soul rises to her level not through negativity and harshness, but out of joy. Simchah frees the mind and soul from exile, bringing yishuv hada'at, settled consciousness and spiritual awareness.

We have seen how the Rambam emphasized the key importance of cheerfulness in the healing process:

"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, especially if his illness is bound up with his mental and emotional state, as in the case of those who are gloomy and depressed. In all such cases the physician should do nothing before improving the patient's state of mind.... The physician should not think that he can alter these emotions through his medical knowledge and expertise. This can be achieved only through moral guidance and the religious teachings we have received from the prophets" (Hanhagat HaBri'ut 3:13-14).

The Rambam gives practical suggestions as to how to foster a good mood:

"One should never forget to strengthen the patient's physical vitality with nourishing food, and to strengthen his spiritual powers with fragrant odors, with music, by telling him happy stories that expand the heart, and by distracting his mind with things that make him and his friends laugh. The people chosen to take care of him should be those who know how to cheer him up" (ibid. 2:20).

As one of the ultimate goals of the spiritual seeker, true simchah is an exalted state of devekut, devotion and attachment to God that bring an expansive sense of joy at His overwhelming goodness and kindness. But as Rebbe Nachman stresses many times, simchah starts with little things. Pleasant surroundings, wholesome, tasty food, beautiful flowers, fragrant odors, joyous and inspiring music, interesting conversation and amusing jokes all have the power to lighten our moods. When it comes to fun and jokes, Rebbe Nachman said: "If you want to joke, there are three conditions: (1) you must be careful not to insult anyone; (2) you must not use vulgar language; (3) your intention should not be to show yourself in a good light at the expense of others. Now you can joke!" (Siach Sarfey Kodesh I:13)

The foundation of true simchah lies in the "ten kinds of melody" (see [Chapter 13](#)). On one level this means quite literally music that delights and inspires. Music has tremendous power to open the heart and help one get in touch with one's inner feelings. Those recovering from an illness or injury should try to keep

tapes or discs of their favorite joyous and inspirational music readily accessible to lift their spirits and keep themselves in a positive frame of mind.

On another level, the concept of the "ten types of melody" means prayer and devotion of all kinds. Rebbe Nachman taught that the entire Book of Psalms is built upon the ten kinds of melody, and these are the very key to healing. It is good to keep a copy of the Psalms at hand. If possible, try to recite at least a few Psalms each day. The Ten Psalms making up Rebbe Nachman's Tikkun HaKlali, the "General Remedy," contain all ten kinds of melody and are therefore a powerful spiritual remedy. (The Ten Psalms are 16, 32, 41, 42, 59, 77, 90, 105, 137, 150).

Periods of bed-rest may provide an excellent opportunity for reading that one may not usually have time for, and this can also often be a catalyst for spiritual insight and growth. The Rabbis said: "Someone with a headache should busy himself with Torah; someone with a sore throat should busy himself with Torah; someone with stomach pains should busy himself with Torah; someone with aching bones should busy himself with Torah.... And if his whole body is aching, he should busy himself with Torah" (Eruvin 54a).

A person recovering from illness or injury may find it difficult to concentrate on serious reading for any length of time, but the short items in books such as *Restore My Soul*, *Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom* and *Tzaddik* provide plenty of food for thought. *Rabbi Nachman's Stories* can be highly refreshing and also contain the profoundest healing wisdom. Where patience is short, the single-sentence items in the *Aleph-Bet Book* and *Advice* do not require sustained concentration, yet are highly interesting and thought-provoking. Someone who finds it difficult to read may enjoy listening to tapes of Torah talks and classes.

Vidui: Acknowledgement

A positive mental state is the best foundation for the introspection and hisbodedus needed to confront the deeper issues that are so often bound up with physical illness or injury. Even a common cold may be associated with personal, family, social, economic and other pressures, and the same is true of many other problems. All kinds of accidents and injuries occur at times of particular stress and difficulty. Under the pressures of everyday life, we are often so anxious to get on with immediate business that we feel forced to ignore the various tensions within ourselves or in our relationships with those around us. We tend to mask them even from ourselves, sending our da'at into exile. The physical crisis is often a signal that we need to take a break from routine in order to look within ourselves and seek more effective ways of tackling our problems.

When things come to a head in a "healing crisis," the point is to penetrate behind the mask and flush out one's accumulated frustration and negativity in order to restore yishuv hada'at, clarity and spiritual awareness. Just as a boil needs to be drained of infected waste matter, so it is necessary to release the various blocked emotions and inner frustrations that may be bound up with problems in one's spiritual life, with family or friends, at work, in the community,

and so on.

The process of penetrating beneath the surface of everyday consciousness in order to get down to the roots of our problems is what today is called "therapy," a word that literally simply means "treatment" or "cure." For most people therapy means going to talk about one's problems with a trained psychotherapist, but in fact "therapy" was known and practiced long before the twentieth century. Anyone who feels troubled and goes to pour out his heart to a trusted friend or a more experienced elder and ask for counsel is practicing a form of therapy, as is the Jew who goes to a Rav, Rebbe, etc. to discuss his problems and ask for wise advice. And so too is the person who practices hisbodedus, pouring out his anguish and suffering to God and crying out for help.

In Torah terms, the process of pouring out the heart is called וידוי (vidui), which is related to the Hebrew root וידע meaning "admit" or "acknowledge." The conventional rendering of this word as "confession" has confusing connotations for many Jews, who associate this with non-Jewish religious practices and are unaware that vidui is a Torah mitzvah (Leviticus 26: 40, and see Rambam, Hilkhos Teshuvah 2:2) and an authentic Jewish spiritual pathway followed by Jews for thousands of years. The idea of vidui is not to wallow in guilt and self-recrimination. It is to give frank and honest expression to one's often conflicting thoughts and feelings, and to own up to and take responsibility for one's personal shortcomings and for any mistakes one has made. This is what lays the foundation for more positive attitudes and behavior in the future. Until one gives verbal expression to one's negative thoughts and feelings, they remain "inscribed on one's bones" and may continue to give rise to actual physical symptoms (Likutey Moharan I, 4:5 and see p.183).

Vidui need not be a formal ritual of special prayers and breast-beating. A few spontaneous words of honest self-expression are also considered vidui. The key is to be sincere and truthful. The very pain, discomfort and suffering caused by illness and injury can be the starting point. It's hard!!! "Hard" in Hebrew is קשה (kasheh). "I'm in pain! I'm hurting all over! Why is this happening to me? What does it mean?" The very hardship (קושי, KoShI) itself elicits these questions to God. A question is a קושיא (KuShYA). KuShYA is made up of the initial letters of the words שְׁמַע יְהוָה קוֹלִי עֲקְרָא (Shema YHVH Koli Ekra), "God, hear my voice - I call" (Psalms 27:7; see Likutey Moharan II, 46 and Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #146). The very purpose of the trouble is to force one to cry out to God. And the cry itself can elevate and strengthen one's faith, until eventually all the difficulties are resolved.

The literature on hisbodedus discusses the various ways of expressing oneself to God, talking through one's problems and difficulties and praying for help and guidance (see Outpourings of the Soul and Under the Table pp. 101-144). Also most valuable is sichat chaverim, heart-to-heart conversation with a good friend. In times of illness it can be tremendously beneficial to unburden oneself to a trusted friend. If you have been having difficulties in your relationship with your spouse, a parent, a child or other family member, or a friend or colleague, etc., part of the therapeutic process may be to discuss the problems with that person

honestly, constructively and in a spirit of reconciliation.

Expanding one's da'at through introspection, hisbodedus and sichat chaverim is an ongoing process of exploration and gradually deepening awareness and understanding. The discomfort and fatigue experienced during recovery may make it difficult to think in a concentrated way, especially since part of oneself may be resisting the whole process. At the same time, such periods can provide many rich insights into oneself and one's life. It can be helpful to keep a notebook at hand to record passing thoughts or capture fleeting insights. Often they may come while one is half asleep or dreaming. Over time, it should be possible to connect the various ideas and understand the broader picture.

3. The Meaning of Symptoms

Psychologists and doctors are becoming increasingly aware of the influence of psychological factors on physical health in general. There is also growing recognition that specific personality traits and emotions are frequently associated with particular kinds of physical problems. Thus many studies indicate a close relationship between grief, suppressed anger, sense of failure, etc. and vulnerability to cancer, while the link between tension and heart disease is now well established. Many psychotherapists and some of the more psychologically-aware doctors now encourage patients to explore the possible role of such factors in their illnesses in the hope that bringing buried emotions to the surface and resolving inner conflict will help promote actual physical healing.

In the Torah view, physical ailments may be bound up not only with worldly psychological factors but also with spiritual flaws. In biblical times saintly individuals took physical ailments as signs of spiritual shortcomings, and would seek out a prophet for insight and practical guidance (Ramban on Leviticus 26:11). The Rabbis taught that certain physical conditions, such as tzara'at, were visitations caused by particular sins. The story of how the Ari diagnosed the spiritual roots of [one man's shoulder pain](#) is an example of the way an outstanding latter-day tzaddik viewed a physical problem.

The Rabbis said that "when someone sees that suffering has come upon him, he should carefully examine his behavior" (Berakhot 5a). Clearly this is a prescription for making a general spiritual accounting in times of trouble and illness. But should the actual physical symptoms themselves be looked upon as pointers to the specific nature of the underlying spiritual problem?

Rebbe Nachman taught: "Every thought, word and deed that God sends you every day is a hint intended to help you draw closer to Him. God Himself is infinite and without end, but He 'contracts' Himself, as it were, to our level, using all the experiences that He sends us every day as a way of signaling to us and guiding us. It is up to us to search for and recognize the messages contained in our various thoughts and conversations and all the other events in our lives. They are all sent to help us reach deeper levels of insight and draw closer to God" (Likutey Moharan I, 54:2).

It should be noted that Rebbe Nachman himself warned against giving excessive

attention to such hints to the exclusion of other sources of spiritual guidance, especially Torah study (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, this teaching indicates that it is perfectly valid to view physical ailments as allusions to deeper spiritual issues, and to devote some attention to pondering their significance. Thus the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, wrote to one sick person: "You have surely heard the saying of the Baal Shem Tov that everything that happens to a person and everything he sees or hears contains buried guidance about ways of serving God, and this is especially true in the case of a major event like your eye problem" (*Refuah Shelemah* p.110).

The mitzvot and the parts of the body

How does one discover the possible spiritual implications of specific physical problems? We know that the 613 limbs and arteries, etc. of the human body correspond to the 613 mitzvot. If a person has a problem in a particular part of his body, does this suggest a possible flaw in his fulfillment of the mitzvah corresponding to that body part? Do we even know which mitzvot correspond to each of the different parts of the body?

Nowhere in rabbinic literature is there an exhaustive one-to-one listing of all the limbs and organs of the body and their corresponding mitzvot. However, the classic 16th century *Sefer Charedim* contains a lengthy discussion of the various positive and negative Torah and rabbinic mitzvot dependent on the heart, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, respiratory system, digestive system, arms, legs, head and sex organ (*Sefer Charedim*, chapters 9-32 & 35-51). The discussion in the *Sefer Charedim* provides much food for thought about the possible implications of certain localized problems.

Selected mitzvot associated with major limbs of the body

Based on *Sefer Charedim*, chapters 9-32 & 35-51

The Heart:

Have faith in God; love and fear God; attach yourself to God; trust in God; sanctify God's Name; concentrate on the Shema and the prayers; revere and honor parents; love your neighbor; judge others fairly; repent and have contrition over sins; don't forget God; don't become angry, hate, bear a grudge or take vengeance; don't listen to slander; don't entertain sinful thoughts.

The Eyes:

Look at the tzitzit; weep over the death of a tzaddik; read the Torah; don't look at statues of idols; don't gaze lustfully.

The Ears:

Study the Torah aloud; listen to your prayers as you say them; hear the shofar on Rosh Hashanah; listen to reproof; listen to prophets and judges; don't listen to false prophets or tempters; don't listen to

slander.

The Nose:

Don't savor the scent of someone with whom sexual relations are forbidden.

The Mouth and Respiratory System:

Recite the grace after meals, blessings and prayers, kiddush and havdalah; study Torah aloud; recount the story of the Exodus on Pesach; count the Omer; mention the Exodus daily; remember the command to blot out Amalek; confess verbally; tell the truth; comfort the sick and oppressed; swear in God's Name; don't take God's Name in vain; don't mention names of idols; don't practice divination; fulfill vows; cry to God in times of trouble; don't take part in communal strife; don't oppress others verbally or shame them; don't lie, flatter or use vulgar language.

The Mouth and Digestive System:

Don't eat before feeding your animals; eat on Shabbat and festivals; eat matzah on Pesach; eat in the sukkah; fast on Yom Kippur; don't consume forbidden fat, blood, unclean or improperly slaughtered animals, birds, fish, worms, insects, fruit from an immature tree (orlah), idolatrous wine or chametz on Pesach.

The Hands and Arms:

Give charity; practice kindness; give loans; wear tzitzit; put on tefilin; fix a mezuzah where required; put a protective railing around a roof; pay wages on time; bury the dead; save your fellow from danger; send away the mother bird from the nest when taking eggs or chicks (shiluach haken); return stolen goods; return lost property; redeem the firstborn; write a Torah scroll; kasher and immerse utensils purchased from a non-Jew; destroy idolatrous shrines; don't make idols; don't murder, steal or rob; don't take interest on loans to a Jew; don't take a pledge by force; don't encroach on others' property; don't blot out God's Name; don't waste food; don't take bribes; don't cut your peyot or razor-shave your beard; don't hit others; don't imitate gentile dress or customs; don't have yourself tattooed; don't delay payment of charitable pledges; don't perform forbidden labors on Shabbat or festivals.

The Feet and Legs:

Stand up before elders and Sages; stand up before a Torah scroll; give testimony standing; escort guests out of the house; attend to the needs of the sick and needy; escort the dead; sit in the sukkah; chalitzah; don't walk beyond the Shabbat boundaries; don't bow to idols; pray to God standing.

The Sex Organ:

Circumcision; marital relations; personal sanctity; don't engage in

forbidden sexual relations.

Another rich source of information about the spiritual connotations of the various body parts is to be found in Kabbalah and Chassidut, which are founded on the principle that man was created in the image of God. "From my flesh I see God" (Job 19:26): the various parts of the human body correspond to various aspects of the higher, spiritual worlds, and the Kabbalah is replete with references to the spiritual significance of various parts of the body.

However, an extensive knowledge of Kabbalah and Chassidut is not essential in order to consider the possible spiritual implications of particular ailments. In hinting to people to draw closer to Him, God "contracts" Himself to the level of each and every person, sending messages that each one is capable of understanding in the light of his or her existing knowledge. One should ask oneself: "What does this problem mean to me? What could it be telling me? What mitzvot or Torah teachings do I associate with this body part or perform with it? How have I been carrying them out?"

Can one know if one's intuitions about possible connections are correct? It would be unrealistic to expect absolute certainty of the kind that masters of ruach hakodesh like the Ari, the Baal Shem Tov and Rebbe Nachman possessed. But precisely because many ailments are sent as hints to the individual on his or her level, it is sometimes enough to devote just a little thought to one's life and activities in order to become strongly aware that a particular ailment is bound up with a specific shortcoming or area of neglect. It is true that "a person does not see his own blemishes" (Sifri Behaalotkha 12:12). Even when faced with the clearest hints, people sometimes resist confronting certain painful issues. In order to overcome such resistances, those sincerely wishing to explore the spiritual dimensions of a physical problem would be advised to do so with the help of a trusted friend, a sympathetic counsellor or therapist, or an understanding rabbi.

If you become aware of having neglected a particular mitzvah or of having acted wrongfully against God or a fellow human, you should verbally acknowledge the wrongdoing and make a firm commitment not to repeat it. You should also make every effort to take all necessary steps to make amends for the wrong. It can be helpful to focus on Torah teachings relating to the part of the body that is afflicted. Thus the Baal Shem Tov taught: "Sometimes one can draw beneficial influences through words alone. For example, if a person has an ailment in a particular limb, he should speak about the corresponding aspects of the upper sefirot. When a person has a pain, he should attach himself to God, i.e. God's attributes [= the sefirot] and he will not feel the pain" (Keter Shem Tov II, #299).

The all-encompassing mitzvot

We should not necessarily expect to find simple answers and direct correspondences between particular maladies and specific spiritual flaws. Many illnesses affect several body parts and systems at once. Any illness should alert us to the need for introspection and spiritual reckoning, but especially where a

problem is more generalized, the search should be not for a single magic solution but for deeper insight into the main areas needing improvement in one's life as a whole. One should give thought to one's connection with God and mitzvah-observance in general, with special emphasis on those mitzvot that encompass all the others: faith, prayer, Torah study, charity and kindness. As the Lubavitcher Rebbe wrote to one sick person: "We need God's blessing in everything, and at times when we are in need of extra blessing it is necessary to add in matters of Torah and mitzvot. The more one adds, the greater the blessing that will come from God" (Refuah Shelemah p.117).

First and foremost is charity. In the words of Rebbe Nachman: "It is through charity that all blessings flow into the world" (Likutey Moharan I, 31). "Charity is the remedy for all wounds" (ibid. II, 4:12). The quest for spiritual healing involves prayer, hisbodedus, Torah study and fulfilment of the mitzvot - and charity is the key to all of them. "Charity has the power to widen the entrance to holiness. When a person wants to embark upon a certain path of devotion, he first needs to make an opening to enter on this new path. This is why all beginnings are hard. But giving charity makes the entrance wider" (ibid.).

At times of illness and injury, one should, if possible, aim to give extra charity according to one's means. (Regarding pidyon nefesh, see [next chapter](#)). The Chafetz Chaim would distribute food to the needy when there was an illness in his family. Rebbe Nachman taught that "when a person gives charity to the Tzaddik, it is as if he gives charity to many, many Jewish souls" (Likutey Moharan 17:5). This is because the Tzaddik has a general soul which includes the individual souls of all those under his influence. One of the highest forms of charity is to support the spreading of the Tzaddik's teachings through books and publications, which provide spiritual food for innumerable Jewish souls. It is a good idea for a sick person to keep a charity box within easy reach and to try to give small amounts before prayer and hisbodedus.

The sick person is in special need of God's kindness and compassion, and it is his acts of love and kindness to others that make it possible for God's love to be channeled to him. As the Rabbis taught: "Everyone who shows love for God's creatures is himself shown love" (Shabbat 151b). It may be difficult for someone who is ill or injured to carry out practical acts of kindness, but even thoughtfulness, consideration, kind words and smiles are also forms of chessed.

One who shows love to others is himself shown love

"When a person is in special need of God's love, God sends him an opportunity to show love to someone else. This is what makes it possible for God's love to be channeled to the person himself, because ' Everyone who shows love for God's creatures is himself shown love' (Shabbat 151b). Thus it is written, ' And He will give you love [i.e. He will give you the opportunity to show love to someone else] and

[then] He will show you compassion' (Deuteronomy 13:18).

"A person's ability to show love depends on his level of da'at, Godly awareness. Someone who has Godly awareness will have compassion. For anger, the opposite of compassion, is rooted in foolishness: ' Anger rests in the bosom of fools' (Ecclesiastes 7:9). Accordingly the Rabbis said, ' It is forbidden to show compassion to anyone who lacks da'at' (Berakhot 33a). This is because a person who lacks da'at is himself lacking in compassion (since ' anger rests in the bosom of fools'). This is why it is forbidden to have compassion on him, because ' Everyone who shows love for God's creatures is himself shown love,' but if a person lacks compassion, it is impossible to have compassion on him. Thus a sick person who is in need of God's compassion needs to have compassion on others, and this depends on da'at.

"A special flow of da'at comes into the world on Shabbat... On Shabbat everyone is given extra da'at. This is why it is customary for those visiting the sick on Shabbat to say, ' Shabbat has the power to show compassion' (Shabbat 12a). Shabbat is a time when da'at shines to all, and thus the Shabbat itself has the power to make the sick person have compassion on others because of the extra da'at that shines into the invalid on Shabbat. And once the sick person has compassion on others, he will certainly receive compassion from Heaven, because ' Everyone who shows love for God's creatures is himself shown love'"

Likutey Moharan I, 119

4. Getting out of a rut

Almost all of us go through periods when we find ourselves feeling generally low physically and spiritually. We may not be able to put our finger on any specific problem. We just feel inexplicably tired, weak, uninspired and apathetic. Prayer, study, mitzvot, work and other responsibilities all become burdensome, and things that never used to be so problematic suddenly seem to weigh excessively. We find ourselves moody, impatient, cynical, angry, rebellious, tense and anxious, or just gray and clouded.

Such periods are often marked by physical problems of various kinds - headaches, stiffness, pains, rashes, nausea, digestive problems and so on - and these may often be exacerbated if we start eating badly and neglecting basic

self-care. Yet we may not feel that there is any specific medical problem as such, although apparently minor symptoms and general malaise can sometimes be the first signs of serious illness. Indeed, chronic frustration and depression can themselves lead to physical illness, which is itself a good reason to make strong efforts to overcome them. But in most cases the weariness and general sense of discouragement that characterize these kinds of ruts in our lives are transient phenomena, perhaps a reaction to a particularly exhausting period we've gone through, a demanding project, a major move or change of direction, a new arrival in the family, and so on. At other times such ruts may precede an important advance in our lives, spiritually or otherwise. But until we actually take the next step forward, we may experience only the negativity.

What can we do to get out of such ruts? Often we are quite well aware of what we ought to do: put more strength into our prayers and meditation, give more time to our Torah study, eat properly, exercise, take ourselves and our lives in hand and be joyous. But we just can't get ourselves to move. We may feel we've tried again and again, only to see all our efforts thwarted. How can we possibly be joyous when we feel so low and the problems we face seem so intractable?

In some shape or form depression is ubiquitous in our societies. Many try to smother it with food, sex, shopping, entertainment, alcohol, drugs, gambling and other distractions. But since depression is at root a spiritual problem, the quest for solutions in the external, material world is doomed to failure. Millions of dollars worth of tranquillizers and antidepressants are consumed every year, but they simply mask the underlying problems while often producing new ones, including psychological dependence, anxiety and further depression. Medications can undoubtedly help alleviate certain mental conditions, but all too often they are prescribed indiscriminately for problems that are rooted in far deeper levels of people's being than simply their body chemistry.

Atzvut

Anxiety, tension, frustration and depression are precisely the ailments of the Princess in Rebbe Nachman's story of the [Beggar who had no hands](#). The Princess is the divine soul in every Jew. In flight from the cruel king - the evil force sent to challenge us in this world by seeking to turn us away from our holy mission - the Princess tries to enter the amazing, beautiful Water Castle: this is the Torah, to which we turn as a salve for the ills and pains of life. Seeing her flee, the king orders his troops to shoot her with their ten types of poisonous arrows, and she falls unconscious. The ten types of arrows symbolize the entire gamut of negative feelings and emotions that poison people's lives, including the futility, sadness, unease and foreboding so many experience, as well as far deeper complexes of frustration, anger, shattered hopes and dreams, grief and despair, of which we may often be barely conscious.

Rebbe Nachman said: "Only a great Tzaddik has the power to enter every place where the soul has fallen and remove all ten arrows from her" (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #273). If only it were possible to pour out our hearts to such a Tzaddik and receive true, sage advice! For many people today one of the greatest sources of frustration is the feeling that they have no one they can really talk to.

The few known tzaddikim are often practically inaccessible, while many of the people to whom we do have access give us the feeling that they simply won't understand. If only there was one kind, sympathetic Sage who could answer the deepest questions of our lives, or just encourage us! Rebbe Nachman told of one saintly man who said, "If only someone, anyone, no matter who, had just said to me when I was starting on my way and going through all the trials of rejection and confusion, 'Be strong, brother! Hold yourself!' I'd have gone running forward with all my might" (Likutey Moharan II, 48).

All this should at least teach us to make every effort to play a supportive role for others when we see them going through their moments of discouragement and depression. When struggling with our own problems and difficulties, it is certainly most important to seek the help and support of any trusted friends and counsellors we can turn to: one of the main pillars of Rebbe Nachman's healing pathway is to bind oneself to other souls, especially to the tzaddikim. Even if it seems impossible to find the right person to speak to, we can and should search in the literature of mussar and chassidut for guidance from the outstanding luminaries of the past. But when it comes to putting their advice into practice, there may be no option but to play the role of helper/counsellor to ourselves. In any case, when it comes to taking the necessary steps to get out of the rut, we have to do the actual work ourselves!

Tracing the causes

It is tempting to look for a quick fix - a crash diet, an intense burst of exercise, some magical segulah or a single tikkun that will quickly lift us out of our low. It is true that certain cases of malaise can indeed be traced to some fairly simple underlying cause, spiritual or physical. Fatigue, for example, may sometimes be directly related to a particular dietary deficiency, an allergy, toxicity, an infection, a postural fault or some other physical cause. Once this is identified and properly treated, the fatigue may just disappear. Poor diet in general is often a factor in mood and fatigue problems. Many people believe their diet to be fairly wholesome without being aware that their two or three seemingly innocent daily cups of coffee, their late-night snacks or some other aspect of their eating habits may be playing havoc with their physical, mental and emotional life. Another frequent cause of fatigue problems is chronic lack of exercise, which can lead to muscle weakness, joint stiffness, poor circulation, sluggish metabolism and a build-up of toxic wastes in the body.

Certain cases of depression, malaise or other problems may be traceable to a single spiritual factor, such as an invalid mezuzah or tefilin, some faulty practice in relation to Shabbat observance, giving charity, kashrut, family purity, etc., or some other spiritual flaw. There have been cases where severe depression has been dissipated simply by inducing the suffering individual to take care to perform the first mitzvah in the daily life of the Jew - washing the hands three times on rising in the morning (negelwasser) in order to dispel the impure spirit that clings to the fingers after sleep.

However, in many other cases of depression and malaise the underlying causes are far less simple and straightforward, and may involve complex syndromes of

interconnected problems on numerous different planes. Domestic, work, financial, family and other difficulties may conspire with inner emotional and other factors to disrupt the daily hisbodedus, prayer and Torah study that are vital to inner balance. All this may adversely affect our celebration of Shabbat and performance of other mitzvot. The general stress and tension this causes may then lead us to eat badly and neglect or abuse ourselves in other ways. This is likely to leave us feeling unfit, out of condition, strained and fatigued, which makes us all the more liable to make mistakes and less able to cope with our problems. We become increasingly frustrated, tense and angry... and so the cycle continues - until we may find ourselves in a state of deep gloom and despair.

Making a start

Many of the problems involved in such syndromes are likely to have been long in the making and will not necessarily be able to be solved quickly. The first step in climbing out of this kind of rut is to find some way to sidestep the discouragement and despair that throw everything else into shadow. However, for more lasting solutions it is also necessary to confront the more long-term problems involved and to institute the necessary changes in your life.

As in any enterprise in life, the first step is to give charity, even just a coin or two, and to pray. The mitzvah of charity brings a flow of kindness into creation, forging a channel for the divine love that will sweeten the situation you confront and release you from the constricted consciousness that is preventing you from seeing your way out. Keep a charity box within easy reach at all times, and get into the habit of making frequent contributions throughout the day. Even when no charity box is at hand, you can always assign one of your pockets or wallet compartments to serve as such temporarily. By frequently making small donations you draw a constant flow of divine love to yourself.

Turn to God for help. Cry out and ask Him for everything you need, materially and spiritually. If you find it hard to talk to God out loud, you can still whisper in your heart: "Ayeh??? Where are You? Where is the place of Your glory?" (see Ayeh?). Rebbe Nachman stressed that not a single word of prayer ever goes to waste. Even the prayers you offer with little inner conviction still leave their mark. You can always say a few simple words asking God to help you make a new start even if you can't yet see how you'll take the first step. You may not feel like embarking on a session of hisbodedus, opening a Torah text, beginning that diet, doing some exercises or taking whatever other steps are necessary in order to heal yourself and bring your life to a higher level. But you can still tell God what you would like to do. You can still express your yearning to do it.

Turning self-healing into an ongoing project

The moment someone takes his or her problems to a doctor, be it a physical doctor - a physician - or a spiritual doctor - a tzaddik, counsellor, or therapist, etc. - getting cured becomes a definite, ongoing project. In the same way, when you have to play the role of doctor to yourself in order to lift yourself out of a rut, it is helpful to turn your quest into a definite project: self-healing. In order

to give continuity to the healing process, why not start a special file in which you collect all the material relating to this project: your private notes, relevant cuttings and articles, inspiring quotations, etc. One of the main keys to self-healing is deeper insight and self-understanding. But insights come and go in the mind. They may come at any time of the day or night. Writing them down as they occur and keeping them together in a place where you can refer to them easily should make it much easier to follow them through and integrate them into your life.

Such a file does not have to be a literary journal. It is often sufficient to note down just a few key words in order to keep track of your thoughts and feelings, define the issues and problems in your life as you currently perceive them, and list ideas to which you want to give further attention. Some people think better in pictures than in words. If this is true for you, why not try drawing simple pictures of yourself, those around you, your house, place of work, synagogue, yeshivah, etc. in order to get in touch with your thoughts and feelings about them and gain deeper understanding of the issues you face?

Making time: regular hisbodedus

If you want to go to a doctor for a consultation or treatment, you normally have to make an appointment. In the same way, you should set appointed times for yourself in order to work on your self-healing project. Fix regular hisbodedus sessions to enable you to unwind from everyday pressures and to work seriously on bringing your life to a higher level. If you feel beset by many problems and find your morale to be low, try to schedule a break from your daily activities - whether for an hour or two, an afternoon, or even a few days if possible - to take yourself to a quiet spot for a brief retreat in order to pray, meditate and start to clarify your goals. If your self-healing strategy includes a physical dimension, such as a cleansing diet, a new exercise routine, etc., such a retreat might be the ideal time to give these special attention.

Trying to diagnose and overcome your own problems when caught up in the middle of them can be one of the hardest and most frustrating aspects of spiritual self-healing. The problems themselves, together with the many associated negative thoughts and emotions, may be keeping you locked in mochin d'katnut, the very state of constricted consciousness that you need to transcend in order to find your way out of them. Quiet meditation and introspection can help you get in touch with levels of your higher self that may have been crowded out by the daily pressures in your life. But you also need to cry out to God, to call out beyond the situation that traps you, appealing for a helping hand to lift you to mochin d'gadlut, expanded consciousness.

A good way to focus the search for insight and understanding is to use questions that you address to God and to yourself: "Where am I in the world? What am I thinking? What am I feeling? What is my health problem? What are my other problems? What do I want in life? What is my purpose in this world? What are my aims and goals? What is holding me back from them, and how can I overcome the obstacles and attain my purpose?" etc. Putting key questions into words and asking them out loud makes it easier to think about the issues

involved, to redefine them where necessary, and to start seeing solutions. Use this method over several sessions of hisbodedus in order to focus on the central issues you face in your life. (See [Guiding Questions for Self Awareness and Change](#).)

Sometimes insight and answers may come quickly; at other times the process of gaining deeper understanding of your problems and seeing how to overcome them may be long-drawn out and uneven. Flashes of expanded consciousness and moments of release and joy may be followed by long periods when the problems seem as bad as ever, if not worse. Many of Rebbe Nachman's writings deal precisely with this aspect of the spiritual journey and are the ideal support when facing the constant ups and downs it involves (see *Outpouring of the Soul*, *Restore My Soul*, etc.). Each time you fall down, you must start over again, giving a little charity, offering a few simple prayers, returning to Torah and hisbodedus, and persisting until God sends complete salvation.

Many problems are best solved by learning to change the way you view them. There are all kinds of things in life that cannot be changed - your body, your family, past mistakes, certain social and economic factors, and many others. But where these are problematic for you, the solution often lies in learning to alter your perceptions and finding ways of turning seeming limitations into advantages. The principle shift in perception needed in practically all the problems we face in life is to recognize that they have been sent to us by God out of love.

A healing worksheet

It can be very helpful to develop a personal healing worksheet listing the principle issues and difficulties you are grappling with and the practical steps you intend to take in each area. Summarize the main goals of your life as a whole. Next, list your particular goals in the current period together with specific projects you are working on. These could include spiritual projects (e.g. conquering anger and other negative traits, embarking on daily study of the Shulchan Arukh), current projects connected with the home, family, work, friends, the community, etc., creative projects, and also any specific health projects you are working on (e.g. losing weight, overcoming fatigue, getting back into condition).

Now list the main components of your self-healing plan, including both physical strategies (e.g. diet, exercise, treatment for specific problems) and spiritual strategies (e.g. giving charity, regular hisbodedus, daily Torah study). Beside each item, briefly note the specific practical steps you plan to take to implement your strategy (e.g. diet - check out sound literature on nutrition; exercise - seek expert advice about appropriate plan). In another section of your worksheet, list the main issues you want to work on in your hisbodedus and all the things you would like to pray for regularly.

Your self-healing worksheet could prove to be one of the most important documents in your healing file. Mapping it out will help you to define the issues and problems you want to work on and to clarify the strategies you need to follow. Seeing all your goals and strategies concisely listed before you will help

you keep them at the forefront of your mind and assist you in organizing your monthly, weekly and daily schedule in order to accomplish what you want. You will probably wish to take your worksheet through a number of successive drafts as you deepen your self-understanding and make progress with your various projects.

Have your worksheet before you during hisbodedus, and ask God to help you attain your goals and to assist you at every step of the way in all your various projects and activities. Ask Him to give you whatever you need, and to inspire you with the willpower and determination to carry out your plans in practice. Every word of your prayers, each expression of holy longing and yearning, every good thought, and even your very cries and sighs will become "notes" in the holy melody of joy that will steadily subdue the negative, depressed spirit, bringing true healing of the spirit and the body (see Chapter 13, pp. 163ff.).

[NEXT CHAPTER](#)

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

[AZAMRA HOMEPAGE](#)

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