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CONCERNING DISEASES OF THE JEWS.



PROFESSOR MANDELSTAMM of Kiev, in 1900, in an address in London, described the physical defects and the diseases of the Jews of Russia. He ascribed them to abnormal, cramped and unsanitary conditions of life. The picture which he drew shocked western Jewry. He pointed to the narrow-chested form, the lack of muscular development, the frequency of eye diseases and especially to the varied affections of the nervous system. In 1902, Dr. Englaender published an address entitled: "*Die auffallend häufigen Krankheitserscheinungen der jüdischen Rasse.*" He gathered the experience of the greatest European clinicians concerning the health conditions of the Jews, and showed that the western Jews who had been emancipated, likewise bore certain rather characteristic disease traits. He emphasized the great and increasing frequency of mental disease and of affections of the nervous system as well as of suicide; conditions due to the intensity of the commercial struggle in which the Jews, liberated from the Ghettos, threw themselves with all their inherited ability and energy, but also with their overwrought nervous system, predisposed to breakdown through persecution and perpetual anxiety for many generations.

In 1907, Wulfing-Luer published a book in Paris under the title "*La Pathologie Nerveuse et Mentale chez les Anciens Hebreux et dans la Race Juive,*" in which he tried to show that the Jews were predisposed to nervous affections even in ancient times. He distinguishes between their liability to organic diseases of the nervous system and to functional affections, finding the latter relatively frequent, the former infrequent, and he gives satisfactory explanations.

We might enter with interest, and perhaps with profit, into a close study of these several works, as well as of the numerous authorities they cite, and of a few other articles which have appeared in recent medical literature, but this is not our purpose. We desire only to call attention to the subject and to the fact that it has been discussed long before it was taken up by any of the authors cited.

There is a little book of ninety-five pages published in Mannheim in 1777. On the title page we read:

"Elcan Isaac Wolf, *der Weltweisheit und Arzneiwissenschaft Doktor in Mannheim, von den Krankheiten der Juden*"

He speaks of the "misery and poverty of his brethren because their diseases are so intimately related to their sad fate," and he "believes he will merit neither the contempt nor the laughter of ill-willed persons if—a poor Israelite, himself, sobbing like his brethren under the same heavy yoke of misery," he "examines into their diseases and proposes useful means of relief." And he adds the "hope that the book may perhaps likewise be helpful to some sick and suffering Christians." He pictures the frightful poverty, the unsanitary homes, the improperly prepared and insufficient food, the uncleanliness, the daily anxiety to earn a livelihood, the continual sorrow, and the resulting lean bodies, the living corpses, the sallow complexions and the excessive nervous irritability, the frequency of hypochondriasis, melancholia and hemorrhoids. "Our religious practices add to our irritability because we worship with all our powers—of body and of soul." He discusses the diseases of the various periods of life, lays stress upon the proper care of the mother, the nursing of the infant, deprecates the too early mental training of the child, attributing the poor physique and the ill health of many adults to the faulty training and the ignorance shown in bringing up the child. He maintains that "our holy Law contains many ordinances and prohibitions of great value," of value as moral influences, of value as hygienic measures and of value for the continuance of the race. But he complains as emphatically of the injurious abuse and the dietary errors, recounting a large number, and urging simple foods rather than sharing one's money between the confectioner, the apothecary and the doctor. He warns against the excessive indulgence in coffee and tea because of the depressing and injurious effects and the danger of hemorrhoids. He is severe in his arraignment of quackish women in the lying-in chambers; he calls them destroying Liliths,* because they do injury to both the mothers and the infants; he recommends that they be given large doses of colocynth to purge away all fancied medical knowledge, and that their activity be limited to their one and only useful purpose—the giving of enemata.

The book contains three chapters on the means of combating the diseases of the Jews: the first deals with diet, the second with the means of the apothecary (including chiefly laxatives, cathartics, emetics and iron

*An infant destroying she-devil, the legendary wife of Adam.

The Medical Pickwick

tonics, but humorously adding "pure gold against poverty"), and the third, with political means. He bewails the fact that the Jews are forbidden to hold and cultivate land. "How many poor families would raise themselves out of their misery were they permitted to buy a bit of tillable land or a few acres of meadow and follow the example of an Abraham or a Jacob . . . would regain their health, and rear their children to the advantage of the state!" His last words caution his readers to follow his instruction, realizing that "their doing so will be his loss, but finding compensation in the pleasurable consciousness that he has taught, counselled and acted like an upright Jew."

But even the book of Wolf is not the first excursion into this field of comparative racial pathology. In an older book the *Synagoga Judaica* of Buxtorf,* which was printed in 1643, we find a chapter entitled "*Von den Krankheiten der Juden.*" "Many persons," he tells us, "believe that the Jews live longer than the Christians, and unlike the latter are free from all sorts of diseases. But experience has taught that they, too, die young, that they suffer from chicken pox, measles, epilepsy and leprosy as well as from other diseases as do other people. . . . Leprosy is not as common among them as among Christians, in part because they are so few in number when compared to Christians and partly because they are more moderate in eating and drinking and in other matters from which this plague results. For in their eating they follow the laws of Moses as closely as possible; concerning no food are they so obstinate as swine flesh; they will not and cannot hear about it, preferring to be put to death rather than eat it. Nevertheless the disease is found among them. . . ."

We cannot stop at Buxtorf. Professor Alexander Marx has called my attention to an interesting Hebrew

Ms. translation of Bernard de Gordon's *Lilium Medicinae*, in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, in which he found a curious statement in the chapter in which Gordon speaks of hemorrhoids among the Jews. Gordon's work was written in Latin, in 1305, and it was translated into Hebrew, in 1387, by Jekuthiel ben Solomon of Narbonne. Dr. Marx was led to seek the words of the original and obtained them through the kindness of Dr. Klebs of the Library of the Surgeon General. Put into English they are as follows:

"Sixthly it is to be noted that the Jews suffer greatly from hemorrhoids for three reasons: first, because they are generally sedentary and therefore the excessive melancholy humors collect; secondly, because they are usually in fear and anxiety and therefore the melancholy blood becomes increased, besides (according to Hippocrates) fear and faint-heartedness, should they last a long time, produce the melancholy humor; and thirdly, it is the divine vengeance against them (as written in Psalm 78, 66), and 'he smote his enemies in the *hinder parts*, he put them to a perpetual reproach.'"

The Hebrew author translates the first and second reasons but when he reaches the third, he states with indignation, "*sheker shekosaf veamaminim sheker*, i. e., what is written is a lie and they, who believe it, lie.

We thus see that the disease to which we are referring has afflicted the Jews for a long time. This fact has passed into Yiddish proverbs:

"*A jüdische j'rüische is a gildene uder.**" (A Jew's inheritance is a golden vein, i. e., hemorrhoids) and "*Wus jarsch'enen jüden?*"

Zurojss ün meriden!"* (What is the Jew's inheritance? Sore troubles and hemorrhoids!)

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*Johannis Buxtorf: *Synagoga Judaica: Das ist Judenschul: Darinnen der ganze jüdische Glaub' und Glaubensübung mit allen Ceremonien, Satzungen, Sitten und Gebräuchen*, etc., p. 620.

**Jüdische Sprichwörter*, Bernstein, Warsaw, 1908.

