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Quality of Life, Pain Relief, and Presence of Mind: a Study of Nachum Ish Gamzu, Tractate Ta'anit 21a

The question of how to properly address pain management is one which presents difficulty to a study of medical bioethics. Normative health care typically strives to eliminate pain and suffering in patients. Adding to the complexity of the situation, medications which can reduce pain usually limit a patient's consciousness. Despite this medical proclivity, there is a distinct need to explore whether there are times when pain elimination may be inappropriate.

A balanced understanding and utilization of pain management may benefit a patient in a variety of ways. According to certain segments of traditional Jewish thought, pain plays a role in a full life; however unpleasant, it may even be something which ought to be dutifully accepted.[1]

Despite the compelling case which might be made in health care settings for pain to be eliminated, clinical application is less clear. This paper argues that pain is embedded within the Jewish framework of ethics and spirituality. Pain's elimination may also remove an avenue by which Jews once experienced God. This could mean that there are cases when pain ought to be accepted instead of being "cured." When one takes into account that pain elimination also typically reduces agency, the issue becomes even more complicated.[2]

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[1] For the sake of clarity, it is important to note that "pain" and "suffering" are two wholly different entities. While discussion of what differentiates these two ideas merits exploration, this paper will not do so. For the sake of simplicity, this paper will discuss "pain" and "suffering" synonymously, and will intend them to mean the sensation of physical distress.

[2] In health care, the preservation of consciousness should be valued. To diminish consciousness is to diminish a patient's ability to control her state; doing so robs her of presence of mind and agency. This is even true when a patient is moribund: While the mitigation of pain is something which may be considered desirable, it can have very problematic side effects if it lessens the patient's autonomy. Ruben Schindler, in "The Jewish Way of Death," writes

Health care's tendency to see a separation between body and mind has been very effective for accomplishing many of its goals. This approach, though, can never fully treat all ailments as they ought to be treated. It certainly is not the most expedient attitude for providing health care.[3]

The struggle in health care to appropriately understand pain management in Jewish patients can be traced to the early twentieth century in America. For example, a study of 51 Jewish patients in 1907 focused on their expression of pain. At the time of the study's writing, there were so many Jewish patients who complained of a 'broadly-defined pain' that some doctors wondered if there was a "Hebraic debility." As a result of this trend, the author of the study, H. Morrison, chose to study 51 Jewish patients.

Morrison noted that despite the patients' complaints of pain, medical testing was unable to determine its etiology; there did not appear to be any known physical or psychological disorder which was causing the pain. Rather, it concluded that expressions of pain may have reflected various cultural understandings of pain and suffering. Morrison found that a different conception of pain's significance was the root cause of this medical misunderstanding.

Morrison asserted that when a health care professional encounters a patient complaining of pain, she should refrain from immediately prescribing pain medications. He argued that the proper response was to assess the patient as an individual embedded within a culture, and afterwards strive to make the most fitting decision for the patient's care. In the case of Jewish patients, it may be that pain plays more than a simply unpleasant role in the human experience.

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about the usage of the confessional prayer in a patient's final hours. He explains that "An additional function of the confessional is to enable the patient to play an active role in his or her final hours." Without agency, though, a patient is incapable of participating in this rite. If the attempt to eradicate pain in a patient denies him the ability to be an active shaper of his final hours, then it has overstepped a boundary which Judaism may consider sacred. Surgery and short-term rehabilitation aside, one ought not to accept this as a solution.

[3] Agdal, 2005; pp. 69-70.

Instead, pain may be something that particular strains of Jewish tradition hold as sacred and worth accepting.

As Donald Caton notes in his paper, "The Secularization of Pain," pain's portrayal as being unconnected to spirituality may have come about during the 19th century. According to Caton, pain once held such spiritual and religious significance, but came to be understood as a 'manageable biological phenomenon.' This paper will assume that Caton's assumptions are true, and that pain was once thought of in a spiritual way. In some Jewish traditions, this seems to have been the case.

This paper seeks to shed further light upon this topic by making a case study of Nahum ish Gamzu, a Talmudic character who has an experience related to the current discussion. The Babylonian Talmud, in tractate Ta'anit page 21a, tells a story of Nahum relevant to the question of pain in bioethics.

Nahum ish Gamzu is used in one of his lesser-known Talmudic tales to teach about the role pain plays in the divine system of rewards and punishments. This story of Nahum is related as follows in the Babylonian Talmud: Nahum ish Gamzu is in a dire state. His hands and legs are amputated, he is covered in boils, and he is blind. He is lying on his bed, the legs of which sit in small vessels of water to keep ants from climbing up the bed and into his wounds. Nahum and his bed are situated in a rickety house, and his disciples are worried that the house in which he is laying may collapse at any moment. Because of this, they ask for permission to remove him and his property from the house, in that order. Nahum instructs them to reverse their order: He knows that so long as he is in the house, God will not allow it to fall. Nahum's disciples follow his instructions and reverse their order. Sure enough, as soon as Nahum is removed from the house, it collapses.

Reacting to the strangeness of the scene, Nahum's disciples ask him how a man as righteous as him could have come to be in a state like his. Nahum ish Gamzu proceeds to tell his story to his disciples in order to explain how the punishments all are his own fault.

Nahum explains that he was traveling when a poor man approached him and asked for food. Nahum ish Gamzu told the poor man that he would help him as soon as he got off of his donkey and unpacked some food. However, before Nahum could get off of his donkey and unpack food, the poor man had already died. Reacting to what he saw as his own failure to save the man, Nahum called for his eyes which had no mercy on the poor man's eyes to go blind, for his hands that had no mercy on the poor man's hands to be cut off, and for his legs which had no mercy on the poor man's legs to be amputated. Nahum, distraught, called further for his whole body to be covered in boils. The Steinsaltz Talmud adds the commentary that Nahum also said "thus it was I myself who prayed for these afflictions, hoping that through them I might be granted atonement."[4]

After hearing this story, Nahum ish Gamzu's disciples exclaim "woe is us that we have seen you like this!" Nahum, in response, tells his students "woe would it be for me were you to not see me in such a state!"[5] After Nahum's closing comment, the Steinsaltz Talmud adds that he says "I am glad to be subjected to all this suffering, for in this way I may expiate for all the insensitivity I showed to a poor, hungry man."[6]

A parallel (though probably earlier and less edited) version of this story exists in the Jerusalem Talmud. The story is roughly the same, though it does have a handful of minor differences. The four most notable differences are that, first, there is no story of how Nahum

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[4] Steinsaltz, 1995; pp. 92.
[5] B.T., Tractate Ta'anit 21a.
[6] Steinsaltz, 1995; pp. 92-93.

rested in a rickety house and had his disciples remove him. Second, Nahum does not relate the story of how his affliction happened to his students, but instead the story is narrated by the Talmudic voice. Third, Nahum fails to help a poor man, but not by failing to dismount from his donkey quickly enough. Instead, he completely leaves the poor man and promises to come back to help him after delivering a parcel. After delivering his parcel and returning, Nahum finds that he is too late, that the poor man has died, and he calls for his afflictions. The last difference is that only Rabbi Aqiva (not Nahum's disciples) arrives and sees Nahum in his dire state. When Rabbi Aqiva states, as do Nahum's students in the version of the Babylonian Talmud, "woe is me that I see you in such condition," Nahum answers here "woe is me that I do not see you in such condition!" In response to this, Rabbi Aqiva asks "Why do you curse me?" Nahum's final answer, the end of the story in the Jerusalem Talmud, is "*why do you rebel against suffering?*"[7]

Nahum's story is relevant to this study for a number of reasons. The most obvious, of course, is that Nahum does not use any manner of pain elimination. While Nahum did not have access to the same sort of pain-relieving drugs that a modern patient does, there still existed certain pain killers which he could have used: for instance, alcohol. A reader must also note two more elements of the story relevant to the current discussion: first, that Nahum *does* experience significant pain. This helps to build a case of Nahum as a paradigm: his experience is a model for those who experience pain, any amount of pain. A second important point of the story is that Nahum's disciples did preserve his life. By preventing ants from crawling into his wounds, Nahum's disciples show that their choice to not dull pain probably was not due to a complete ignorance of health care. Further, Nahum is a prime candidate for study because he embraces his

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[7] J.T., Tractate Sheqalim 5:4; Neusner translation, 1991; pp. 112.

pain, as unpleasant as it may be. Nahum teaches that pain, when approached with a proper mindset, is a potential religious experience.

In their attempt to better understand this story, the rabbis throughout the ages interpreted it in two different ways. The first way was as a call to perform acts of tzedakah without hesitation. This line of reasoning is demonstrated in the Menorat Hamaor and the Shulchan Aruch.

The second way which the rabbis interpreted this story was as a coming-to-grips with pain and suffering in life. The rabbis typically viewed Nahum's story in a talionic way. According to them, he calls for his afflictions for the sake of atonement. The way in which the rabbis see Nahum's choice contains a strong message about how pain can be a positive element in a person's life.

In Nahum's response to his disciples, one can see that his suffering contains meaning for those other than himself too. In his response to his disciples in the Babylonian Talmud's version, for instance, one can see that Nahum is interested in educating them. In this version, accepting suffering is important as a way of teaching the realities of the human condition to others. The Jerusalem Talmud's version teaches that suffering is not always limited to the sufferer, Nahum. When Rabbi Aqiva makes the complaint that he must see his master suffer, Nahum laments that Aqiva would rebel against suffering.

The form of the punishments which Nahum receives, in both stories, helps explain how in the rabbinic mindset pain elimination would have been undesirable. Nahum's punishment follows the principle *midah k'neged midah*. Both versions of the story are within a set of teachings elucidating Mishnaic discussions of this principle. Nahum's story helps a reader to better understand how the Rabbis conceptualized *midah k'neged midah* saw pain as an integral

part of it. Pain was to be accepted as a natural part of life, as a fitting way to atone for sins, and as a way to gain merit in the world to come.

One last feature of Nahum Ish Gamzu's character worth discussing (in the Babylonian Talmud's version of the tale) is the extreme degree to which he was considered righteous. The part of the story which describes that a building would not fall on him is quite important. The attainment of a level of righteousness so extreme that a building would not fall on one demonstrates an extraordinary degree of piety. Nahum is a paradigm of Right action which one should strive to emulate.

Rabbinic commentators note the importance of accepting certain aspects of one's situation as they are (such as pain) and not fighting against divine will. *Sefer Chasidim* discusses Nahum's situation. In it, his situation is interpreted as a lesson about accepting all aspects of life with faith: it is argued that Nahum is attempting to take an innately challenging human experience, pain, and accept that there is divine purpose behind it.[8]

Sefer Orchot Tzaddikim delves further into this concept. It argues that a person could be made happy by receiving good things all of the time, but that Judaism does not consider happiness by itself of value to humanity. Instead, *Sefer Orchot Tzaddikim* reasons that by having true faith in God, a person can be content with all that he receives in life: both the "good" and "bad." It suggests that a person can thusly receive a reward both in the current world and in the world to come.[9]

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[8] Sefer Chasidim, *siman* 1,114.
[9] Sefer Orchot Tzaddikim, Gate 9: The Gate of Happiness.

The main challenge present inherent to discussing the value of pain is the issue of framing quality of life and pain relative to one another. The discussed Jewish perspectives suggest that a balanced life may involve *both* joy and suffering.

The current paper is not meant to argue that the rabbinic, talionic view of pain is necessarily relevant to modern health care. In fact, this model may be of limited value to many Jews. The sources discussed, however, demonstrate an extensive history of Jewish thought which understands the experience of pain through a spiritual lens. This avenue of scholarship has been concerned with understanding how pain is connected to a person's experience of that which is holy, and therefore omits discussion of how to eliminate pain. These Jewish teachings have merit in the modern day discussion of pain management.

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