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Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by

Nancy Esther Wechsler

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

Rabbinic Attitudes toward Healing

This thesis involves the collection and close analysis of much of the extensive aggadic/midrashic material concerning the process of healing. Though some material may have been overlooked, the author has succeeded in amassing a sizable collection of material by using the Hebrew root and tracing it through its usages in the Bible. After studying the multitude of biblical texts with this root, she concentrated on thirty verses which involved extraordinary healing events, such as the curing of leprosy and the granting of fertility to barren women.

After studying these texts closely, with an eye toward gaining a handle on the nature of illness and punishment from the biblical writer's perspective as well as on specific healing techniques, the author then attempted to gather the pertinent rabbinic texts by utilizing the available verse indices and thematic anthologies. As she gathered the rabbinic material, she began to realize that there was a proliferation of healing legends preserved in midrashic literature which most probably were the result of the rabbis' response to the suffering and anguish of their constituencies. The irony of course is that most modern Jews do not even realize that these texts exist. In analyzing the rabbinic traditions on healing, the author noted several key themes which were continually present, including the relationship between sin and illness, the tension between God as healer and the wisdom of doctors, and the healing power of prayer. The challenge of course is how to translate such notions into modern parlance.

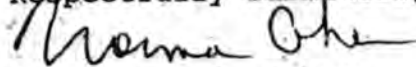
After locating and analyzing the extensive body of rabbinic texts on the nature of healing, she divided them up into ten substantive thematic chapters, preceded by a short Introduction, which deals in the main with methodology, and followed by a Conclusion and Bibliography. Chapter One deals with healing in the Bible and focusses on the sense of illness as divine punishment. This is followed by a discussion of repentance as the cure to illness. Healing is seen as coming mainly from God, though a few human remedies are mentioned. Chapter Two focusses on the rabbis' belief that there is a purpose to illness and suffering, while Chapter Three deals with the relationship between illness and sin, and repentance and healing. In Chapter

Four, the author reflects on the tension between God as the ultimate source of healing and the activity of human healers. Since God has the power to heal, Chapter Five then concerns itself with the potential of prayer and the forms that petitions for healing should take. Chapter Six deals with the observance of two specific mitzvot which carry the power to provide healing in themselves - visiting the sick and hospitality to the stranger. In the next chapter, the author touches on the work of miraculous healers in the Bible, concentrating on Moses, Elijah, Elisha and Hezekiah, while Chapter Eight delves into human cures either sanctioned or prohibited by the tradition. Chapter Nine then turns to the metaphor of light and its healing power, and links the discussion of healing with the notion of the coming of the messiah. The final chapter, Chapter Ten, involves an analysis of traditions involving the ultimate healing, that of resurrection, and the overcoming of physical demise.

Although it is always very difficult to gain a clear sense of the thrust of a vast collection of midrashic material, the author has handled it in a quite sophisticated and sometimes creative manner. She has distilled it effectively and presented it in a quite clear and meaningful format. The chapter layout takes the reader through the main thematic rubrics related to healing and underscores the basic tensions prevalent in rabbinic literature related to it. It is evident from her research and writing how the rabbis fit the notion of healing into a broader world view, all the time responding to the exigencies of their contemporaries who were in need of solace and hope.

Ms. Wechsler is to be commended for her research and thoughtful analysis. She has demonstrated her ability to analyze closely rabbinic texts, to integrate diverse materials and to express her ideas in a concise and coherent manner. Though at times more might have been done with particular texts, especially if the author felt more secure with their historical background, and it is possible that other texts might not have been included, nevertheless much has been accomplished. The author has gained a fairly good grasp of this subject and has highlighted its essential nature. To be sure, much is left to be done, e.g., to expand the analysis to include mystical and hasidic traditions and to trace non-Jewish influences on the attitudes of the rabbis. Yet, this thesis provides us with an excellent angle by which to view the rabbinic attitude toward healing and to appreciate the importance of the thematic treatment of rabbinic texts.

Respectfully submitted,



Dr. Norman J. Cohen
Dean

April 18, 1990

NJC/ams

RABBINIC ATTITUDES TOWARD HEALING

Nancy Esther Wechsler

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
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To my dear parents,
Bernard and Sylvia Wechsler
for instilling in me the fortitude to grow,
for which I am ever grateful.

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The Talmud says: "Great is teshuva, repentance, for it brings healing to the world" (B.T. Yoma 86a). For several years, this verse has resonated within me, causing me to contemplate its meaning. As a Jew, I was interested by the rabbinic thinking that underscored their claim. Over the course of my studies at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, my curiosity developed in the area of rabbinic attitudes toward those questions that I found most challenging. The traditional word for Jewish Law, halacha, which actually stems from the root "to walk," became a metaphor for "walking" and I became the "walker" on the road of deeper understanding within the tradition.

I have chosen the medium of midrashic literature as my vehicle into the rabbinic attitudes toward healing. Midrash is a homiletical interpretation of Scriptural verse. The primary intent of this literature is to explain the Scriptures homiletically and to popularize them among large numbers of Jews. Rabbinic parables, humor, and discussion characterize this literature. Fortunately, considerable midrashim have been preserved during the centuries, permitting the modern day student glimpses of a world rich with wisdom and faith. The body of this thesis contains midrashim compiled from the Tannaitic period (300-500 c.e.) until the period of the Yalkutim (1200-1500 c.e.). Among the better known midrashic

traditions I examined came from works such as: Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Sifre to Numbers, Talmud, Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, Midrash Rabbah, Pesikta de-Rabbi Kahana, Pesikta Rabbati, Tanhuma and an anthology of midrashim from various sources called Yalkut Shemoni.

The methodology employed in this work originated with the Tanach. With the aid of the Concordance (edited by Even Shoshan), I looked up all the passages which contained the root: Resh, Peh, Aleph, (meaning: 'heal'). From the hundreds of citings found, I selected approximately thirty verses which directly related to extraordinary healing events; such as resurrection, a cure for leprosy, purification of water and fertility granted to previously barren women. At this time, I also made note of statements reflecting faith in a healing God juxtaposed with those tensions leaning toward the endorsement of a physician to heal. In addition to the research aid of the Concordance, I utilized Legends of the Jews by Louis Ginzberg. This resource provided the footnotes necessary for finding primary sources.

When the thirty verses which directly related to healing had been selected, I utilized a verse index, Torah ha-Ketuvah v'ha-Mesorah (Aaron Hyman) which led me to legends of the Talmud and other midrashic compilations. I gathered many references per verse, and began the stage of tracking down footnotes which led me to the primary books and specific passages. Once these midrashic passages had been zeroxed, I

began to analyze them for themes, personalities and Scriptural proof texts.

Once I reached the writing stage of this work, I was conscious of using inclusive language. Though the characters found in the midrashim were generally men, I substituted the words: people or individuals when possible. In terms of language reflected divinity, I employed those names of God which were gender neutral, such as "Holy One, God, Sovereign and Adonai."

Chapter One of this thesis reflects what the Bible says about healing. I define what the Bible meant when it says a person is ill. I then present material which suggests that the Biblical attitude toward illness carries a sense of divine punishment. Following a discussion of themes of illness and punishment, is an analysis of the Biblical antidote which is repentance. I then look at the tension between turning to mortal healers for cure versus unwavering faith in God. Lastly in this chapter, I examine healing techniques implemented by both God and mortals.

Chapter Two brings us into the world of the rabbis. It appears that they believed that there was a meaning to illness and suffering. They felt that illness was a divine method of communicating that something was awry within a person's relationship with God. Though illness is a terrible curse, the rabbis noted that there was merit as well. In many cases, suffering in this world implied reward in the world to come.

Chapter Three deals with a prevalent rabbinic idea that sin is related to illness while repentance is related to healing. Rabbinic literature consistently guides the invalid toward spiritual contemplation. The rabbis do not go so far as to say sick individuals brought the illness upon themselves. However, through repentance, charity and good deeds, there was an opportunity to alter the negative decree.

Chapter Four reflects the tension found within rabbinic literature in regards to God as ultimate authority on healing versus the potential of mortal healers. Frequently, we find the tradition telling us that if people would only direct their intentions toward studying Torah, they would never get sick in the first place. And if they became sick, Torah study would alleviate their pain. Despite this principal leaning toward God and Torah as treatment for the ill, some of the legends reflect an acceptance toward medical doctors.

Chapter Five concerns the potential of prayer. When individuals became sick, the rabbis encouraged that not only should others pray for them, but that the sick should pray for themselves. We find that there are unusual motivating factors why people prayed for one another as well as specified formulas appropriate for petitioning a cure.

Chapter Six reveals the fact that human beings are independent agents in terms of insuring their own future well being. Two mitzvot are highlighted as carrying the potential for recompense: visiting the sick and hospitality. Through

Biblical examples of visiting the sick, the rabbinic tradition elaborates that the essential reason for divine visitation of the sick was for human beings to emulate God. Welcoming the stranger is the second mitzvah lauded as meritorious and holding potential for extraordinary gifts from God.

Chapter Seven delves into the world of miraculous healers. Miraculous healers are those who can pattern their behavior after God's acts. Just as God can perform miracles, such as healing the sick, resurrecting the dead, bringing children to the barren and causing rain to fall, so, too, can Moses, Elijah, Elisha and Hezekiah. In this chapter we explore those parallel traits between God and rare individuals.

Chapter Eight focusses upon two types of cure. There were those cures which gained approval within the rabbinic world, while others were prohibited. In this chapter other rabbinic issues are raised concerning idolatry and forbidden Canaanite rituals.

Chapter Nine reflects upon the healing imagery of light. Light provides protection for the sick as well as symbolizes God's favor. The rabbis address the healing power of sunlight. Lastly we study those midrashim that link light with the coming of the Messiah.

Chapter Ten contemplates rabbinic attitudes toward death and resurrection. In significant ways, the rabbis believed that death could be healing, especially when it removed a person from suffering. Within this material we find a

consistent promise that when resurrection occurs, individual will become completely cured.

In distilling and analyzing the source material upon which I built these chapters, I became acquainted with the vast popular market for healing oriented books. It would seem that the general public has a voracious appetite for literature that addresses a renewal of both body and spirit. However, what I found distressing was a paucity of writings based within the Jewish tradition amongst a plethora of Eastern, "New Age," Christian and Feminist works. My familiarity with midrashim regarding healing, however, has shown me how vital the rabbis perceived this theme.

I am acutely aware that my research raises far more questions than it answers. Of personal interest, I have limited myself to three specific areas. First, there remains the rich though obscure mystical writings within the literature of Hasidut and the Zohar. In light of the current interest in healing, I would like to study this material and thus find an accessible and authentic Jewish voice to offer. Second, I would examine how various religious disciplines relate to the same theme of healing, repentance and prayer. I wonder if there are definitive theological boundaries which define separate religions, or whether there exist universal "truths" upon which there is mutual agreement. Third, I would like to steep myself in the general socio-historical context in which the rabbinic literature was processed. This multi-

cultural study would enable me to assess those non-Jewish influences which may have penetrated the rabbis' world. Similarly, I would investigate with a critical eye all the contemporary literature published in this country on healing, in order to discern the current "spiritual" trend.

Though the rabbis of the early centuries were devoted to the topic of healing, in some ways, I feel like a pioneer. In the recent past, liberal Judaism ceased inquiring into a Jewish response toward illness and recovery, while today questions are beginning to be raised. In discussions with colleagues, as well as congregants, I perceive a tremendous desire to know more about Judaism and healing. In selecting this topic, I have had the great fortune of discovering facets of Judaism that I never knew existed. More than unearthing literary artifacts, I have found the rabbinic attitudes toward healing to be a vibrant spring of inspiration.

♦ CHAPTER ONE:

BIBLICAL EXPRESSIONS OF HEALING

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According to Bible, two of the most firmly related fibers of mortal cloth are sickness with punishment and healing with atonement. No less important, though smaller in number are threads which reflect an interest in human practitioners and healing techniques. Though we will encounter some colorful examples of human therapeutic intervention, the prominent expression in the Bible reflects God as the absolute healer, as it says: "I am Adonai, your healer" (Ex. 15:26). The ancient Israelites acknowledged God's judgement and warning, although the harshness of disease most likely challenged their faith as it does our's today. Ultimately the thrust of the biblical passages suggests that one should accept God's will, for along with the anguish of illness came the promise of healing.

"Behold, happy is the one whom God corrects; therefore do not despise the chastening of the Almighty; for God makes sore, and binds up; God wounds, but God's hands make whole" (Job 5:17-18).

A. DEFINITION OF ILLNESS

The term most frequently cited for illness is choleh, meaning to be diminished or sick. One example of choleh as becoming diminished is seen in the legend of Samson and Delilah. The text tells us that Samson had extraordinary

powers. He was a Nazarite, and as such, never cut his hair. He states: "If I am shaved then my strength will leave me and I will become weak (v'sar mimene ko-achi v'chaliti) and be like any other man" (Judges 16 17:1).¹ Another example of choleh is found in the Second Book of Kings concerning King Yoram who becomes sick from the effect of the wounds he suffers. This verse contains three connecting words: sickness (choleh), healing (rofeh) and wounds (makkot). "And King Yoram went back to be healed is Yizrael of the wounds which the Aramaens had given him at Rama" (II Kings 8:29). Though not always the norm, sickness is also linked to dying in the case of Hezekiah. "In those days, Hezekiah fell mortally ill" (chalah Hizkiyahu lamut) (II Kings 20:1).

When individuals became critically ill, by definition they no longer had their earlier strength. The example of Samson illustrates this altered status most clearly. Another case depicting a waning of status arises when choleh describes those animals no longer fit for sacrifice. "And if you offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And if you offer a lame or sick animal, is not that evil?" (Mal. 1:8). Physically a living creature, human or animal is diminished in some way when touched by something that had become choleh.

In addition to corporeal changes, the Bible illustrates emotional and mental weakness. Love sickness, for example,

¹ See also: Judges 16:7, 11.

characterizes one of the passionate themes in the Song of Songs: "Let me rest among the apple trees; for I am sick with love" (ki cholat ahavah ani) (Song of Songs 2:5).² A case of mental distress utilizes the figures of King Saul and David. Saul says to his servants: "There is none of you that is sorry (sickened) for me or lets me know that my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as at this day" (v'ain choleh mikem alai) (I Sam 22:8).

Co-existing with the legends of illness in the Bible are stories of healing. The term most frequently used for healing is rofeh. Rofeh generally assumes the meaning of becoming whole, restored or pacified. An example of rofeh as restoration is seen in a verse from Jeremiah. God says to Jeremiah: Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, that cannot be made whole again (lo yuchal l'herafeh) (Jer. 19:11). God is the healer in these examples; God is the one who heals wounds: "I will heal you of your wounds" (Jer. 30:17).

In addition to rofeh, we also find other biblical expressions of healing. Shalom and chai are idioms reflecting the health of a person. "Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke, is he alive?" (hashalom avichem ... haodeinu chai) (Gen. 43:27-28) Shalom depicts a sound state of health in an earlier verse in Genesis concerning Jacob, "And he said

² See also Song of Songs 5:8.

to them, "'Is he well?'/And they said, 'He is well'" (hashalom lo v'yomru shalom) (Gen. 29:6).³ We also find shalom when Israel tells Joseph to visit his brothers to find out how they are faring; he says: "Go, I pray you, see whether it be well with your brothers" (re'eh et shalom achicha v'et shalom hatzon) (Gen. 37:14). Chai is found expressing well being, especially when situated in parallel with shalom. "Well-being to you, peace to your house, and peace to all that you have!" (L'chai v'atah shalom uvaitchal shalom v'chol asher l'cha shalom) (I Sam. 25:6).

We have reported about the affect of illness upon human beings or animals, yet there are examples that show other forms of creation that become damaged as well. For instance, the Bible gives us examples of polluted waters that became purified. The land belongs to God we are told, in Lev. 25:25 and we are simply the tenants. In order for a polluted earth to be healed, it takes more than human prowess. In the following example, note the necessity of God's aid in restoring balance to the polluted water: "I have healed these waters; there shall not be thence any more death or barren land. So the waters were healed unto this day" (ripiti lamayim) (II Kings 2:19-22).

Well-being for the individual, animal and earth was believed to be a Divine gift, and along with material

³ See also Ex. 18:7 for well-being and Ps. 38:4 for a description of lack of health (ain shalom).

posterity, was confidently expected by the faithful in Israel. When disease occurred, however, people could only look to God, the Physician of humanity, for healing and recovery. Because sickness was a spiritual matter, in the last analysis, healing could only properly be expected to follow a revival or revitalizing of the relationship between an individual and God.

B. ILLNESS AS PUNISHMENT

A primary thrust of the biblical material concerning illness speaks about Divine retribution. Through the lens of sickness, God's authority is made clear and the sanctions are harsh. In several cases, Divine reprimands are global instead of individual. Examples in which God punishes masses of people are found in Numbers, where God reprimands with a plague. For example we read in Numbers 25:9, "And those that died in the plague were twenty-four thousand." For the sin of complaining against God and Moses for the misery of the wilderness, God punishes with killing serpents: "And God sent venomous serpents among the people and they bit the people and many people of Israel died" (Num. 21:7).

In addition to biting serpents, the Bible reports skin disease as a punishment for ignoring God's command: God will smite you with the pox of Egypt and with emerods and with the scab and with the itch and where of you can not be healed"

(Deut. 28:27). Leprosy⁴ and other skin disfigurements are very commonly regarded in popular lore as punishments for violating taboos or for spreading slander.⁵ A familiar example of the retribution of leprosy is the incident involving Miriam when she slandered against Moses (Num. 12).⁶

In the examples we have studied thus far, God punishes on account of transgressions. While we may not condone the severity of the reprimand, the sin committed was at least noticeable. A great question of injustice arises, however, when the sin is not apparent. An example of this outrage is seen when a baby dies. Why must an innocent child's life be swept away? We discover this situation of infant mortality in the Second Book of Samuel where King David and Bathsheba's son

⁴. David Landy, Culture, Disease and Healing, (Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc.: New York, 1977) pp. 396-400. The present day "Hansen's Disease" and not leprosy is more likely the affliction of our biblical ancestors. It is a chronic communicable disease of the skin, eyes, internal organs, peripheral nerves and mucous membranes. It can produce severe physical handicaps and disfigurements, especially when untreated. Scientific and medical data are adduced to show that leprosy historically has been mistakenly identified with a wide variety of other skin and nerve conditions and that for centuries it has been a general catch-all for any number of deforming illnesses that have afflicted humanity. Psychologically, leprosy patients typically exhibit a sense of total rejection by society and initially even by themselves.

⁵. Theodore H. Gaster, Myth, Legend, and Custom. (Harper and Row Publishers, New York and Evanston, 1969), p. 300.

⁶. Ibid. Gaster writes: "In this case of Miriam's leprosy, there is an added point in the story in as much as the Ethiopian woman was perceived in the tradition as being a Black woman. Moses' sister, in attempting to impose a color ban, is made to demonstrate her own palor in unexpectedly drastic fashion - white scales."

becomes ill and dies. The text tells us that David took Bathsheba for a wife in a highly unethical manner; he had arranged for her husband, Uriah, to be killed in battle. The biblical text concerning David and Bathsheba's child says: "The child that is born to you will surely die" (II Sam 12:14).

King David and Bathsheba's son was clearly not the sinner, and yet his life was taken away. This powerful text teaches that God punishes with painful blows for reasons we cannot always fathom. Another example of God punishing the "innocent" is in Second Chronicles. In this story, God strikes all the inhabitants of Jerusalem because Yehoram had followed the ways of the Kings of Israel and 'made the people unfaithful.' "Behold God will smite your people with a great plague with a disease of the bowels, until your bowels fall out by reason of the sickness day by day" (II Chr. 21: 14-16). In hindsight we might question whether "all" the people were unfaithful. Maybe God could have used a more gentle reprimand. And yet, this is but another instance in which God's decisions are beyond human comprehension.

Whether the punishment struck because of an individual's sin or sin of a ruler (king / parent), sickness was a serious life crisis. The ancient faith of Israel offered only one alternative: prayer. Prayer in these situations meant a confession and an entreaty for healing. There are many cases in the Bible where a person turns to God for mercy, and is

granted forgiveness. We see an illustration of a healing petition in Psalms: "God strengthens him upon the bed of sickness: whenever he is prostrate, You recover him in his illness. I said, God, be gracious to me: heal my soul; for I have sinned against You" (Ps. 41:4-5).

C. HEALING AND REPENTANCE

Our Israelite ancestors attributed health as well as disease to a Divine source. Healing was in the hands of God.⁷ One of the more powerful examples of healing and repentance is the story of King Hezekiah. He was given a death sentence by the prophet Isaiah. Though the Biblical text does not tell us how he sinned, the midrash fills in this gap by telling us that his sin was in not having children.⁸ Despite Isaiah's prophecy of imminent doom, King Hezekiah turned toward the wall and begged God for mercy. God accepted his plea and rewarded him with an extended life, as it says:

At this time Hezekiah fell dangerously ill, and the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came to him and said, 'This is the word of the Lord: Give your last instructions to your household, for you are a dying man and will not recover.' Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and offered this prayer to God: 'O God, remember how I have lived before you, faithful and

⁷. References to healing by God include: Ex. 15:26, Num. 21:6-9, II Kings 20:1-11, Isaiah 53:5, Psalms 23; 30; 103.

⁸. B.T. Berachot 10B.

loyal in your service, always doing what was good in your eyes.' And he cried bitterly. But before Isaiah had left the citadel, the word of God came to him saying: Go back and say to Hezekiah, the prince of my people: 'This is the word of the Lord, the God of your father David. I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you..' (II Kings 20:1-6).

The theme of people humbling themselves before God and receiving a miraculous recovery is characteristic of the Biblical world view. A second example of King Hezekiah's ability to entreat God's favor is found in another passage where he pleads with God to pardon the people of Israel for an incorrect ritual concerning the Paschal Lamb. "And God hearkened to Hezekiah and healed the people" (II Chr. 30:20). King Hezekiah was a successful advocate for achieving God's favor. Another defender of the Israelites was the prophet Hosea. Hosea petitioned the people to return to God in order to be healed: "Come, let us return to God, for God has torn and God will heal us; God has smitten and God will bind us up. After two days, God will revive us" (Hosea 6 1-2).

Judging from the language used in this verse, we might presume that this particular healing is for physical ailments only. We find in other biblical texts, however, that God's healing concerns the spirit as well. Note how these two example in Psalms incorporate the non-physical: "I said, God, be gracious to me; heal my soul (refa'ah nafshi): for I have sinned against You" (Ps. 41:5). "O bring me out of my

distress. Look upon my affliction and my pain and forgive all my sins. Consider my enemies for they are many; and they hate me with a cruel hatred. Watch over my soul (shamrah naf-shi) and deliver me" (Ps.25:17-20).

Healing of spirit and healing of body; both are under the governance of God. Any other route toward recovery was deemed idolatrous or of no avail. Despite the ordinance, "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your fellow" (Lev. 19:15) or even "And you shall restore it to him" (Deut. 22:2), there was a belief that human intervention was an interference in the delicate design of providence. Though we might debate that, "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) implied human effort toward saving the neighbor's life, a literal rendering of the Biblical tradition suggests surrendering exclusively to God.

D. MORTAL HEALERS

To post-exilic Judaism, recourse to human aid was also precluded on the ground that such a procedure would usurp Divine prerogative. A patient who sought a doctor, for example, was showing a lack of faith in God. An example of this attitude is found among the Karaites.⁹ Though certainly

⁹. Philip Birnbaum, Encyclopedia Of Jewish Concepts (Hebrew Publishing Company: New York, 1964), p.546 The Karaite sect was founded by Anan ben David in the middle of the eighth century. Originally they were known as Ananites from the name of their founder, Anan of Baghdad, Babylonia. The Karaites

a post-Biblical group, their doctrine was founded on a most literal interpretation of Torah. The Karaites rejected all forms of human healing and relied entirely upon prayer. Consistent with their fundamentalist orientation, they based their position upon a literal reading of Ex. 15:26: "I will put none of the diseases upon you which I have put upon the Egyptians, for I am God, your physician." The Karaites taught that God alone should be sought for healing.

Despite the dominant attitude that God was the exclusive healer, there are a few remarkable verses that allude to the fact that medical intervention took place in Ancient Israel. The warrant to heal can be adduced from the following passage concerning financial liability:

"And if people quarrel with one another, and one smites the other with a stone or with the fist and he does not die, but has to stay in bed..he must pay the loss entailed by absence from work and he shall cause him to be thoroughly healed" (Ex. 21:19-20).

Since detailed reference is made to liability for medical expenses, it follows that liability for such expenses implies biblical permission to seek the ministration of a practitioner

struggled with the Rabbanites over four centuries and were excluded by choice from mainstream Judaism. They rejected talmudic-traditional authority and based themselves on individual interpretation of the Biblical teachings. Karaism flourished for some time in the Arabic countries. Once Israel became a state, thousands of Karaites left Egypt and settled in Israel.

of the healing arts.¹⁰

Similar to the notion of "causing him to be thoroughly healed," there were other acts that only a human technician could perform. An example of pertinent human involvement concerned burial. At the conclusion of Genesis, Joseph yearns to be buried in the place of his ancestors. In order to transport his father out of Egypt, he wants to preserve the body: "And Joseph commanded his servants, the physicians (harofim), to embalm his father; and the physicians embalmed Israel" (Gen. 50:2).¹¹

A descriptive story of unsuccessful medical procedure concerns King Asa. "And Asa in the thirty ninth year of his reign was diseased in his feet, until his disease became severe; yet in his disease he did not seek God, but the physicians (ki barofim) (II Chr. 16:12). The following verse informs how the doctors were not able to substantially extend his life: "And Asa slept with his ancestors and died in the forty first year of his reign" (II Chr. 16:13).

¹⁰. David Bleich, Judaism and Healing, (KTAV Publishing House, Inc.: New York, 1981), p.2

¹¹. Isaac Klein, Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, (The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, 1979), pp. 276. While there are examples of embalming in the Bible, the later authorities forbade the practice because it infringes on honoring the dead and the preservation of the body. In extreme cases, when burial must be detained, the only method permitted in such cases is one that leaves the body intact (Gesher Hahayyim 1:73).

The Biblical passages tell us clearly that seeking a mortal physician was the fallacious path to healing. This opinion is clearly expressed in Job when he says: "Yet I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to reason with God. But you are forgers of lies, you are all physicians of no value" (rofi elil kulam) (Job 13:3-4). This verse suggests that he was speaking to Zofar, the Na'amite (Job 11:1-2), yet we might interpret his statement as an accusation against the broader audience of therapeutic healers.

Pursuing a cure from a medicine man was a poor choice option for the Ancient Israelite. In most cases, attempted healing with medicine met with failure. There was a class of people, however, who were healers and they were accepted as such. These legitimate "healers" were the priestly class (kohanim). Their position in the purification of leprosy, for example, was critically important to the Israelites. See in the following passage the integral role that the priests played:

"And God spoke to Moses saying: 'This shall be the Torah of the one stricken with leprosy on the day of his cleansing. He shall be brought to the priest and the priest shall go out of the camp. He shall look and if the plague of leprosy is healed, then he will command to take for him those things that are to be cleansed. These items are: two birds alive and clean, cedar wood, scarlet, and hyssop. The priest shall command that one of the birds be killed in an earthen vessel over running water and he shall sprinkle upon him the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water seven times...' (Lev. 14:1-8).

Other passages in this portion delve into great detail as to the manner the priest placed oil on the left hand and the top of the right ear of the leper (Lev. 14:14). We could argue that the priest was serving as a ritual functionary and not a therapeutic one. The power, however, of ritual to the Hebrews may have been expressly therapeutic.

Exceptional and rare are Biblical examples where individuals receive medical treatment. The primary exceptions to this rule were Kings Asa and the embalming of Jacob. Despite the ban on human dependency for cure, certain types of remedies were acceptable. They include substances such as music, incense, and mineral baths, which even today are considered soothing.

E. HEALING TECHNIQUES

Ritual acts to rid an individual from disease appear with some frequency in the Bible. The use of water, for example, plays a significant role in biblical healing.¹² The potency of the River Jordan was known in Ancient Israel for its medicinal value.¹³ One of the early healing stories associated with the

¹². For other sources regarding "water imagery," see Num. 20:7-8 and Num. 21:17.

¹³. To this day, many Christians find meaning in the Jordan's water for the ceremony of Baptism.

River Jordan concerns Na'aman, captain of the host of the King of Aram. Na'aman was stricken with leprosy and sought a cure from Elisha.

To Na'aman's surprise, Elisha sent a messenger to him with the following advice, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh will be restored to you, and you shall be clean" (II Kings 5:10). This prescription angered Na'aman who was expecting a miraculous healing rather than having to actually participate. In spite of his resistance to treatment, he washed in the waters, as it says: "Then he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God, and his flesh was restored of a little child and he was clean" (II Kings 5:14). ¹⁴

Another healing liquid mentioned in the Bible is an aid known as the Balm of Gilead. Gilead was a territory between the Arnon and the Jabbok River as well as the entire Jordan land once occupied by Israel.¹⁵ We note that this balm is

¹⁴. Theodore H. Gaster, Myth, Legend, and Custom, p. 498. The term Man of God, ish Elohim does not refer, as in modern speech, to piety but characterizes people subject to suprasensuous experiences. It is virtually the equivalent of shaman. In terms of Elisha, "man of God" is applied in connection with quasi-magical performances of his past. In precisely the same way, the Hittites used the expression, "man of the gods" to denote one who was crazed or who possessed the mantic powers of a sooth-sayer. The Hebrew expression, ish Elohim does not really mean "man of God," with a capital "G," but simply one possessed by the supernatural. Other "men of God" are Elijah, Moses, and Samuel.

¹⁵. Brown, Driver, Briggs, Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1951) "Gilad" p.166.

cited twice in the Bible: "Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" (Jer. 8:22). In the second passage, the biblical author's use of Balm of Gilead is not a positive one: "Go up to Gilead, and take balm, you, unmarried woman, daughter of Egypt; in vain you use many medicines; for you will not be healed" (Jer. 46:11).

In addition to the River Jordan and the Balm of Gilead, other healing cures were employed such as incense and sweet ointments. Though they were not specifically intended for "healing," they are depicted as successful. A Biblical story exemplifying the curative power of ointments concerns Ruth, the Moabite. Ruth heeds her mother-in-law Naomi and applies some variety of ointment as she prepares to meet Boaz in the threshing room. Naomi advises her saying: "Wash yourself and anoint yourself and put your raiment upon you and go down to the threshing floor" (Ruth 3:3). Another Biblical heroine, Esther, found positive results in anointing herself with oils of myrrh and other sweet odors before being chosen by the King: "Now when every girl's turn was come to go in to king Ahashverosh, after she had been twelve months under the regulations for the women, for so were the days of the anointing, namely, six months with oil .." (Esther 2:12-13). In retrospect, we note that ointments of this type may have also served as fumigants and deodorants for the Ancient Hebrews.

God, as well as human suitors, appreciated pleasant odors. The primary function of incense was to give honor to God in the worship in the sanctuary, as it says: "God said to Moses, take sweet spices, storax ... of each shall there be a like weight and you shall make it a perfume ... and bring it before the Testimony in the Tent of Meeting, where I will meet with you" (Ex.30:34-36).

In contrast to the etherēal odors for God or person is a tangible healing device used in the Second Book of Kings. In this Biblical portion we find that the staff of a holy person contains healing powers. Elisha had been befriended by the Shunamite woman and now her son has died. In her grief, she looks for Elisha, the man of God, to heal him. In this legend, Elisha tells his servant Gehazi the following instructions concerning the medicinal staff: "Then he said to Gehazi, 'Gird your loins and take my staff in your hand, and go your way: if you meet any man, greet him not and if any greet you, answer him not, and lay my staff upon the face of the child'" (II Kings 4:29). The next verse of the Elisha story proves that it was not the staff that was therapeutic, but the man. Gehazi was not successful in the healing of the child. Only later when Elisha prayed and laid his body upon the child, did life return to him (II Kings 4:34).

It takes a special person to heal. The tools of the trade, be they balms, ointments, or staff, are worthless without the correct practitioner. Young David was an example

of the "right" healer with the "right" method. One of the more sensuous ancient remedies of the Bible is the music he played. The colloquialism of modern times says that 'music soothes the savage beast.' Perhaps this saying stemmed from the ancient legend in the First Book of Samuel. We discover "melodious" healing when King Saul was stricken with periods of severe mental distress. The king would call upon David to calm him through music, as it says: "And it came to pass, when the spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took a lyre and played with his hand; so that Saul was refreshed and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him" (I Sam. 16:23).

In proportion to the passages showing God as sole healer, the citings of human remedies are few. By restricting the amount of accessible therapies, the Biblical authors may have tried to teach a lesson of fidelity to the Ancient Israelite people. At a period in which there was great diversity of god worship, they wanted the Hebrews to worship the one God, Adonai. Nothing would be permitted to detract from God's authority. Within the rabbinic tradition, however, we will see how this Biblical premise evolved. At the post-biblical stage, Judaism learned to justify human participation in the essentially Divine activity of healing.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE MEANING OF ILLNESS

The rabbinic attitude toward healing is intrinsically related to their conceptualization of the illness which they were attempting to ameliorate. They struggled with the reality that even "good" people suffered. The confrontation of faith in a compassionate God with the persistence of "irrational" suffering fueled the search for resolution. The midrashic literature responded to the misery inflicted upon both old and young, righteous and apathetic, by attempting to answer demanding theological questions.

In this chapter we examine some of these perplexing issues concerning illness. In the ensuing sections, we deal with the purpose of illness, those who suffer, and the merits of illness.

A. PURPOSE OF ILLNESS

One of the first questions asked by the rabbis revealed a haunting question: "What is the purpose of illness?" What reason exists for pain, suffering and premature death? One way the rabbis answered this question was by sketching a midrashic portrait of the first "patient." Some of these portraits claimed Abraham as the first sick person, while others cited Isaac, Jacob or King Hezekiah. The common element within healing legends is the search for meaning within the painful

realization of the mortality of life. It says, for example in the Talmud:

Until Abraham, there was no old age; whoever wished to speak to Abraham would speak to Isaac and the reverse.¹⁶ Thereupon he prayed and old age came into existence, as it is written, "And Abraham was old and well-stricken in age" (Gen. 24:1). Until Jacob there was no illness. Then Jacob came and prayed and illness came into being, as it is written, "And one told Joseph, Behold, your father is sick" (Gen. 48:1). Until Elisha, no sick man ever recovered, but Elijah came and prayed and he recovered, for it is written, "Now Elisha was fallen sick of his sickness whereof he died" (II King 13:14), thus proving that he had been sick on previous occasions too, [but had recovered]."

Notice in this midrash, the effort the author extends to providing a reason for old age and then illness. Abraham received old age due to seniority and for the sake of his honor. Jacob's request for sickness remains undeveloped in this early legend. The commentary suggests that before Jacob, one lived his or her allotted years in full health and then died suddenly. Further, states the midrash, Elisha warranted the first recovery with the aid of Elijah's prayer. All these midrashic characters, Abraham, Jacob, Elisha, and Elijah, utilize prayer as the instrument to effect God's mercy.

¹⁶. The commentary explains that prior to old age, Abraham and Isaac looked exactly alike.

¹⁷. B.T. Baba Mezia 87a. See also B.T. Sanhedrin 104a and Sanhedrin 107b.

Some centuries later, the same legend regarding the "first" person to experience old age, illness and recovery surfaces with some differences. We note in the similar passage that follows, that patriarch Isaac in place of Abraham introduce a new concept: suffering (visurim). The rabbis of the later pieces employ the three patriarchs in contrast to the earlier one which mentions only Abraham and Jacob. Other variations suggests that King Hezekiah and not Elisha merit the first recovery from illness.

"And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old." R. Judah b. Simon said: 'Abraham requested [the appearance of old age, pleading before God: 'Sovereign of the Universe! When a man and his son enter a town, none know whom to honor! But if You will crown the father with the appearance of old age, one will know whom to honor.' Said the Holy One to him: 'As you live, you have asked well, and it will commence with you.' Thus from the beginning of the Book until here old age is not mentioned, but when Abraham arose the appearance of old age was granted to him: "And Abraham was old, well stricken in age" (Gen. 24:1).

Isaac demanded suffering, pleading thus: 'Sovereign of the Universe! When a man dies without previous suffering, the Attribute of Judgement is stretched out against him; but if You would cause him to suffer, the Attribute of Judgement would not be stretched out against him. The Holy One said to him: 'By your life, you have asked well, and I will commence with you.' Thus suffering is not mentioned from the beginning of the Book until here: "And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim."

Jacob demanded illness, saying to God: 'Sovereign of the Universe! A man dies without previous illness and does not settle his affairs with his children; but if he were ill two or three days, he would settle his affairs with his children.' The Holy One said to him: 'By your life, you have asked well and it will commence with you.' Hence, "And one said to Joseph: Behold your father is sick" (Gen. 48:1).

R. Levi said: 'Thus Abraham introduced old age, Isaac suffering, and Jacob illness. Hezekiah introduced repeated sickness. Said he to God: 'You have kept him in good health until the day of his death; but if a man falls sick and recovers, falls sick and recovers, he will fully repent.' The Holy One said to him: 'By your life! You have asked well, and with you I will commence.' Thus it is written, "The writing of Hezekiah King of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness" Isa. 38:9). R. Samuel b. Nahman said: This intimates that between one sickness and another he had an illness more severe than both.¹⁸

In the example mentioned above, repentance emerges as an important theme. King Hezekiah's argument with God proposes that God keeps people in good health until they die, but if God were to grant recovery, human beings would correlate recovery with repentance.

In the Bible, there are situations, however, when a person sins and receives no punishment. The rabbis often dealt with such a discrepancy by saying that person's 'unusual' action was actually part of God's mysterious plan. The "sinner" was virtually forced to act in this way, they might say, in order to fulfill a pre-destined purpose. Rabbinic rationalizing of this sort alleviated the "sinner's" guilt, and raised him or her to an elevated status. We find a rabbinic argument of this type in the Biblical twist of fate when Isaac blesses his son Jacob with the blessing traditionally saved for the eldest (i.e. Esau). Neither

¹⁸. Genesis Rabbah 45:9.

Rebecca, Isaac's wife nor even Jacob absorb the confusion of the first born blessing, rather this act was besheret, destined to be:

R. Hanina b. Papa commenced thus: "Many things have you done, God, even your wondrous works and Your thoughts toward us" (Ps. 40:6). Said R. Hanina: 'All the works and thoughts which You have wrought have been toward us, for our sake. Thus, why did Isaac's eyes grow dim? So that Jacob might come and receive the blessings. Hence, "And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old etc".¹⁹

From this illustration we infer that even "bad" things such as blindness, in the case of Isaac, have a greater purpose in the unfolding of history. Only in hindsight, however, can people begin to acknowledge God's divine plan.

God's plan encompasses both the monumental as well as the seemingly mundane. A midrash, Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer describes the first sick person as well as the first recovery. It includes a delightful anecdote of the first sneeze and how significant sneezing became in the life of humanity. See, for example, the following legend concerning the first illness:

The fourth wonder (was): From the day when the heavens and the earth were created, no man was ill, (who) sneezed and lived, but in every place where he happened to be, whether on the way or in the market, (when he) sneezed, his soul went out through his nostrils: until our father Jacob came and requested mercy and he said before the Holy One; 'Sovereign of all the worlds! Do not take my soul

¹⁹. Genesis Rabbah 45.8.

from me until I have charged my sons and my household.' And God was entreated of him, as it is said "And it came to pass after these things, that one said to Joseph, "Behold your father is sick" (Gen.48:1).

All the kings of the earth heard (thereof) and they wondered because there had been no one like him from the days when the heavens and earth had been created. Therefore a person is duty bound to say to his fellow: Life! (chayyim) when the latter sneezes, for the death of the world was changed into light, as it is said, "His sneezings flash forth light" (Job 41:18).²⁰

The second theme pertaining to illness within the same compilation, Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, describes recovery. Note that in this midrash, like Genesis Rabbah, the first recovery introduces King Hezekiah. We will see in this compilation greater detail, including a dialogue between the king and God.

The seventh wonder (was): From the day when the heavens and earth had been created there had never been a sick man who had recovered from his sickness, until Hezekiah, king of Judah, came and fell sick and (yet) he recovered, as it is said: "The writings of Hezekiah, king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness" (Isa. 38:9). He began to pray before the Holy One, saying: 'Sovereign of all worlds! "Now, O Lord, remember, I beseech you with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in your sight" (II Kings 2:8); and God was entreated of him, as it is said, "Behold, I will add unto your days fifteen years" (Isa. 38:5). Hezekiah said before the Holy One: 'Sovereign of all worlds! Give me a sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up unto the house of the Lord?" (II Kings 22:8)

God answered him: 'Ahaz your father compelled the constellations, and he bowed down to the sun, and the sun fled before him and went down in the west ten steps. If you want, it shall go down ten steps, or it shall ascend ten steps.' Hezekiah spoke before

²⁰ Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chap. 52.

the Holy One: 'Sovereign of all worlds! Nay, but those ten steps which it has already gone down, let it retrace and stand, as it is said, "Nay, but let the shadow return backward ten steps" (II Kings 20:10). And God was entreated of him, as it is said, "Behold, I will cause the shadow on the steps, which is gone down on the dial of Ahaz with the sun, to return backwards ten steps" (Isa. 38:8).²¹

The discussion between Hezekiah and God in the above midrash gives us insight into the rabbis' attitude about prayer and repentance. The author of this compilation highlighted Hezekiah's ability to reason with God. The king's fate could be directed either way; a shortened or lengthened life. Despite his evil father, Ahaz, God was merciful with Hezekiah and to his own merit.

In contrast to God's mercy with Hezekiah, there are midrashim that portray God as punishing. When God becomes angry with the sins of humanity, explains the midrash, severe retribution ensues. The portrait of a punishing God is emphasized through the following argument; had God only taught the generation of Noah about suffering, they never would have been sinned! Because God excluded them from pain, they behaved naively and consequently, sinned. Their sinning compelled God to destroy the world! The text insinuates that human beings require instruction in order to avoid transgression. The lesson which best motivates people to proper behavior is suffering. The lesson of suffering indicates that once people

²¹. Ibid.

experience pain, they will repent.

Beneath the text of the midrash lies the question: 'How can future destruction be avoided?' A solution to this question is raised by Abraham. He suggests that when God teaches the world the lesson of pain, future trauma will be prevented.

Abraham says to God: 'If you had made known to the generation of the flood what pain is, they never would have rebelled against you'. Whereupon, God replied, 'You will be the first to experience suffering.' And Isaac became very ill at his birth. To celebrate his son's recovery from the first illness, Abraham made a great feast (Gen. 21:8).²²

God informs Abraham that pain will begin with him and yet the next verse discusses the illness of his son, Isaac! The rabbis indicate that there are more facets to pain than physical discomfort for that individual. We experience pain through empathy with loved ones. When Isaac became ill, this was genuine "suffering" inflicted by God upon Abraham. Parents watching a child suffer is far greater agony than their own physical pain.

A different explanation about the Isaac's illness suggests that Isaac's first sickness was actually his circumcision, and then Abraham celebrated his child's endurance of this procedure with a feast. Pursuing the idea

²². Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Toldot. 20 on Genesis 9:18ff.

that the pain was entirely Isaac's suffering and not Abrahams', we realize that this pain was not a punishment per se, but rather part of his initiation into Jewish life. We will see in the next section about suffering that pain can be broadly interpreted and how agony and righteousness become interwoven themes.

B. WHO MUST SUFFER?

The contemporary colloquialism "accentuate the positive" may have found its source in the earliest writings of rabbinic literature. The rabbis consistently struggled to find something positive; something worthwhile about the suffering of humanity. They searched to understand how a compassionate God could inflict anguish upon pious individuals. One way of comprehending the "injustice" of suffering was to say that God tested only the most righteous of people. By arguing that affliction meant that God found a person more worthy than others, suffering could be perceived as a holy burden. We see in the following midrash an example of the righteous suffering:

"My beloved is unto me as a bag of myrrh" (Song of Songs 1:13). What is a bag of myrrh? R. Azariah in the name of R. Judah applied the verse to our father, Abraham. Just as myrrh is the most excellent of spices, so Abraham was the chief of all righteous men. Just as myrrh gives off its perfume only when brought near the fire, so the worth of Abraham was not known till he was cast into the fiery furnace. Just as when anyone gathers myrrh (mor) his hands

smart, so Abraham afflicted (memarer) himself and castigated himself.²³

Righteousness, say the rabbis, is likened to the increased scent of myrrh. When heated, the potency of perfume is released. When suffering is increased for people, then their true strength, the essence of their being is exposed. Again we detect the theme of God increasing the pain for the most righteous in a later compilation, Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer. In this example, Abraham's test is clearly articulated, telling us that his ordeal was circumcision.

Rabban Gamaliel, the son of R. Judah the Prince, said: 'When our father Abraham was circumcised, on the third day he was very sore, in order to test him. What did the Holy One do? God pierced one hole in the midst of Gehinnom and made the day hot, like the day of the wicked. Abraham went forth and sat down at the entrance of the tent in the cool of the day, as it is said, "And he sat at the tent door (in the heat of the day)" (Gen. 18:1).

The Holy One said to the ministering angel: 'Come let us descend and visit the sick, for the virtue of visiting the sick is great before Me. The Holy One and the angels descended to visit our father Abraham, as it is said, "And the Lord appeared unto him" (ibid.). The Holy One said to the ministering angels: 'Come and see the power of circumcision. Before Abraham was circumcised he fell on his face (before Me) and afterwards I spoke to him, as it is said, "And Abraham fell upon his face" (Gen. 17:17). Now that he is circumcised he sits and I stand. Whence do we know that the Holy One was standing? Because it is said, "And he looked and lo three men stood over against him" (Gen.

²³: Song of Songs Rabbah 1.13.

18:2).²⁴

Several new themes are introduced in this midrash that we have not observed earlier. In this work, we are told that not only was righteous Abraham tested with the discomfort of circumcision, but God made it worse by causing the day to be very hot. Secondly, we are informed about the mitzvah, the religious obligation, to visit the sick. The subject of bikkur cholim, visiting the sick, is a dominant theme in the midrashic literature regarding healing. Third, it states that whereas before circumcision, Abraham would fall upon his face when speaking with God, now he sits. There is a definite change of posture from prostrate to vertical sitting. In the same way, after enduring the procedure, Abraham has earned an elevated status. The midrash may be suggesting that when individuals survive an ordeal and retain a sensitivity to others (as Abraham did in welcoming the strangers) then they are rewarded with a greater sense of confidence when visited by God.

From these two midrashim concerning the relationship between righteousness and pain, we begin to appreciate God's involvement with human suffering. We might go further to place a value upon the manner in which people experience their anguish. Agony should be more than merely tolerated, say the

²⁴. Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chap. 29.

rabbis; it should be experienced as an offering to God. In the following legend we see that the rabbinic attitude goes so far as to praise suffering:

Beloved are sufferings, for they appease like offerings. Yeah, they are more beloved than offerings, for guilt and sin offerings atone only for the particular sin for which they are brought in each case, but sufferings atone for all sins, as it says: "The Lord has chastened me sore, but has not given me over unto death" (Ps. 118:18).²⁵

God taxes the best human beings with obstacles. A person's ability to retain faith and love of God even while experiencing trauma is a gift to God. An earlier midrash echoes this theme when it says: "This means that the rod of God lights only upon people whose hearts are pliant like lilies."²⁶

The theme of God choosing the most pious to test is a frequent motif in midrashic literature on suffering. In addition, we observe the scrutiny placed upon individuals' attitude toward pain. Realistically the rabbis knew, however, that retention of faith in the midst of crisis was not easily achieved. Even the most learned of scholars struggled with this lofty goal. Surely, rabbinic lessons regarding suffering were easier taught than experienced. In the following example, we observe how the two rabbis reveal their human-ness when

²⁵. Midrash Psalms 118:8.

²⁶. Song of Songs Rabbah II 16,2.

encountering their own illnesses. We see that what comforted one rabbi does not suffice for the other.

"That feeds among the lilies" (Song of Songs 2:16). R. Johanan had the misfortune to suffer from gallstones for three and a half years. Once R. Hanina went to visit him. He said to him: 'How do you feel?' He said to him: 'Don't speak so, but say, "The faithful God" (El Me-lech N-e-man).' When the pain was very great, he used to say, 'Faithful God' and when the pain was greater than he could bear, R. Hanina used to go to him and utter an incantation which gave him relief.

Subsequently R. Hanina fell ill, and R. Johanan went to see him. He said to him. 'How do you feel?' He replied " 'How grievous are my sufferings!' He said to him: 'But surely the reward for them is also great!' He replied, "I want neither them nor their reward.' He said to him: 'Why do you not utter that incantation which you pronounced over me and which gave me relief?' He replied " 'When I was out of trouble, I could be a surety for others, but now that I am myself in trouble do I not require another to be a surety for me?' He said to him: It is written, "That feeds among the lilies" (ibid.). This means that the rod of the Holy One lights only upon people whose hearts are pliant like lilies.

R. Eliezer said: 'It is like a man who had two cows, one strong and the other weak. Which one does he work hard; is it not the strong one? So the Holy One does not try the wicked, because they could not stand the trial, as it says, "But the wicked are like the troubled sea (Isa. 57:20). "Whom then does God try? God tries the righteous" (Ps. 11:5), and also, "And it came to pass after these things, that God did prove Abraham (Gen. 22:1).'²⁷

In this legend we notice several subjects concerning possible reward for suffering, an incantation for comfort and straightforward complaining, kvetching, between friends. The

²⁷. Ibid.

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most prevalent theme in the midrashim mentioned above, however, states that the righteous suffer because God chose them. Though pain scars the body, on a spiritual level, it holds the potential for healing the soul. In the ensuing section, we will examine the countless merits of illness.

C. MERITS OF ILLNESS

One of the rabbinic responses as to why God makes people suffer was that sickness elevated the person to a higher spiritual plane. According to the rabbis, it was unseemly to say that God was unjust, as well as overly simplistic to state that illness was evil. In some cases, as we have noted, illness was positive and suffering good. Note the following tradition in this regard:

Rabbah b. Bar Hana said: When R. Eliezer fell sick, his disciples entered (his house) to visit him. He said to them: 'There is a fierce wrath in the world.' They broke into tears, but R. Akiba laughed. 'Why do you laugh?', they enquired of him. 'Why do you weep?' he retorted. They answered, 'Shall the Scroll of the Torah lie in pain, and we not weep?' - He replied, 'For that very reason I rejoice! For as long as I saw that my master's wine did not turn sour, nor his flax smitten, nor his oil purified, nor his honey become rancid, I thought, God forbid, that he may have received all his reward in this world (leaving nothing for the next); but now that I see him lying in pain, I rejoice (knowing that his reward has been treasured up for him in the next).' R. Eliezer said to him, 'Akiba, have I neglected anything of the whole Torah?' He replied, 'You, O master, have taught us, "For there is not a just man

upon earth that does good and sins not."²⁸

According to this midrash, suffering in this life offers reward in the world to come. The tradition says more than simply 'compensation follows pain;' rather, if a person has no discomfort then his or her reward is "used up" already! Metaphorically, illness beckons us like a jewel of promise. In this same midrash, Rabbi Eliezer becomes ill and four elders sit by his bedside. Once again, Rabbi Akiba captures everyone's attention when he presents his opinion which seems so contrary to the others:

Our rabbis taught: When R. Eliezer fell sick, four elders went to visit him; R. Tarfon, R. Joshua, R. Eliezer b. Azariah and R. Akiba. R. Tarfon observed, 'You are more valuable to Israel than rain; for rain is (precious) in this world, whereas you are precious for this world and the next. R. Joshua observed, 'You are more valuable to Israel than the sun's disc: the sun's disc is but for this world, while my master is for this world and the next.' R. Eleazar b. Azariah observed, 'You are better to Israel than a father and a mother; these are for this world, whereas my master is for this world and the next.' But R. Akiba observed, 'Suffering is precious.' Thereupon he (the sick man) said to them, 'Support me, that I may hear the words of Akiba, my disciple, who said, 'Suffering is precious.'

'Akiba', queried he, 'whence do you know this?' He replied, 'I interpret a verse: "Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign and he reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem and he did that which was evil in the sight of God" (II Kings 21:1-2). Now it is elsewhere written: "These are also the proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah King of Judah copied out" (Prov. 25:1). Now would Hezekiah King of Judah have taught the Torah

²⁸. B.T. Sanhedrin, 101b.

to the whole world, yet not to his own son Manasseh? But all the pains he spent upon him and all the labors he lavished upon him did not bring him back to the right path, save suffering alone.²⁹

Candid Akiba engaged the attention of his teacher Eliezer more than the other disciples as their complements skirted his primary distress. More than kindness, Eliezer craved a theological vehicle to carry his pain. Akiba told him that suffering brings a human being back to God. Only this piercing idea soothed the sick man. In the first section of the midrash Akiba explains that if people don't suffer in this world, they merit no reward in the World to Come. Greater than the promise of the World to Come, suffering draws us close to God like no other medium. The following example employs suffering as the glue which binds God with the people Israel:

"For I am love-sick"(Song of Songs 2:5). Said the Community of Israel before the Holy One: 'Sovereign of the Universe, all the maladies which You bring upon me are to make me more beloved of You.³⁰ Another explanation: "For I am love-sick" (ibid.). The Community of Israel said before the Holy One; 'Sovereign of the Universe, the reason for all the sufferings which the nations inflict upon me is because I love You.' Another explanation: "For I am love-sick" (ibid.), 'Although I am sick, I am beloved of God.'³¹

²⁹. Ibid.

³⁰. Translating: For my sickness is for the purpose of love; ki cholat ahavat ani.

³¹. Song of Songs Rabbah II 5,1.

Suffering deserves more than tolerance. The Jew strives to embrace suffering as part of the Covenant. Loving God and being loved by God is frequently ridden with obstacles. If God desires Israel to suffer, then we accept this "Torah" graciously as noted in the ensuing statement:

The Community of Israel said, "I am indeed experienced in sufferings; what pleases You is beneficial to me."³²

Following this statement, the midrash presents a parable about the burden of Torah. If Israel had not accepted the Torah, it says, their level of responsibility would be lower. But because Israel accepted the Torah, their sins disappoint God all the more so and punishment perpetually follows them. This example is complex, for on one hand, the Torah signifies tremendous potential while at the same time, suffering churns within the unique Jewish inheritance.

Are the rabbis telling us that "it is Jewish to suffer?" The preceding midrash suggests that from the point of view of both the individual as well as the nation, accepting Torah, in the broadest sense, implies struggle. At the exact moment, however when we accept the weight of Torah's yoke, we are reminded that our destiny is also extraordinary. The rabbis believed that inclusive of the covenant between God and the people Israel were trials, endurance and necessary faith.

³². Lamentations Rabbah 3.1.

Eternal betrothal conceptualizes the relationship between God and Israel. In sickness and in health, the Jew remains faithful to the Creator. We will find in the following section concerning the relationship between sin and illness, and repentance and healing, how deeply we cling to God.

FOR RIVER BOLD

CHAPTER THREE:

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SIN AND ILLNESS

The question of theodicy challenged the rabbinic mind in every generation. The rabbis vacillated between an unquestioning acceptance of God's will and a search for meaning while experiencing suffering. Rarely did they claim that accidents merely happened. More prevalent was the belief that each person's fate was deliberated by God. If something evil befell a people, it was perceived as a divine warning. When individuals became very ill, it was a sign that they needed to probe their relationship with God. However, only through repentance, prayer and charity would a person counter an unfavorable decree.³³ Repentance alone could actually alter one's life. Note, for example, the emphasis R. Johanan placed upon the potency of atonement:

R. Johanan said: Great is the power of repentance that it rescinds a person's ultimate decree.³⁴

Just as illness was believed to correspond to transgression, so, too, was healing related to repentance. We will see that the correlation between illness and transgression focussed primarily upon the relationship between one individual and another, bein adam l'havero, whereas the link between healing and repentance emphasized the

³³. Genesis Rabbah 44:15.

³⁴. Sifre to Numbers, pisqa 10.

relationship between an individual and God, bein adam l'Makom.

A. ILLNESS AND TRANSGRESSION

One of the earliest questions asked by the rabbis of the second century may have been the question that perplexes us today; why do people suffer? Surely there must be a reason! If the hand of God touches all of creation, then undoubtedly illness and suffering are part of God's plan. The question persisted in yet another form: why would God cause suffering and illness? The answer to that question was straightforward as well as harsh. The rabbinic tradition taught that God punishes sinners with misfortune.

The rabbis believed that one of the earliest sins was that of idolatry. Note, for example, in the following early midrash, how illness and impurity correspond directly to infidelity toward God:

R. Jose the Galilean says: Come and see the terrible effect of sin. Before the Israelites committed the sin (of the golden calf), there was among them no person with an issue, nor any leper. But as soon as they sinned, these diseases sprang up in their midst. Incidentally, we gather from this that all three things happened on the same day. R. Shimon bar Yohai says: Come and see the terrible effect of sin. Before they committed the crime we read concerning them, "The vision of the glory of God was like unto them a burning fire" (Ex. 24:17), and yet they did not fear, nor tremble. But as soon as they sinned, we read: "And Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, and behold the skin of his face shone

and they were afraid to come near him" (Ex. 34:35).³⁵

Due to the first sin, disease befell humanity. Not only were the sinners ostracized by their disease, but "they were afraid to come near him (Moses)," whose face shone with God's presence. Divine reproof included spiritual separation from God which the midrash explains as the 'fear to look at someone who is inspired by God.'

Another example that displays the rabbis' belief that sin and illness were related is found in the rabbis' discussion of a character named, Nahum Ish Gamzu, who's very name reflects a resigned acceptance of "deserved" illness.³⁶ In this legend, Nahum acknowledges his sin and takes full responsibility for his pitiful state. He says: "Ani gramti l'atzmi - I have brought this upon myself."

Nahum Ish Gamzu's popularity derived from his philosophy regarding illness: no matter how many calamities befell him, he held, "This too (gam zu) is for the best." So certain is he that he deserves his plight, he even welcomes each affliction. Note in the following midrash, how Nahum's position is one of unquestioning faith in God's judgement:

It is related of Nahum of Gamzu that he was

³⁵. Sifre on Numbers, pisga 10.

³⁶. Gimzo is mentioned in II Chron. 28:18 as name of a place. In this example however, it serves as a cognomen where gam is 'also' and zu is 'this.'

blind in both his eyes, his hands and legs were amputated and his entire body was covered with boils. He was lying in a dilapidated house on a bed, the feet of which were standing in bowls of water in order to prevent the ants from crawling onto him.

One occasion his disciples wanted to move the bed and then clear things out of the house, but he said to them, 'My children, first clear out the things (from the house) and then remove my bed for I am certain that so long as I am in the house, it will not collapse.'

They first cleared out the things and then they removed his bed and the house (immediately) collapsed. Thereupon his disciples said to him: 'Master, since you are wholly righteous, why has all this happened to you?' He answered, 'I have brought it all upon myself. Once I was journeying on the road and was going to my father in law's house, and I had with me three female donkeys, one laden with food, one with drink, and one with all kinds of dainties, when a poor man stopped on the road. He said, 'Master, give me something to eat.' I replied to him, 'Wait until I have unloaded something from the donkey.' I had hardly managed to unload something from the donkey when the man died.'³⁷

This midrash goes further still where he falls upon upon the dead man, begging that his own eyes be blinded, his hands and legs amputated, and his body covered with boils, due to his negligence. The rabbinic authors accelerate their warning regarding the sin of neglecting another person by justification Nahum Ish Gamzu's misfortune. The story of Nahum was one of unprecedented acceptance. Recognition of his guilt defined Nahum's piety and hence his repentance.

Whereas Nahum had been charged with the sin of neglect, another sin that warranted the punishment of illness was bribery, shohad. Bribery, the rabbis warn, is a weakness that

³⁷. B.T. Ta'anit 21a.

can corrupt even the most righteous of people. Even medicine provides no certainty of cure for the one who engages in bribery.

R. Abbahu said: "Come and see how blind are the eyes of those who take a bribe. If a person has pain in his eyes, and he pays money to a doctor, he may or may not be cured. Even one who is righteous in every respect and takes bribes, he will not depart without the affliction of a confused mind."³⁸

From the midrashim presented thus far, we have observed how strongly the rabbis believed that afflictions pursued the "sinner." One of the more prevalent sins that the midrashic literature comments upon is that of slander. Slander against God or slander against one of God's servants resulted in severe if not fatal punishment. A midrash compiled in the seventh/eighth century warns about the sin of slander and its resulting calamities. Note that in this later midrash, the rabbis provide a non-medicinal remedy: the sinner must direct his or her heart to God.

Rabbi said: They slandered God and said, 'We were dwelling in the land of Egypt in ease and contentment, but the Holy One and Moses have brought us forth from Egypt to die in the wilderness' as it is said: "And the people spoke against God and against Moses: Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" (Ex. 21:5).

What did God do? God sent against them fiery serpents which bit and killed them, as it is said: "And God sent among the people fiery serpents and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died" (Ex. 21:6). Moses saw the misfortune and rose and prayed on their behalf. God said to him: 'Moses! Make a serpent of copper like the

³⁸ B.T. Ketubot 105a.

serpent that spoke slander between Adam and his helpmate, and place it on a high place. Let people who has been bitten direct their heart to their Father who is in heaven, and let them gaze at the serpent and be healed.³⁹

Slander had the potential of provoking God into even killing Israelites who had "sinned." The above midrash developed the biblical punishment found in the Book of Exodus, of fiery snakes, where as in other legends such as in the book of Numbers, leprosy is the inflicted curse (Num. 12:13). Within the same compilation, Pirke D'Rabbi Eliezer, is another example of the sin of slander. In this piece, slander is scrutinized as being either "secret" or "public." Public slander receives a more severe punishment than the incurable disease that accompanies secret slander.

In the following midrash, note how the humiliation of the slanderer is extended to his or her relatives. Sin, it teaches, is not an isolated act; rather it is stain that blurs boundaries in it's path.

The eight descent was when God descended into the Tabernacle, as it is said, "And when God came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the door of the Tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forth." (Num. 12:5) The Holy One spoke to them: 'Whoever speaks slander against his or her fellow in secret has no cure; if one slander his or her sibling, the child of his or her father or the child of his or her mother, how much more so is the case?' The Holy One was angry with them; and God departed from the Tent, as it is said, "And the anger of God was kindled against them; and God departed" (Num.

12:9).

"And the cloud was removed from over the Tent" (Num.12:10). Miriam became leprous. The Holy One said, "If Aaron also be leprous, the High Priest, who is afflicted with a blemish, will not be able to bring an offering upon My alter; but he shall look upon his sister and become astonished, as it is said: "And Aaron looked upon Miriam and behold, she was leprous" (ibid.).

Aaron went to Moses and said to him: 'O our lord, Moses! Brethren do not suffer themselves to be separated from the other except through death, as it is said, "Though one be fruitful among his brethren" (Hosea 13:15). Our sister, while still among the living, is separated from us, as it is said: "Let her not, I pray, be as one dead" (Num. 12:12). Not only this, but now all Israel will hear and say that the sister of Moses and Aaron is leprous. Half of this infamous report concerns you.' Moses was appeased by his words, and he arose and prayed for her...⁴⁰

The legend about Miriam's affliction of leprosy accelerates to the moment when God hearkens to Moses' prayer and resolves when she returns fully healed to her people's camp after seven days. From this incident regarding Miriam, we observe that physical punishment is not always fatal and may function primarily as imparting a severe moral lesson. There are other examples in which, like Miriam's story, an illness teaches a lesson to cleanse sin from a person's body. Note as an illustration how sickness is caused by sin, and the function of the malady is beneficial to the person. The commentary on this midrash suggests that perhaps stomach troubles cleanse the internal organs of the body so that the

⁴⁰. Ibid.

righteous may live like angels after their death.

"And Abraham expired and died in a good old age; an old man and satisfied in years" (Gen. 25:8). R. Judah b. R. Ilai said: 'The early hasidim used to suffer with stomach trouble about ten to twenty days, thus indicating that sickness cleanses.' R. Judah said, 'All is in connection with one who dies of stomach trouble.'⁴¹

Sickness as "moral teacher" is found several times in the midrashic material. In the Amoraic midrashim, we discover Elisha, a popular biblical character, who's three illnesses resulted from ethical mistakes. Elisha, known in much of the rabbinic material as a healer and a servant of God, is not immune from sin. In the following midrashim expose Elisha's transgressions as well as God's leniency in the case of two of the three violations. Note in the following rabbinic tradition, the ordinance against "pushing people away with both hands." This warning later became intertwined with the "incorrect" approach toward potential converts. Even in extreme cases, there should always be an opening, a possible acceptance, or a pardon. It seems that Elisha's greatest transgression was in his impatience toward Gehazi. In his anger, he performed the unforgivable act of pushing away with both hands.

Our rabbis taught: On three occasions did Elisha fall sick: once he repulsed Gehazi with both

⁴¹. Genesis Rabbah 52:1.

hands;⁴² a second time he incited bears against children,⁴³ and then when he died, as it is said, "And Elisha was fallen sick of his sickness when of he died."⁴⁴

Our rabbis have taught: Always let the left hand thrust away and the right hand draw near. Not like Elisha who thrust Gehazi away with both his hands, (and not like R. Joshua b. Perahiah who thrust one of his disciples away with both of his hands.)⁴⁵

Midrashim relating transgression to illness underscore a direct warning under no uncertain terms that God holds the Jewish people to a high moral imperative. The God of Israel demanded exemplary standards from the Jew. Choosing a behavior contrary to Torah, even turning someone away with both hands (in the case of Elisha), was unacceptable. We noted earlier in this chapter that Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer suggested the people should turn their hearts back to God for healing. In a tradition preserved in Genesis Rabbah which we will look at next, the rabbis also speak of turning back to God, however not as fully as in Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer.⁴⁶

Genesis Rabbah begins to formulate the concept of repentance in the sense of following God's will for life long protection. The rabbis describe the God of Israel as a shield

⁴². B.T. Sanhedrin 107b.

⁴³. II Kings 2:23ff.

⁴⁴. II Kings 13:14.

⁴⁵. B.T. Baba Metzia 87a, Sota 47a, Sanhedrin 107b, P.T. Sanhedrin 10,29b.

⁴⁶. Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chap. 53.

from misfortune. In place of using the word: refuah, (healing), this earlier example employs mitkayem (establish). The punishment for forsaking God's ways is not articulated, though the tone is punitive. The warning, though only an allusion, communicates the rabbis' admonition about remaining within the fold of Jewish law.

"And Jacob said: O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, O God who said to me: 'Return to your country, and to your kindred, and I will do you well.' (Gen. 32:10), 'And the God of my father Isaac;' but was God not so to Esau too? 'One who so chooses their ways [sc. of the Patriarchs] and acts as they,' [says God]. 'I will afford protection; but to one who does not choose their ways, and emulates their acts, I do not afford protection.'"

God will protect those who follow the path of Torah. Those who reject God by their transgressions, may confront misfortune and illness. Yet, despite the strict dictum, the rabbis kept a window of hope available to the Jew. If a Jew turned to God in humility and sincerity, then "illness" would be no longer perceived as suffering in vain. In some cases, a person could recover entirely. In most of the examples, however, repentance transformed illness into a cleansing agent, a learning experience, or provided peace of mind when the moment of death arrived.

47. Genesis Rabbah 76.4.

B. HEALING AND REPENTANCE

The rabbis believed that sickness was an indication that something was amiss in a Jew's spiritual life. A transgression against God or another person had the power of bringing tragedy upon that person. Repentance was the remedy that could change an evil decree; therefore, drawing close to God became a critically important issue. Would a person turn to God simply because he or she feared death? Or did a person freely turn to God out of devotion and love?⁴⁸

The rabbis were aware that standing upon the precipice of mortality was a great motivation for repentance. However, what the rabbis preferred, as we shall see in the following Tannaitic midrash, was a Jew embracing God out of love.

R. Hama b. Hanina said: "Great is repentance, for it brings healing to the world." It is said, "I

⁴⁸. On repentance see: Rabbi Avraham Kook, The Lights of Penitence (The Paulist Press, New York, Ramesy, Toronto, 1978), pp. 26-26. Repentance is a feeble attempt to capture the Hebrew word, Teshuvah. The talmudic statement that "repentance brings healing to the world" reverberates beyond the issue of a cure for a person's illness. Nineteenth century rabbi, mystic and leader Abraham Isaac Kook captured the essence of repentance as something consequential for all people. He wrote: "The act of repentance, whether as a reaction to a specific wrongdoing or to a general dissatisfaction with the state of one's life, is free of morbidity. It is, on the contrary, a liberation from morbidity. It is a therapy that cancels out the anguish of remorse and endows a person with a sense of elation for having ascended out of the mire and toward the heights. The repentant who has shed an old self and assumed a new and higher self has in effect been reborn as a new person. He has released by his act, a divine son and a divine joy throughout the universe."

will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely" (Hosea 14:5). R. Hama b. Hanina pointed out a contradiction: It is written: "Return, ye backsliding children" (Jer. 11:22), i.e., you who were formerly backsliding; and it is written, "I will heal your backsliding?" This is not a difficulty; in the one case, the reference involves those who return out of love, in the other, out of fear.⁴⁹

Rashi explains that the contradiction in this passage is not clear. Apparently, the first part of the verse spoken by R. Hama b. Hanina implies that having repented, they are perfect as children, whereas the second part, which speaks of 'healing,' implies that they still retain the shame of their former backsliding. The commentary further explains that where the repentance is motivated by love, the return is complete, leaving no trace of taint, which is not the case where it is motivated by fear.

The rabbis were aware of human nature and its limitations. They pointed to the two characteristics of haughtiness and humility as a means of measuring a person's ability to repent. Note in the following legend how the rabbis have designated categories of wilderness to denote mortal attributes:

And Solomon spoke to the trees, from the cedar to the hyssop (I Kings 5:13). Can a person speak to trees? It means; he drew teaching from them. Why is the leper cleansed with the highest of the high and the lowest of the low? As it says: "And cedar wood, and scarlet and hyssop" (Lev. 14:4-6). Because when

⁴⁹. B.T. Yoma 86a.

a man is haughty like the cedar, he is smitten with leprosy; when he humbles himself like the hyssop, he is healed.⁵⁰

A person who repents is humble. One who does not repent remains haughty and miserable. At times the rabbis were less metaphorical in their view of repentance. Note the promise of recovery given in this earlier piece from the Amoraic period.

R. Alexandri said in the name of R. Hiyya b. Abba: A sick man does not recover from his sickness until all his sins are forgiven, as it is written: "Who forgives all your iniquities; who heals all your diseases" (Ps. 103:3). R. Hamnuna said: He [then] returns to the days of his youth, for it is written, "His flesh shall be fresher than a child's; he shall return to the days of his youth" (Job 33:25).⁵¹

It can be debated what the rabbis meant when they said: "Return to the days of his youth." Did they really mean the person would live longer or rather did the renewal concern the condition of the eternal soul? This ambiguous issue of renewal is reiterated in other midrashim of the same time period. The rabbis stress that turning to God brings healing, but they leave the absolute definition of "healing" unclear. See how the rabbis illustrate this tenuous issue by contrasting the state of being healed, mitrafin, and the state of decay, nimukim:

Now did the hands of Moses wage war or crush the enemy? Not so, only the text signifies that so long as Israel turned their thoughts above and

⁵⁰. Pesikta Rabbati, pisqa 14:9.

⁵¹. B.T. Nedarim 41a.

subjected their hearts to their Father in heaven they prevailed, but otherwise, they fell.

The same lesson may be taught, thus. It is written, "Make a fiery serpent and set it upon a pole and it shall come to pass that everyone that is bitten, when he sees it, shall live" (Num. 21:8). Now did the serpent kill or did the serpent keep alive? No, rather when Israel turned their thoughts above and subjugated their hearts to their Father in heaven, they were healed, but otherwise they decayed.⁵²

In this last example, the transgression mentioned is one against God. When people sins and God punishes until the moment when they repents.

A different dimension to God's response to transgression is developed in a later midrash. Here we see that people will sin for the very purpose of being punished! If a people are punished, then they have an "reason" to repent. By sinning individuals provide themselves the opportunity of drawing closer to God. Note, in the following example, how the rabbis explore this viewpoint:

"For Thee, Thee only, have I sinned...That Thou may be justified when Thou speaks" (Ps. 51:6) To whom may David be likened? To a man who broke a limb and came to a physician. The physician marveled and said, "How great is your break! I am much distressed on your account. The man with the broken limb said: "Are you distressed on my account? Wasn't my limb broken for your sake, since the fee is to be yours?" In the same way, David said to the Holy One: "For Thee, Thee only, have I sinned." If You will accept my repentance, then You must say to [the other] sinners, 'Why haven't have the rest of you not repented?' [Then] all sinners will submit to You for the reason that they will see me (David). I shall surely bear witness that You receive the

⁵². B.T. Rosh Hashana 29a.

penitent.

Hence the Holy One, said: "Behold, I have given him for a witness to the peoples". (Isa. 55:4). And God gave as a witness not only me, David, but all Israel, since it is said "You are My witness, says God, and My servant whom I have chosen" (Isa. 43:10).⁵³

This midrash suggests that God accepts a individuals' transgressions if they follows through with sincere repentance. From this legend, the rabbis express God's resignation to the reality of human sin. At the same time, there was a firm charge for returning to the Covenant of Israel. R. Johanan may have had this concept in mind when he said:

"Great is the power of repentance that it rescinds individuals' final decree, as it says, "Make the heart of this people fat and make their ears heavy and shut their eyes, lest they seeing with their eyes and hearing with their ears and understanding with their heart return and be healed" (Isa. 6:10).⁵⁴

We have seen how the tradition utilizes the theme of atonement in its' theology of healing. Forgiveness and reconciliation between a person and God, or between one person and another far exceeds the import of material compensation. The price of the inner recompense soars above that of earthly settlement. To make sure that the Jewish people would not be deceived into thinking that money settles altercations, the

⁵³. Midrash on Psalms 51:3.

⁵⁴. B.T. Rosh Hashana 17b.

rabbis went so far as to record their high regard for reconciliation in the Mishnah itself.

MISHNAH. Even though the offender pays him (compensation), the offense is not forgiven until he ask him for pardon, as it says: "Now therefore, restore the man's wife etc" (Gen. 20:7). Whence can we learn that should the injured person not forgive him, he would be stigmatized as cruel? From the words: "So Abraham prayed unto God and God healed Abimelech etc (Gen. 20:17)."⁵⁵

Further along, this mishnah shows that a person who forgives someone who wrongs him or her, receives a blessing. The verse about 'Abraham forgiving Abimelech for taking his wife and praying to God to restore his health' is used frequently in midrashim about healing. Forgiveness was a principal concern for individuals to master. Paying a fine was one thing, but without heartfelt forgiveness, a debilitating grudge could extend an entire lifetime. Note the following illustration:

Raba said to Rabba b. Mari: 'Whence can be derived the lesson taught by our rabbis that one who solicits mercy for his fellow while he himself is in need of the same thing [will be answered first]?' He replied: As it is written: "And God changed the fortune of Job when he prayed for his friends" (Job 42:10). He said to him: 'You say it is from that text, but I say it is from this text: "And Abraham prayed unto God and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maid servants" (Gen. 20:17) and immediately after it says: "And God remembered Sarah as he had said" (Gen. 21:1) as Abraham had prayed

regarding Abimelech.⁵⁶

When the themes of forgiveness and healing surface, the rabbis often utilize Job and Abraham. Prior to forgiving his friends, Job is characterized as being unsuited for God's compassion. Once Job makes peace with his companions, however, God is merciful. Abraham, on the other hand, is accepted as a tzaddik (righteous person) from the beginning. His forgiveness of Abimelech is purely exemplary. When God sees that a person is humble, then God acts with compassion. We notice the rabbi's forceful opinion in the following ninth century midrash regarding how humbling oneself, mashpil atzmo, is contrasted with one who is arrogant, adam bizdono:

When the Holy One sees that a man humbles himself, God forgives his sins. As long as a man holds onto his arrogance, no remission will be granted him. And if it is your wish to have proof of this statement, then consider the following: As long as Job stood obdurate against his friends and his friends against him, the measure of God's justice was ready to be discharged against them both. We find Job saying to them: "But now those younger than I deride me" (Job 30:1). They reply: "With us are both the gray-headed and the very aged men" (Job 15:10). But as soon as Job made peace with them and asked mercy for them, in that very instant the Holy One returned to him, as it is said, "And God returned at the return of Job" (Job 42:10). When? "When he prayed for his friends (ibid.). Scripture says further, "When you are imbued with mercy, God has mercy upon you" (Deut. 13:18). R. Jose, son of a woman of Damascus, said: You may regard your compassion as a sign that God's compassion will follow. Whenever you show compassion for your fellow man, God will show compassion for

other mortals as well as for you. Abraham is an example, because he procured mercy for Abimelech, having prayed for him, Abraham received his reward at once. Scripture tells us, "And Abraham prayed unto God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife" (Gen. 20:17).

And what reward did Abraham receive? Abraham's wife was remembered and she bore him a son, as the next verse tells us: "And God remembered Sarah etc." (Gen. 21:1)⁵⁷

We have seen that forgiveness and humility are integral to the overriding subject of healing. When an individual turns to God either by making peace with his or her neighbor or seeking favor from God in other ways, blessings appear. There are times, however, when people cry out to God, not on their own merit, but with support of the past. In these special cases, the sufferer asks God for mercy on account of the virtue of his or her ancestors.

In two midrashic compilations, *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana* and *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*, we find examples of individuals praying on behalf of others. In *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana*, the leader asks for God's mercy based on the people's exemplary behavior in the past. In *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*, the leader calls upon the exemplary behavior in his own personal lineage. In these two midrashim, note how the rabbis equate King Hezekiah with Moses as leaders. The first examples are found in *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana*:

⁵⁷. *Pesikta Rabbati*, pisga 38.

[Moses prayed to God]: "Pardon, I pray Thee, the iniquity of this people, according unto the greatness of Thy loving kindness" (Num.14:19). R. Jose b. R. Hanina and R. Samuel b. Nahman differ in their comments on this verse. According to one, the Holy One replied to Moses, "From Egypt even till now" (ibid.) --haven't they sinned against Me?" But according to the other, it was Moses who, acknowledging Israel's guilt in the words "from Egypt until now," went on to plead with the Holy One: 'Master of the Universe, has Thou not pardoned and forgiven them in the past? Even so, pardon and forgive them in the future.'

God forgave the Jews once, will God forgive them again? This midrash requests that God be lenient at this moment as in the past. The next section of this midrash presents a parable of two men petitioning the king. One man presents his petition in his own name, whereas the second man uses his ancestor's name. The rabbis reverse the outcome in order to show that one can never know how to please God. It is not safe to rely alone on one's ancestors, but at the same time one should not be so autonomous as to think that the past has no bearing on the present.

R. Alexandri told a parable of two men who presented written petitions to the king. One presented it in his own name; it was granted [not in his name], however, but in the name of his ancestor. The other presented his petition in his ancestor's name, but it was granted to him in his own name.

Thus Hezekiah presented a petition in his own name: "Remember now, O God, I beseech Thee, how I have walked before Thee in truth (II Kings 20:3); but it was granted in the name of his ancestor: "I

will defend this city for Mine own sake, and for My servant David's sake" (II Kings 20:6). Moses presented a petition in the name of his ancestry, but it was granted in his own name. He presented it in the name of his ancestry: "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants (Ex. 32:13), but it was granted in his own name: "I have pardoned according to thy word" (Num.14:20).⁵⁹

In this sixth century compilation, Moses and Hezekiah pray for their people by alternating between the merit of their own names and that of their ancestors. In a later piece found in Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, we note that Hezekiah now plays a different role. Where before he prayed with the support of his ancestors, in this example, Hezekiah is the meritorious ancestor for his evil son, Manasseh. Although Manasseh is known for his evil nature, because of his father, God grants him pardon.

R. Joshua said: 'Know thou the power of repentance.' Come and see from Manasseh, son of Hezekiah, who perpetrated all the evil abominations much more than all the nations. He made his son to pass through the fire to Baal outside Jerusalem, causing (doves) to fly, and sacrificing to all the hosts of heaven. The princes of the troops of the king of Babylon came, and they caught him by the hair of his head and brought him down to Babylon and they put him in a pan (over) a fire, and there he called upon all the other gods, to whom he had sacrificed, and not one of them either answered or saved him.

He said: 'I will call on the God of my fathers with all my heart; perhaps God will do for me according to all God's wonders which God did for my father.' And he called on the God of his ancestors with all his heart and God was entreated of him, God

heard his supplication as is said, "And he prayed to God, and God was entreated of him and heard his supplication... then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God" (II Chron. 33:13). In that hour Manasseh said: 'There is both a judgement as well as a judge.'⁶⁰

We have seen how firm the rabbis could be in their judging the sick with transgression. Did they truly believe that illness and sin were related; that God examined the moral scale for each individual? The rabbis needed a logical paradigm by which to organize their lives and the lives of their people. In another way, the rabbis implemented their doctrine to retain their influence upon the dispersed Jewish people. Calling upon Jews to return to God enabled the rabbis to mold a Jewish theology for those living in dispersion.

We will find in studying other midrashim how protective the rabbis were of Torah and the mitzvah system. In some cases they encouraged medical intervention, but never at the expense of prayer. The primary motive was that Jews should be accountable for their actions in life. By continuously acknowledging the power of God, individuals aspired to their highest ethical behavior.

⁶⁰. Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chap. 43.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE TENSION BETWEEN MITZVOT AND MEDICINE

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Of all the values espoused in Judaism, saving a life exemplifies the most brilliant jewel upon the crown of our faith. No other mitzvah is held in such high regard as the intervention of one to rescue another from death. As we are all created in the image of God, it is incumbent upon us to honor and recover that holy spark should a crisis arise. This attitude toward protecting and redeeming life is found in the Talmud:

Therefore only a single human being was created in the world, to teach that if any person has caused a single soul of Israel to perish, Scripture regards him as if he had caused an entire world to perish; and if any human being saves a single soul of Israel, Scripture regards him as if he has saved an entire world.

And yet, on theological grounds, this moral imperative to preserve life met with great resistance! The problem concerned the issue of authority. The rabbis grappled with a specific question: "Who is the healer?" If God is the healer, then human cures challenged God's divine scheme. If human beings are healers, then the relationship between repentance and healing is at stake.

The sick found themselves burdened with a certain odium since disease was deeply believed to be the consequence of

⁶¹. B.T. Sanhedrin 37a.

unrighteousness. In a world defined by contrasting imagery, such as God as the Healer or human beings as healers, there could be little integration. We will see in this chapter how Rabbinic Judaism reflected this theological dichotomy. We will first examine the way midrashic literature expressed the tension between medicine and God. Second, we will examine midrashim depicting God as the ultimate Healer. Third, we will study the conflict between mortal healers and rabbis. Lastly, we will survey the more popular belief that links Torah and healing into an invincible treatment.

A. TENSION BETWEEN MEDICINE AND GOD

Is it within the authority of humanity to tamper with physiological processes? In some cases, the rabbis found this "intrusion" to be a violation of the natural order as determined by Providence. At the same time, our sages realized that the medical arts were divinely given and mastered by talented, motivated individuals. Through the following midrashim, we will explore the issue of God's permission for a human being to heal in contrast to God's role as ultimate healer. Note, the following example, in which the rabbis address the futility of human intervention:

R. Judah, son of R. Hiyya, remarked: 'Come and see how the dispensation of mortals is not like that of the Holy One. In the dispensation of mortals, when

a man administers a drug to a fellow, it may be beneficial to one limb but injurious to another; but with the Holy One, it is not so. God gave a Torah to Israel and it is a drug for life for all Israel's body, as it is said, And healing to all his flesh" (Prov. 4:22).⁶²

The rabbis believed that God was the healer par excellence. And yet, if God is the Creator of all things, isn't it the right of human beings to utilize that creation for goodness? This attitude is given equal expression in the rabbinic literature when we are told in a simple yet profound manner, how creation provides the basis for cure. We read in the subsequent legend, how the biological chain suggests two positions; the first is that remedies are God given and the second is the possibility of human beings utilizing God's creation.

Among all the things which God created in the Universe, God created nothing that was useless. God created the snail as a cure for a wound, the fly as a cure for the wasp, the gnat as a cure for the bite of the serpent, the serpent as a cure for a sore, and a spider as a cure for the sting of a scorpion.⁶³

This midrash suggests that everything created in the universe has a purpose. There is nothing, it explains, that cannot cure something else. Centuries later, we find the same

⁶². B.T. Eruvim 54a.

⁶³. B.T. Shabbat 77b.

theme explaining in greater detail that creation provides its own cures. This later midrash introduces the heavenly constellations as a metaphor exemplifying God's permanent involvement with the world:

Ben Sira said: 'God caused drugs to spring forth from the earth; with them the physician heals the wound and the apothecary compounds his preparations' (Eccl. 38:4,7,8). R. Simon said: 'There is not a single herb that does not have a constellation in heaven which strikes it and says, 'Grow', as it is written, "Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?" Can you establish the dominion thereof in the earth?' (Job 38:33) Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion? (Job 38:31) R. Hanina b. Papa and R. Simon said: 'Pleiades binds the fruit and Orion draws it out between knot and knot, as it is written, "Can you lead forth the constellations in their season? (Job 38:32) R. Tanhum b. R. Hiyya and R. Simon said: 'This implies that it is the constellation which ripens the fruits.'⁶⁴

This midrash teaches that everything in creation serves a purpose. God, the source of all creation, produced the remedies by which the physician can heal. The rabbis deal with the tension between medicine and God by showing that medicine stems from God's creation. In this way, a physician's therapeutic hand is a result of God's initial touch.

There are other examples, however, where the rabbis acknowledge that God is the creator of all medicines, doctors and cures. At the same time they raise the question as to

⁶⁴. Genesis Rabbah 10.6.

whether or not this constitutes interference. The following eloquent midrashic narrative reflects both the recognition of human beings' ability to cure as well as their inherent lack of authority.

Once R. Yishma'el and R. Akiba were walking in the streets of Jerusalem, and a third man was with them. They met a sick man who said to them: "My masters, tell me with what can I be healed?" They said to him: "Do thus and thus, until you become healed." He said to them: "And who smote me?" They said to him: "The Holy One." He said to them: "If so, you have injected yourselves into a matter which is not yours. God smote me and you heal me. Are you not transgressing God's will? They said to him, "What is your work?" He said to them, "I am a cultivator of the soil, And here is the scythe in my hand." They said to him: "Who created the vineyard?" He said: "The Holy One." They said: "If so, you inject yourself into a matter which is not yours. God created it, and you take fruit from it". He said to them: "Don't you see the scythe in my hand" If I don't go out and till it, and cover it, and manure it and weed it, it will yield nothing." They said to him: "O fool in the world! Because of your work you have not heard that it is written, "As for man, his days are grass, as a flower of the field, so he flourishes" (Ps. 103:15). Just as the plant, if it is not weeded and manured and plowed, it does not grow; or if it grows but does not drink water and is not manured, it does not live but dies, so the human body; the manure is the medicine and all kinds of remedies, and the tiller of the soil is the physician." He said to them: "I beg of you, punish me not!"⁶⁵

The rabbis, Yishmael and Akiba challenge the sick man to reconsider his position. The sick man represents two conflicting sides of human beings. On the one hand, we will

⁶⁵. Midrash Temurah, ed. J.D. Eisenstein, Otzar Midrashim (New York, 1915), II, 580-581.

receive cures from a physician whom we respect. At the same time, there is a part of us, even if marginal, that may question why we became ill in the first place? Is there more, we wonder, than a purely physical condition? This last midrash provides resolution by showing that though God is the absolute source of all healing, human beings are capable healers as well. To exclude human resources is both foolish and limiting.

Though the midrash mentioned directly above sanctions medical treatment, other texts do not. We will see in the following section how strongly some of the rabbis felt about allocating the role of healing exclusively to God.

B. GOD AS HEALER

If sick people were not encouraged to turn to doctors, then they could only turn to God for help. One way of guiding the Jewish people toward repentance was to negate medicine. Note in the next illustration the "hostile" attitude expressed by the rabbinic author:

One should not teach his son to be: a donkey-driver, camel-driver, wagoner, sailor, shepherd, or shopkeeper, because their profession is the profession of robbers. R. Judah said: 'Most donkey-drivers are wicked, while most camel-drivers are worthy men, and most sailors are righteous. The best of doctors are destined for Gehenna.'⁶⁶

Isn't it ironic that the role of doctor became one of the most enviable professions among the Jewish people! A closer look at this midrash, however, sheds some light upon the rabbinic attitude toward physicians. Centuries later, Rashi explains in his commentary that doctors were unafraid of sickness and thus appeared haughty before God. The rabbis believed that living without fear of God placed a person on the road to Gehenna. Other commentators suggest that the talmudic polemic against doctors was not against healing per se, but rather against the "advanced" views held by the physicians in those days.

What were some of the "advanced" views held by doctors? Possibly the rabbis opposed the medical model because they saw it as an opponent to Jewish life. One of the greatest concerns about medicine juxtaposed with Judaism may have concerned the right of a doctor to heal the sick a Jew on the Sabbath. The doctors' position may have been to cure at any cost, whereas the rabbis believed that Sabbath was sacred rest. The following tradition reveals an adamant rabbinic position toward the preservation of the seventh day.

MISHNAH. If one bathes in the water of a pit or in the water of Tiberias and dries himself even with ten towels, he must not fetch them in his hand. But ten men may dry their faces, hands and feet on one towel and fetch it in their hands. One may oil and massage, but not knead or scrape. You must not go

down to a wrestling ground,⁶⁷ or induce vomiting, or straighten an infants limbs or set a broken bone. If one's hand or foot is dislocated, he must not agitate it violently in cold water, but may bathe it in the usual way. If it heals, it heals.⁶⁸

The rabbis believed that if they did not protect the Sabbath, the Jewish people would forsake it as well. Though this Mishnah is harsh, we know that should a person be seriously ill on the Sabbath, all steps to save that person's life would be applied.⁶⁹ The preceding example presents a clear rabbinic ordinance about certain types of healing.

There are other times, however, where the rabbis offer a mixed message. On one hand, a cure may have saved a life, while on the other hand, the "sin" of following that cure may have involved crossing religious boundaries. The next legend embodies precisely this sort of mixed teaching. A righteous person, tzaddik endured his prescribed treatment, and yet, received glaring stares by the other rabbis. At the end of his life, his great confession concerned the impropriety of his treatment.

Our rabbis taught: There was once a certain pious person who suffered with his heart, and the doctors on being

⁶⁷. The wrestling ground refers to a clay ground. Rashi comments on this passage that this is actually a name of a river.

⁶⁸. B.T. Shabbat 147a.

⁶⁹. B.T. Sanhedrin 37a. See also Deuteronomy Rabbah 10.1: The sages have taught thus: Where there is the least question of danger to life, the Sabbath laws are suspended.

consulted said that there was no remedy for him unless he sucked warm milk every morning. A goat was therefore brought to him and fastened to the legs of the bed and he sucked from it every morning. After some days, his colleagues came to visit him, but as soon as they noticed the goat fastened to the legs of the bed they turned back and said, 'An armed robber is in the house of this man, how can we come in to see him.' They thereupon sat down and inquired into his conduct, but they did not find any fault in him except this sin about the goat. He also at the time of his death proclaimed: 'I know no sin that can be imputed to me, save that of the goat, when I transgressed against the words of my colleagues'.⁷⁰

The pious person who endured the "goat" treatment bore the reproof of his colleagues. This example of physician's cure reflected what some of the rabbis thought about tampering with God's plan. The remedy, though strange indeed, seemed to have extended the man's life. In shaping this tradition, the rabbis explored the extremities of permissible behavior. The last line, however, reveals where they rabbi's cast their vote. The man said prior to death: "I know no sin that can be imputed to me, save that of the goat.." By the end of his days, he placed his greatest faith with God.

There is more to this legend, however, than simply faith in God. The rabbis have another agenda concerning the clout of rabbinic authority. We will see in the following section that the rabbis perceived themselves as healers.

⁷⁰. B.T. Baba Kama 80a.

C. SAGES AND DOCTORS

The rabbis were authority figures in the lives of our people. If a person, for example, had a legal dispute, they met with a court of learned men, a bet din, for guidance. The lines, however, grew blurry when the legal case had a medical slant. In such a case, the bet din's position might differ from a doctor's diagnosis. The following talmudic passage explores the strain between the rabbis' and the doctor's final word.

Our rabbis taught, if she went to a sage after her betrothal and he disallowed her [past] vow, her betrothal is valid. If one went to a physician who cured her, her betrothal is invalid. What is the difference between the act of the sage and that of the physician?

A sage annuls the vow retrospectively, while a physician effects the cure only from that moment onwards. But was it not, however, taught that if she went to a sage and he disallowed her vow or to a physician and he cured her, her betrothal is invalid? Rabbah replied: "There is no contradiction. The former represents the view of R. Meir, the latter represents that of R. Eliezar. The former represents the view of R. Meir, who holds that a man does not mind his wife being exposed to the publicity of a court of law. The latter represents that of R. Eliezar who holds that no man wants his wife to be exposed to the publicity of a court of law."⁷¹

Commentary on this passage explains the difference between the two judgments. The oath concerns a marriage vow

⁷¹. B.T. Ketubot 74b.

previously made. At this later time the woman wanted to be free in order to marry someone else. At the same time, the vow also relates to a medical issue. If she goes to a bet din, she is exposed publicly. If she goes to a physician, and he heals her, the negativity has been stamped onto her name forever. Her reputation becomes tarnished and thus it invalidates the betrothal. R. Meir's position is that the woman should go to the bet din, while R. Eliezer believes that she should seek the physician to prevent any penalty for lax morality or ill-reputed associations. Through this argument, the rabbis express the forceful tension between physician and rabbinic advice.

The sages believed that they were vehicles for God; that their prescriptions would bring justice and healing to the Jewish people. This attitude is reflected in the talmudic dictum: "The sayings of the Sages are a source of blessing, wealth and healing".⁷² So strongly did the rabbis believe that their advice could bring healing, that even the definition of sickness was transformed.

Midrashic literature reflects this new understanding of sickness. Sickness evolved into a metaphor regarding forgotten Torah knowledge. In the rabbis' world, when people forgot their "learning" they were perceived as diminished or ill. The

⁷² B.T. Ketubot 103a.

best anecdote for recuperating from a lapse of Torah knowledge was study of Torah. Hence the rabbi's position of healer developed in the rabbinic tradition.

D. THE REMEDY OF TORAH

It is difficult to say what came first: a new definition of sickness as forgetting Torah or the healing power of study. This pivotal thematic connection of Torah and health colored the rabbinic tradition. In many ways, it placed more responsibility on individuals to insure their own well being. When a Jew studied, he or she felt protected from harm. Forgetting Torah, one kind of sickness, could be remedied by increased study, while the healing of physical illness, another sickness, flowed from God's mercy. Through the midrashim in this section regarding the therapy of Torah, we begin to see how these two kinds of "sickness" developed. The following talmudic legend explores how "the sick" came to signify students of Torah, whereas those who are ill, but are not scholars are called "invalids".

Rabba said: "By the sick (cholin), scholars are meant." This agrees with another dictum of his, for Raba said: In accordance with whom is it that we pray for the invalid, (ketzirei) and the sick (meriei)? In accordance with R. Jose. Since he said, 'the invalid and the sick,' it follows that the "invalid" is literal and the "sick" metaphorically means the

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rabbis (students of Torah).⁷³

The torment of a "forgetful" scholar is explained further along within the same talmudic passage. The rabbis linked the terms "illness" with a "lapse in Torah knowledge" since being occupied with Torah kept a person actively engaged with the spirit of God, ruach ha-Elohim. Losing one's knowledge may have been experienced as distance from God. We observe in the following passage how the rabbis relate Torah study with God.

"You have turned his bed in his sickness" (Ps. 41:4). R. Joseph said: 'This means that he forgets his learning. R. Joseph fell ill (chalash) and forgot his learning; but Abaye restored it to him. Hence it is frequently stated that R. Joseph said, 'I have not heard this law,' and Abaye reminded him. 'You yourself did teach it to us and did deduce it from this particular Baraita.' When Rabbi studied his teaching in thirteen different interpretations, he taught R. Hiyya only seven of them. Eventually Rabbi fell sick (chalash) [forgot his learning]. Thereupon R. Hiyya restored to him the seven versions which he had taught him, but the other six were lost.

Now there was a certain man who had overheard Rabbi when he was studying them himself; so R. Hiyya went and learned them from the fuller, and then repeated these before Rabbi. When Rabbi met him, he said to him, "You have taught both R. Hiyya and myself." Others say that he spoke thus to him: 'You have taught R. Hiyya and he has taught me.'

In this midrash we see how illness (chalash - becoming weak) is equated with forgetting Torah. The implied healing comes from being re-taught all that was forgotten. In addition, the emphasis on tutoring the sages implies giving

⁷³. B.T. Nedarim 49b.

dignity to teachers. They believed that through the study of Torah a person remained in intimate relationship with God. The last section of this midrash says that a sick person in connection with God [through study] is invincible:

"A fire kindled by man, all can extinguish, but that of a sick person who is engaged with a heavenly fire, who can extinguish that"?⁷⁴

Developing a relationship with God through study was a primary method of strengthening oneself. In addition to inner-strength, there are also examples where the study of Torah serves as a preventative to trouble and illness. Following God's ways implied the possession of a protection, whereas alternative worship provided no insurance. Note this rabbinic warning in the following amoraic midrash:

"And Jacob said: 'O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, O God who said to me: Return to your country and to you kindred and I will do good for you' (Gen. 32:10). 'And the God of my father Isaac', but was God not so to Esau too? For a person, however, who chooses the ways [of the Ancestors] and acts as they,' [says God], 'I afford My protection; but to one who does not choose their ways and emulate their acts, I do not afford protection.

R. Hunah observed in R. Aha's name: Who was nearer to David [of Ahaz and Hezekiah]: surely Ahaz! Yet he [the prophet] leaves Ahaz and says to Hezekiah: "Thus says God, the God of David your father" (II Kings 20:5): 'To him who chooses the ways of righteous ancestors and emulates their

⁷⁴. Ibid. See Deuteronomy 33:2 where fire is likened to Torah: "From his right hand went a fiery law" (esh dat lamo).

deeds, I afford protection' says God, 'while to him who does not choose the ways of righteous ancestors nor emulates their deeds, I do not afford protection.⁷⁵

If an individual followed the path of sainted ancestors, then God promised protection. The alternative left that person spiritually stranded.⁷⁶ The above midrash warns the readers what they should do prior to misfortune. Other midrashim that we examine are specifically focussed as to what people should do once struck with disaster. Note, for example, the way the rabbis prescribe Torah as a cure for actual pain:

HALACHA: Is it permissible for a Jew suffering from an earache to heal it on the Sabbath? The sages have taught thus: Where there is the least question of danger to life, the Sabbath laws are suspended. And therefore in the case of an earache, if it is dangerous it may be healed on the Sabbath.⁷⁷

The rabbis say: If you desire not to suffer earache or pain in one of your limbs, then incline your ears to the Torah, and you will inherit life. Whence this? For it is said, "Incline your ears and come unto Me; hear, and your soul shall live" (Isa. 55:3). R. Hanina b. Papa said: 'Whoever turns away his ear from the Torah, his prayer is rejected, as it is said; "One that turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination" (Prov. 28:9).⁷⁸

⁷⁵. Genesis Rabbah 76.4.

⁷⁶. B.T. Berachot 5a: R. Simeon b. Lakish says: 'If one studies the Torah, painful sufferings are kept away from him.'

⁷⁷. On remedies for earache see: B.T. Avoda Zara 28b.

⁷⁸. Deuteronomy Rabbah 10.1.

We learn in this midrash about pain and Torah's remedy that the rabbis communicate several points at one time! The first point communicated by the rabbis is that severe pain overrides Sabbath prohibition. A second point is that if people turn to Torah study then they will not suffer the discomfort. The third point concerns a rabbinic equation where rejecting Torah is equivalent to rejecting God.

Not only is Torah study the treatment for drawing close to God, but Torah also alleviates memory lapse and pain. In addition, Torah study assuages loneliness. The rabbis often had responsibilities, either teaching, study, or business, that forced them to travel alone. By keeping to the discipline of prayer and study, the rabbinic authors believed traveling Jews would cling to appropriate moral behavior as well. Notice in the following passage the way the rabbis deal with issues of loneliness and pain in many parts of the body.

R. Joshua b. Levi stated: If a man is on a journey and has no company, let him occupy himself with the study of the Torah, since it is said in Scripture, "For they shall be a chaplet of grace" (Prov. 1:9). If he feels pains in his head, let him engage in the study of Torah, since it is said, "For they shall be a chaplet of grace unto your head" (ibid.). If he feels pains in his throat let him engage in the study of the Torah, since it is said, "And chains about your neck" (ibid.). If he feels pains in his bowels, let him engage in the study of Torah, since it is said, "It shall be a healing to you navel" (Prov. 3:8). If he feels pain in his bones, let him engage in the study of the Torah, since it is said, "And marrow to your bones" (ibid.). If he feels pain in all his body, let him engage in the study of the Torah, since it is said, "And healings to all his

flesh" (Prov. 4:22).⁷⁹

Throughout this chapter we have discovered the theme of God and Torah as the most acceptable treatments for illness. This is not to say that Jews avoided mortal healers; it implies, however, just how seriously the rabbis believed that ultimate healing came from God. Interestingly enough, the rabbis themselves frequently took the role of healers, "spiritual counselors," when they advised the Jew to be accountable through repentance and study. We will see a greater emphasis upon the individual in the next chapter, which concerns the responsibility of human beings the vehicle of prayer.

⁷⁹. B.T. Eruvin 54a.

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CHAPTER FIVE:

THE HEALING POWER OF PRAYER

The rabbis taught that the Jew possessed the tools for spiritual renewal: good deeds, prayer and repentance. These human efforts contained the strength to counter all evil decrees. There were some scholars, nevertheless, who held the opinion that these tools were negligible, for God remained unaffected by human action. They argued that any attempt at changing God's judgement was futile.⁸⁰ Despite this pessimistic outlook, most rabbis believed that God actually listened to prayer. One of the earliest midrashim reflects this belief of God hearing our pleas. Note, in this example, how the rabbis express God's willingness to answer prayer:

R. Aha says: 'Wherefore do you cry unto Me? For your sake I will do it.' The Holy One said to Moses: If not for your crying I would already have obliterated them. For it is said: "Therefore God said that they would have been destroyed had not Moses, God's chosen, stood before the Holy One in the breach, to turn back God's wrath lest God should destroy them" (Ps. 106:23).⁸¹

Without Moses' cry on behalf of the Israelites, there would have been no divine intervention. The impact of human

⁸⁰. B.T. Rosh Hashanah 16a. The rabbis maintain that a person is judged on the New Year, and once he or she is sentenced, whether to life or death, the verdict cannot be reversed. Consequently, in their opinion it would be futile to pray for the recovery of the sick during the year.

⁸¹. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Massekta, Beshalach, Chap. 4.

concern reached God who answered with compassion. Not only biblical figures such as Moses were known to have prayed, but post-biblical leaders as well. Similarly, one need not be a religious personality to seek God's empathy. Even physicians, for example, were known to turn to God in the face of pain or danger.⁸²

To pray was no indication that rational means were exhausted, nor was prayer a betrayal of medical expertise. Some of the most outstanding Jewish physicians did not hesitate to acknowledge that they depended to some degree upon Divine assistance. Note, as an illustration, the words of the great poet-physician of the Middle Ages, Judah Halevy:

"My medicines are of Thee, whether good or evil,
whether strong or weak, It is thou who shalt choose,
not I; Of Thy knowledge is the evil and the fair.
Not upon my power of healing I reply,
Only for Thine healing do I watch."⁸³

In this chapter we will examine midrashim related to healing prayers in three sections. First we will focus upon the motivation for offering a healing prayer which will be followed by the second section which concerns the preparation required for this special plea. Third, we will compare the

⁸². Harry Friedenwald, The Jews and Medicine (Baltimore, 1944), p.25.

⁸³. Ibid. p. 27.

rabbinic attitude toward praying for oneself versus praying for the well-being of others.

A. MOTIVATION FOR OFFERING A HEALING PRAYER

There are some who say that human beings are altruistic by nature. People are generous, some believe, because that is integral to their character. Others, certain psychologists for example, may differ by taking a behaviorist position. A behaviorist would argue that personalities are shaped through reward and punishment. It appears that the rabbis followed what we today might categorize as the behaviorist's argument, since their traditions reflect that reward accompanied good deeds. We will examine several midrashim that support the theory that individuals offer prayers of healing and in so doing are rewarded with blessing.

The first midrash in this section concerns praying through the metaphor of "lending." When people lend something that is precious to them (when people offer prayers for others) God provides compensation (God rewards those who pray for the well-being of others). The justification for rendering "lending" for 'prayer' stems from Rashi's commentary which explains that the "reward" is actually the surviving of an illness. The man who lends something precious to someone else is promised that "when his soul presses to break loose, God will return it to him."

Another explanation of the text, "If your brother be waxen poor" (Lev. 25:39). It bears on what is written in Scripture: "He that is gracious unto the poor lends unto the Lord" (Prov. 29:17). R. Eleazar said: It is written, "God gives food to all flesh" (Ps. 134:25), and since this man comes and snatches up the good deed, The Holy One says: 'I must pay him recompense.' Hence it is written, "And his good deed will God repay unto him" (Ibid.)...

R. Pinhas in the name of R. Reuben said: 'Whoever gives a perutah to a poor man,⁸⁴ to him will the Holy One, give life! For indeed does God give him a perutah? No, he gives him his life. How is this explained? If a loaf cost ten perutot and a poor man standing in the market-place has only nine, then if someone comes and gives him a perutah so that he buys the loaf and, having eaten it, feels refreshed, the Holy One says to the donor: 'In your case, too, when your soul presses to break loose from your body,⁸⁵ I shall return it to you.'⁸⁶

God rewards kindness with kindness; generosity with generosity. The rabbis taught that for the Jew to act in accordance with the greatest ethical standard was to live in the likeness of God. What we see in God's reaction is similar to the person who offered the perutah. If human beings treat one another with compassion, God will act accordingly. In the following midrash, note how the rabbis communicated this teaching:

R. Jose, son of a woman of Damascus, said: You may

⁸⁴. A perutah is a small coin.

⁸⁵. When the soul presses to break loose from the body refers to being dangerously ill.

⁸⁶. Leviticus Rabbah 34.2.

regard your compassion as a sign that God's compassion will follow - whenever you show compassion for your neighbor, God will show compassion for other mortals as well as for you. Abraham is an example because he procured mercy for Abimelech, having prayed for him. Abraham received his reward at once. Scripture tells us "And Abraham prayed unto God; and God healed Abimelech and his wife" (Gen. 29:17). And what reward did Abraham receive? Abraham's wife was remembered and she bore him a son, as the verse immediately following tells us, "And God remembered Sarah as promised, and God did unto Sarah as God had spoken" (Gen. 21:1).⁸⁷

Due to Abraham's generous prayer to heal Abimelech and his household, God rewarded him. The blessing offered by Abraham concerned the removal of God's curse upon Abimelech and his family. Though Sarah, Abraham's wife, had been taken by Abimelech, Abraham seemed to have forgiven him and hence prayed on his behalf. The prayer asked for an opening of the orifices for Abimelech's household (which implied conception). The reward received by Abraham was the very same blessing that Abraham offered for his "enemy," for immediately the text tells us that Sarah conceived. Another midrash from the same collection, Pesikta Rabbati, says that the whole court of angels in heaven argued to God that Abraham should be blessed with a child. They say to God "Justice demands that Sarah also be remembered."⁸⁸

⁸⁷. Pesikta Rabbati, pisqa 38.1.

⁸⁸. Pesikta Rabbati, pisqa 42.3

We perceive forgiveness and compassion as 'legitimate' motivators for offering a prayer for another person. In addition to these honorable reasons why one might propose a healing prayer, there are other motivations, less lofty. In Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, for example the rabbis introduce us into the world of insecurity and rumor. In this collection of midrashim, the author suggests that Moses prayed for his sister because otherwise Miriam's shame of leprosy would spread to both Aaron and Moses. Note, in the following example, how Aaron pleads with his brother to do something!

Aaron went to Moses and said to him: 'O our lord, Moses! Brethren do not suffer themselves to be separated one from the other except through death, as it is said, "Though he be fruitful among his brethren" (Hos. 13:15). Our sister, while still among the living, is separated from us, as it is said, "Let her not, I pray, be as one dead" (Num 12:12). Not only this, but now all Israel will hear and say that the sister of Moses and Aaron is leprous. Half of this infamous report concerns you. Moses was appeased by the words and he arose and prayed for her.⁸⁹

⁸⁹. Pirke d'Rabbi Eleazer, Chap. 53. The proof text which comes from Hosea provides an interesting theme to this midrash: "Though he be fruitful among his brethren, an east wind will come, the wind of God will come up from the wilderness, and his spring will become dry and his fountain will be dried up; he will spoil the treasure, every lovely object" (Hosea 13:15). Moses is the one "fruitful among his brethren" (his brethren are Aaron and Miriam). Lest Moses neglect to intervene on behalf of Miriam, the proof text warns that a time of trouble will come upon Moses. By employing this proof text, the rabbis insinuate that Moses will not have the opportunity to bask in happiness as "an east wind will come, the wind of God...". Therefore, Moses must pray for Miriam's recovery from leprosy.

This preceding midrash implies that one of the reasons Moses arose to pray on behalf of his sister was his sensitivity to malicious gossip. The second example from the compilation, Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer is even more startling. This midrash concerns the story of Elijah and the woman in Zarepath (I Kings 17:15). In the Book of Kings, this woman's son becomes sick and dies (Ibid. 17). Elijah arises and brings her son back to life. The following legend, like the other in Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, concerns the issue of gossip:

And it came to pass after these things that the son of the woman fell sick" (I King 17:17). The woman said to him (Elijah): 'You came to me for coition, and you will bring my sin to remembrance against me and my son is dead. Now take away all that which you have brought to me and give me my son.' Elijah, may he be remembered for good, arose and prayed before the Holy One and said: 'Sovereign of all the worlds! Is it not enough (to endure) all the evils which have befallen me, but also this woman; for I know that out of sorrow for her son has she spoken of a matter which has not occurred. She has made this charge only to vex me. Now let all the generations learn that there is resurrection of the dead, and restore the soul of this lad within him...' ⁹⁰

Who can be certain what motivates people to be altruistic? The rabbis offer a variety of rationales for generosity of deed and spirit. Once the individual has committed to helping another, he or she must be prepared

⁹⁰. Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chap. 33.

adequately. In the next section we will examine several midrashim concerning preparation and healing prayers.

B. HEALING PRAYERS

Before an individual offers a prayer of petition to God, what is the appropriate procedure? The rabbis focus in the issue of the petitioner's intention, kavanah, and this elicits serious discussion. One avenue toward proper kavanah was humility. The rabbis employ the metaphor of a soft heart (meisim libo k'basar), to signify those who have the kavanah necessary for this special kind of prayer.

R. Hiyya b. Ashi said in the name of Rav: 'A disciple of the sages should possess an eighth [of pride]. R. Huna, the son of R. Joshua, said: '[This small amount of pride] crowns him like the awn of the grain.' Raba said: [A disciple of the sages] who possesses [haughtiness of spirit] deserves excommunication... Hezekiah said: 'A person's prayer is not heard unless the person makes his or her heart [soft] like flesh..'⁹¹

The rabbis teach that a soft heart void of haughtiness is pleasing to God. Though the legend does not mention healing specifically, it does utilize the name Hezekiah. When Hezekiah is mentioned in midrashim, it usually concerns the

⁹¹. B.T. Sota 5a.

incident of healing mentioned in Isa. 38:1-9.⁹² Keeping this in mind, we understand that when a single individual petitions God with proper intentions, his or her prayer will be answered.

Prayer cannot be offered to God without this deliberate kavanah, or introspection from a pliant heart. We are not told specifically how to ease our hearts toward humility, only that without this tone, our prayers are not acceptable. Not only must the kavanah be appropriate, but also the blessing must be accurate. According to the rabbis, if those who pray are punctilious, God will reward:

The Holy One says: 'Take care to recite to Me the proper blessings for every occasion. If you are careful with regard to such blessings, I will come to you and bless you in return, as it is said, "In every place where I ordain to have My name remembered, I will come to you and bless you" (Ex. 21:21). Consider Abraham: what is said of him? "Abraham obeyed My voice" [in the matter of blessings and spoke in a voice that held blessing]"

⁹². "In those days, Hezekiah fell mortally sick. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amos, came to him and said: 'Thus says God, set your house in order, for you will die and not live.' Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall and prayed to God and said, 'Remember now, God, I beseech you, how I have walked before you in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in your sight.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Then came the word of God to Isaiah saying, 'Go and say to Hezekiah: Thus says God, the God of David your father. I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add to your days, fifteen years. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Ashur and I will defend this city. And this will be a sign to you from God, that God will do this thing. I will turn the shadow of the dial which is gone down in the sun dial of Ahaz, ten degrees backward. So the sun returned ten degrees, by which it had gone down on the dial' (Isaiah 38:1-9).

(Gen. 26:5).

In a star Abraham saw his destiny revealed that he would have no children, as it is said, "Seeing that I go hence childless" (Gen. 24:1). But the Holy One said: You did indeed read the stars correctly, for as you live, Abram, as Abram, is not destined to beget children. What then did I mean to do for you? I will change your name and you will beget, as it is said, "Neither shall your name any more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham" (Gen. 17:5). Sarai also, as Sarai, is not destined to bear children, as it is said, "Sarai was barren" (Gen. 11:30); but as Sarah she will bear children, as it is said, "The Lord remembered Sarah" (Gen. 21:1).⁹³

This midrash suggests that God showed compassion to Abraham for several reasons. One of the primary reasons was that Abraham listened to God. The rabbis interpret the way Abraham listened as the reason for God speaking with him in a voice filled with blessing. In response to God's compassion, Abraham's voice contained fervor as well. Abraham's kavanah was one of humility and faith, and, as a result, he was rewarded with the legacy of the Jewish people.

The second part of the midrash concerns the power of a name. The name received at birth links that person to a specific destiny. These maps of destiny are held by God and there is no modification. On the other hand, miracles do occur. What may have been an inconceivable concept, such as Abram, or Sarai having children, is changed by God. Each of these people underwent rites of passage and by their trials

⁹³. Pesikta Rabbati, pisqa 43.1.

were transformed. God acknowledges their metamorphosis and grants them change of name from Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah. Hence, as different people, they can be blessed with children.

Other traits also become important in requesting healing favors from God. In addition to the proper kavanah and proper prayer, one must praise God before asking for favors. Prefacing a request with praise is another way of showing humility and respect. In this next example, the rabbis discuss the prayers of Miriam and Aaron. These siblings beseech God's favor but Miriam is mentioned first. The rabbis ask why her prayer came before Aaron's. The answer has to do with her prayer formula:

And it is said concerning all the petitionary prayers. And why is it that the Miriam's prayer preceded the prayer of Aaron? It is rather that she opened her prayer with a word of praise and thus she preceded him.⁹⁴

Praising God for all that is good prior to asking favor received greater approval from the rabbis. This special prayer formula evolved into a major rubric within the Jewish daily worship prayer service called the Amida. The Amida, like Miriam's prayer alluded to in the midrash, includes praise and petition followed by thanksgiving. In addition to praising God

⁹⁴. Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, Izav 13.

prior to a healing supplication, we will find that there are other ways to ask for God's healing blessing.

In a much later piece from the Zohar, we come across an unusual means of reaching God. It concerns a meditation for healing. The tradition concerns the story in Numbers, chapter 12, in which Moses prays for the healing of his sister, Miriam. The midrash addresses the very short prayer uttered by Moses and asks why Moses utilized such a concise utterance. It explains that a longer prayer relates to the higher world (heavens), whereas a short prayer is tied to the lower world (earth). Second, it teaches that God has a special healing name. By meditating on this healing name of God or perhaps a way of addressing God, El na refah na la (God, please heal her) Moses unlocked the secret cure for his sister.

And Moses cried out to God saying: El na refah na la. Rabbi Shimon came and saw that when Moses ordered his prayers for the sake of all Israel, he offered a long prayer. Thus a long prayer was the prayer employed before the heavens on high (for all Israel) When he ordered his prayer for his sick sister, he did not lengthen his prayer (as it was for one person). Therefore this prayer was a prayer for the lower world. Thus it is written El na refah na la and not lengthened any longer...

Rabbi Abba said El na refah na la is the secret of God's holy name. This Divine name contains eleven letters and Moses did not want to pray longer.⁹⁵

⁹⁵. Zohar, Behalotcha 15.

When praying to God for a healing, there is a special formula. This formula may include humility, kavanah, praises or a distinctive way to address God. The Zohar piece also suggests that there was some question about the use of a long or short prayer when praying for Miriam. Throughout the centuries, the rabbis have grappled with this issue of Moses pleading to God with such few words!

In another collection of midrashim, Tanhumaha ha-Nidpas, further explanations are provided for Moses' choice of prayer formula. In this tradition, it says that the people of Israel would presume favoritism if he prayed for her recovery over an extended period of time. In order not to upset of the rest of the community, he kept his prayer brief.⁹⁶

And for what reason didn't Moses lengthen this prayer? In order that the Israelites would not say, 'He gives greater attention to his sister's trouble, and that is why he keeps his prayer long.'⁹⁷

⁹⁶. An earlier references in the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishamel, Beshalach, chap. 4 states: "And then God said to Moses: 'Wherefore do you cry to me? Speak to the Children of Israel that they go forward' (Ex. 14:15). R. Joshua says: The Holy One said to Moses. 'Moses, all that Israel has to do is to go forward.' R. Eliezer says: 'The Holy One said to Moses, 'Moses, My children are in distress, the sea forming a bar and the enemy pursuing, and you stand there reciting long prayers; why do you cry unto Me? For R. Eliezer used to say: 'There is a time to be brief in prayer and a time to be lengthy as it says: "Heal her now, God, I beseech You" (El na rafa na la (Num. 12:13)).

⁹⁷. Tanhuma Ha-Nidpas, Izav, 12. For an earlier reference, see Sifre to Numbers, Behalotcha: pisga 105: "Heal her God, I beseech You" (Num. 12:13). Why did not Moses make a long prayer? In order that the Israelites should not say, "Ah, he prays long because she is his sister!" Another

Having discussed some of the aspects of preparation for a healing prayer; an open heart, humility, kavanah, praising God, and employing a special "healing" name or meditation for God, we now turn to specific prayers offered by the sick themselves. We will find that there is more than one opinion about the efficacy of praying for oneself in contrast to praying for another person.

C. HEALING PRAYERS: FOR OURSELVES AND OTHERS

Is praying for our own well being a selfish act? Or does the Power in the Universe accept prayers of all varieties if offered with pliant hearts? This question of egotism or honest supplication intrigued the rabbinic mind throughout the ages. In this section we will observe that tension by examining prayers related to healing. We will notice the way the rabbis encouraged individuals to forge a personal relationship with God, especially in their time of need. In addition, we will see that prayers for healing are the most

explanation: In order that Israel should not say: 'His sister is in distress and he stands here and makes long prayers!' Another explanation: Is not this Moses, who, when he prays, God answers his prayer? The righteous has only to say one word and it is accepted by God and therefore it was not necessary for him to pray long (Cf. Job 22:28; Isa. 58:9)....There is a time for short prayers and a time for long ones.

personal type of prayer included in Jewish liturgy.

We begin this section concerning healing prayers for oneself with a text from the amoraic period. Note how directly it states that praying for oneself is pleasing to God:

"And the angel of God called to Hagar" (21:17). For Abraham's sake, while "God heard the voice of the lad" (Gen. 21:19). "Where he is" (Gen. 21:17) connotes for his own sake; for a sick person's prayers on his own behalf are more efficacious than those of anyone else.⁹⁸

Thus we learn that a person who defines his or her own pain and asks for God's mercy is more effective in reaching God than anyone else. One of the reasons for this rabbinic lesson might be to encourage people to pray. Another might be to inspire individuals to forge a more direct and honest personal relationship with God as well as develop faith. We note in an early tannaitic midrash that even when death has been predicted, one is compelled to ask God for healing.

Rabbi said: 'If individuals have a terrible dream or see terrible visions from which they are terribly afraid, they should gather three things. Rabbi Yoden said in the name of Rabbi Eleazer: 'Three things change a judgment and they are: prayer, charity, and repentance...

And thus you find this with Hezekiah, king of Judea, at the hour that Hezekiah was sick, God said to Isaiah: "Is your house in order, for you will die and not live" (Is. 38:1).

Hezekiah said to Isaiah: In the earthly world, a person goes to visit the sick, saying: 'From the

⁹⁸ Genesis Rabbah 53.13.

heavens, let there be mercy upon you.' And the doctor goes to this person and says: 'Piloni [requires] blood-letting and eats or Piloni should not [then] eat. The judgement is to drink or the judgement is not to drink.' Even if a person is near dying, one should never say to them: 'Get your house in order.'⁹⁹

This powerful teaching implies that nothing is too extraordinary for God. Regardless of what mortal authority has predicted about the length of one's life span, there is always hope for change, even miraculous change. This midrash further explains that mortals have no right to believe they know another's life sentence. In addition, since Hezekiah turns to pray for God's mercy and recovers, we learn that God can intervene regardless of what anyone else may have said. Ultimately, healing or death are in the hands of the Creator, not humanity.¹⁰⁰

Of course, as mortals, we give great credence to the physician's diagnosis. The rabbis acknowledge this tendency to believe in physicians as well as or often instead of God.

⁹⁹. Kohelet Rabbah, 5:4. See also B.T. Berachot 10b: 'R. Hanan said: 'Even if the master of dreams says to a person that on the morrow he or she will die, this person should not desist from prayer, for so it says, "For in the multitude of dreams are vanities and also many words, but fear your God" (Ecc. 5:6). Thereupon straightway, "Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed unto God" (Isa. 38:2). See also B.T. Yevamot 49b-50a.

¹⁰⁰. In a later anthology of midrashim, Yalkut Shemoni 1: 817, we find the example of Hezekiah's prayer again. It says: 'Just as Hezekiah prayed to God (in his hour of great need), so should the rest of Israel (sha-ar b'nei Yisrael al achat kamah v'kama).

Note in the following text how the rabbinic author explores this tension through a discourse about surgery:

On going to be cupped (blood letting) one should say: 'May it be Your will, Adonai, that this operation will be a cure for me and may You heal me, for You are a faithful healing God. Your healing is sure, since people have no power to heal, yet this is a custom of theirs.¹⁰¹ Abaye said: People should not speak thus, since it was taught in the School of R. Ishmael: "God will cause them to be thoroughly healed" (Ex. 21:19). From this we learn that permission has been given to the physician to heal. When individuals get up (after the operation) what do they say? R. Aha said: 'Blessed be God, who heals without payment.'¹⁰²

Interestingly in the following section within the same talmudic passage the rabbis introduce another aspect of healing. Healing, we will see, is not only for those who are "sickly" in a diminished sense, but vulnerable in a mortal sense. Normal body performance must not be taken for granted. Without the normalcy of daily physical functioning, we would face severe crisis. In this way, the rabbis suggest that even going to the bathroom is a reason to praise God. In this passage the rabbis argue about the prayer to be recited

¹⁰¹ "Since people have no power to heal, yet this is a custom of theirs (l'efi sh'ain darchan shel b'nai adam l'raphot, eleh sh'nahgu). This passage may refer to the tension experienced by the person who seeks a cure from a mortal physician and yet realizes that the ultimate Healer is God.

¹⁰² B.T. Berachot, 60a.

following this seemingly mundane act. Rabbi Papa concludes by saying that the proper blessing should be: 'Blessed is God who heals all flesh and does so miraculously.'

On entering a privy, one should say: 'Be honored, you honored and holy ones that minister to the Most High. Give honor to the God of Israel. Wait for me till I enter and do my needs and return to you.' Abaye said: 'A person would not speak thus, lest they should leave him and go. What he should say is, 'Preserve me, preserve me, help me, help me, support me, support me, till I have entered and come forth, for this is the way of human beings.' When he comes out, he says: 'Blessed is God who has formed human beings in wisdom and created in them many orifices and many cavities. It is fully known before the throne of Your glory that if one of them should be improperly opened or one of them closed, it would be impossible for a person to stand before You.'

How should this blessing conclude? Rav said: 'Blessed are You that heals the sick.' Samuel said: 'Abba has turned the whole world into invalids! No; what he should say is: 'that heals all flesh.' R. Sheseth said: 'Who does miraculously.' R. Papa said: 'Therefore let us say both, 'Who heals all flesh and does miraculously.'

In this talmudic passage the rabbis provide an expanded definition of illness, by showing that something as 'normal' as using the bathroom requires a blessing. This blessing is one of praise in order to insure that, in general, God will continue to care for us and specifically, maintain our body functions. The rabbis realized that God "heals" on a daily basis by preserving our well being. This very "average"

miracle merited pious reflection.

In the preceding text, the rabbis express the importance of orifices and cavities that work in perfect condition. This theme of body functioning is found in other places as well. One biblical story from Genesis for example, speaks about the 'closing up' of Abimelech's household. As mentioned prior, Sarah, wife of Abraham had been taken into King Abimelech's harem. The rabbis teach that God cursed Abimelech with the closing up of orifices. The midrash on this Genesis verse, "For God had fast closed up" (Gen. 20:18), explains how Sarah prayed to God for help. Because she prayed for herself, God came to her rescue. We note that in healing Sarah of a potentially agonizing experience with the King, God brought curses upon her tormentor.

"For God had fast closed up" (Gen. 20:18). This 'closing up' applied to the mouth, the throat, the eye, the ear, above and below. And all admitted that it was "Because of Sarah, Abraham's wife" (Gen. 10:21). R. Berekiah said: 'It was because he dared to approach the shoe of that lady. And the whole of that night, Sarah lay prostrate on her face, crying, 'Sovereign of the Universe! Abraham went forth [from his land] on Your assurance, and I went forth with faith; Abraham is [free] of this prison while I am within!' God said to her: 'Whatever I do, I do for your sake, and all will say, "It is because of Sarah, Abraham's wife" (Gen. 18:21).¹⁰⁴

God heeded Sarah's prayer and sent curses upon the house of King Abimelech. We note that her prayer was direct: 'I went forth from my home with faith. Abraham is not going through this torture, I am. Rescue me!' Her heart was pliant, her words honest. God delivered in a way we might have never imagined. We discover within this biblical story that Abraham is able to forgive Abimelech and prays for his return to health. God grants this as well by removing the curse of 'closed up' orifices.

In this section we have examined midrashim stressing that God listens and in some cases prefers prayers offered by the person in pain. The rabbis also present a contrary perspective which emphasizes that praying should only be performed on behalf of another. The following talmudic passage adamantly states the prohibition concerning self oriented healing prayers:

R. Joshua b. Levi recited verses (Ps. 91:1-9) when retiring to sleep. How could he do so? Did not R. Joshua b. Levi say it is prohibited to heal oneself with words of the Torah? To protect oneself is different. Well then, when he said it is prohibited he meant where there is already a wound. If there is a wound, is it merely prohibited and nothing else? Surely we have learned, the One who utters an incantation over a wound has no portion in the world to come!¹⁰⁵

The argument separates praying for the healing of an

¹⁰⁵. B.T. Shavuot 15b.

existent wound and a protection from evil. The rabbis condone praying for protection, but do not accept utilizing words of Scripture for the healing of a wound. To comprehend this argument requires some manipulation of pre-existing values. Though we have read midrashim stressing the power of prayer and the importance of a humble heart, here we learn that praying for oneself is wrong. The rabbis suggest that a person can pray for safekeeping, but once there is an actual wound, asking God to change the decree is not appropriate.

Praying for oneself is not allowed, though prayer for another is encouraged. The following passage tells us that no one prayed to God for on behalf of others until Abraham.

"And Abraham prayed to God" (Gen. 20:17). R. Hama b. R. Hanina said; 'From the beginning of the Book of Genesis until here we do not have this expression. But as soon as Abraham prayed, this knot¹⁰⁶ was untied.'¹⁰⁷

God accepts the intervention of people when they offer prayers for others. As we saw above, the example of Abraham praying on behalf of King Abimelech is a popular theme in the midrashic literature. The issue of his ability to forgive Abimelech is intrinsically linked to the healing power of his prayer.

¹⁰⁶. The knot represents the closing up of orifices.

¹⁰⁷. Genesis Rabbah, 52.13.

We have a similar example, that shows the power of forgiveness shown by Abraham through his unique plea. Logical thinking epitomized his healing prayer! Since God commanded all living creatures to reproduce (Gen. 1:22), then a curse on King Abimelech which prevented reproduction ran counter to that Divine request.

Rabbi Joshua ben Korchah [rehearsed] before Rabbi Tarphon saying: 'Whatever Pharaoh gave, he gave to Sarah; whatever Abimelech gave, he gave to Abraham; as it is said, "And Abimelech took sheep and oxen" (Gen. 20:14) Abraham rose and prayed before the Holy One and said: 'Sovereign of all worlds! You have created the whole world to increase and multiply and let Abimelech and all the females of his household increase and multiply. The Holy One was entreated of him, as it is said, "And Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maidservants; and they bore children" (Gen. 20:17).¹⁰⁸

Abraham exalts his "enemy" Abimelech in prayer and healing occurs. The rabbis teach that the potency of Abraham's prayer reached God and rescued the household of Abimelech. Other examples have been recorded of praying in which a single person's prayers extend to entire communities of Jews. For example, wide reaching prayers of healing were uttered by King Hezekiah.

King Hezekiah, ruler over Jerusalem is acclaimed in Second Chronicles, as he was the one who succeeded in returning the Israelite ritual back to the Temple after many

years of neglect. He brought a renaissance of Jewish practice, such as the festival of Passover. A problem arose, however, in that the levites who were performing the ritual of the paschal lamb were not all clean. Many of the people, the biblical passage explains, were not purified but ate the paschal lamb regardless.

There was a great fear that God would strike the people down for the sin of performing the ritual imperfectly. The transgression hinged on the fact that the calendar was incorrect after so many years of disregard. Therefore, Hezekiah is attributed with introducing a leap year at this time. Thus for many reasons, the well being of his people was at stake. Note the rabbinic debate about of the King Hezekiah's prayer on behalf of his entire people.

"For the multitude of the people, even many of Ephraim and Manasseh, Issachar and Zebulan had not cleansed themselves, yet did they eat the Passover otherwise than it is written; for Hezekiah had prayed for them saying: 'May God in God's goodness pardon everyone.'" R. Simeon said: If the intercalation was actually on the grounds of uncleanness, it hold good. Why then did Hezekiah implore Divine mercy? Because only an Adar can be intercalated and he intercalated a Nisan in Nisan. R. Simeon b. Judah said on behalf of R. Simeon that it was because he had persuaded Israel to celebrate a Second Passover unduly.¹⁰⁹

In this midrash concerning uncleanness, the rabbis pursue the reason for Hezekiah's prayer to God. One reason was that the levites were unclean; another reason was the calendar intercalation and the third was that he had persuaded them to make up a lost Passover celebration. In two of the three explanations, it is assumed that the King had made the error and thus he offered prayer. The first explanation, however, bears further inquiry. If the sin was due to the people's lack of purity before offering the paschal lamb, then Hezekiah was not the one directly at fault! And yet, we find that he prayed on behalf of his people and they were pardoned.

This midrash shows that Hezekiah's generous prayer reached God successfully. Within the midrashic literature there are other examples of generous prayer offerings even when the one who prays has not been asked directly for help. The rabbis teach that even if we dream about someone and do not understand the dream, we should offer a prayer of healing for that person. In the talmud, the rabbis argue about the issue of healing for those who surface in our dreams:

Amemar, Mar Zutra and R. Ashi were once sitting together. They said: Let each of us say something which the others have not heard. One of them began: 'If one has seen a dream and does not remember what he saw, let him stand before the priests at the time when they spread out their hands and say as follows: 'Sovereign of the Universe, I am Yours and my dreams are Yours. I have dreamt a dream and I do not know what it is. Whether I have dreamt about myself or my companions have dreamt about me, or I have dreamt about others, if they are good dreams, confirm them and reinforce them like the dreams of Joseph.

If the dreams require a remedy, heal them as the waters of Marah were healed by Moses our teacher, and as Miriam was healed of her leprosy and Hezekiah of his sickness and the waters of Jericho by Elisha. As you turned the curse of wicked Balaam into a blessing, so turn all my dreams into something good for me.' The individual would conclude the prayer along with the priests so that the congregation might answer: Amen. If the person cannot manage this prayer, he or she should say: You who are majestic on high who abides in might, You are peace and Your name is peace, May it be Your will to bestow peace on us.¹¹⁰

The Jewish tradition encourages us to pray for healing, whether it is for ourselves or for others. This view has been highlighted throughout midrashic literature. Even in the most frightening of situations, where all seems hopeless, the Jew is actually obligated to turn to God for compassion. Indeed, in the example gleaned from the Zohar we discovered that God has a healing name, El na rafa na la. In this chapter we saw that a pliant heart, humility, kavanah and praise were necessary in order to offer a healing prayer. In the following chapter we will examine other means of receiving the blessing of recovery. The tradition teaches that good deeds, mitzvot, are another means of reaching God.

¹¹⁰ B.T. Berachot 55b.

FOX RIVER BOND

CHAPTER SIX:

HEALING: RECOMPENSE FOR MITZVOT

One alleged criticism of the rabbis is that they attached enormous importance to reward.¹¹¹ The motivation for performing good deeds was the hope of reward, in this world or the world to come at resurrection or in heaven.¹¹² Surely we can understand why the rabbis emphasized a reward for good deeds. All the persecutions and endless troubles under which Jews suffered convinced the rabbis that there must be reward for the righteous in this world if not the next. We gain a sense of the rabbinic perspective about deserved blessing in response to good deeds in the following illustration:

Another exposition of the text, "If your brother be waxen poor" (Lev. 25:25). It bears on what is written in Scripture: "One who is gracious unto the poor lends unto the Lord" (Prov. 19:17). R. Eleazar said: It is written, "God gives food to all flesh" (Ps. 136:25), and since this person comes and snatches up the good deed, the Holy One says: 'I must pay this person recompense.'¹¹³

¹¹¹. C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, A Rabbinic Anthology (Schocken Books, New York 1974), p.202.

¹¹². Less prominent in the tradition is the emphasis on 'joy of commandment' - simcha shel mitzvah. This theme focusses upon the experience of happiness in the performance of the deed. See, for example B.T. Berachot 31a: "One must not stand up to say the Amida prayer in the midst of sorrow, idleness, jocularly, frivolous conversation, levity or idle chatter, but in the midst of the joy of the commandment.

¹¹³. Leviticus Rabbah 34.2.

Good deeds do not go unnoticed by God. The rabbis allude to a balance sheet on which human efforts of goodness count in the grand scheme of life. We realize that goodness begets goodness in the same way that acts of selfishness develop a pattern of their own. Often we forget that the small acts we do on a daily basis provide the backbone of who we are. This ethic is exemplified by a statement uttered by Moses to the Israelites as they wandered impatiently in the desert.

In the exchange between Moses and the Israelites, the word "redemption" is employed. Redemption implies an action that delivers people from an oppressive situation. In a similar way, "healing" also signifies an exodus from an enslavement; whether it is physical, emotional, or spiritual distress. In this midrash, the word "redemption" is read synonymously with "healing." Moses explains to the Israelites about the possibility of redemption. In order to leave their oppressive situation, he warns them that they must make the effort as well.

Moses said to Israel: "If you desire to be redeemed, you can obtain your redemption with a very little thing." They were like a person who suffered with his feet and who went round to all the doctors and could not find a cure, until at last one came and said to him, 'If you want to be cured, there is a very easy way of doing it; plaster your feet with the dung of cattle.' So Moses said to Israel: 'If you want to be redeemed, you can obtain your

redemption with a very simple thing.¹¹⁴

The metaphor of cow dung implies a 'simple thing' that a person would never presume to be important. And yet the tradition emphasizes that people can direct their redemption/healing to a degree through seemingly inconsequential acts. A person's ability to create a satisfying life is developed by their acts of goodness toward others. This chapter will look at two such acts: visiting the sick and hospitality. We will see how intimately the rabbis linked them with healing.

A. VISITING THE SICK - BIKKUR CHOLIM

Visiting the sick, bikkur cholim, is much more than a praiseworthy social act. Jewish law has given bikkur cholim the status of a religious obligation, a mitzvah. It states in the Mishnah that visiting the sick counts among the deeds for which: "One uses the interest in this world, leaving the principal for the World to Come."¹¹⁵ The rabbis traced this mitzvah directly to moments when God performed this deed. Abraham had undergone circumcision and on the third day, God appeared to him. Many midrashim discuss how God visited him

¹¹⁴. Song of Songs Rabbah, II 3, 2.

¹¹⁵. B.T. Peah 1:1.

for the sole purpose of bikkur cholim. Note the following portrayal of this model of bikkur cholim.

The Holy One said to the ministering angels: 'Come let us descend and visit the sick, for the virtue of visiting the sick is great before Me.' The Holy One and the angels descended to visit our father Abraham, as it is said, "And God appeared unto him" (Gen. 18:1).¹¹⁶

The tradition underscores the notion that God considers visiting the sick an important task. Even at the moment of supreme joy, a wedding, a later legend teaches that God visits the sick. The biblical verse predominantly used in midrashim concerning bikkur cholim is Genesis 18:1. In this verse, God pays a healing visit to Abraham. Notice in the succeeding vignettes the importance of this mitzvah:

R. Abbahu said: 'The Holy One took a cup of blessing and blessed them.'¹¹⁷ R. Judah b. R. Simon said: 'Michael and Gabriel were Adam's 'best men.'¹¹⁸ R. Simlai said: 'We find that the Holy One blesses bridegrooms, adorns brides, visits the sick, buries the dead, and recites the blessing for mourners. God

¹¹⁶. Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chap. 29.

¹¹⁷. The cup of blessing relates to the "wedding cup" which is used in the Seven Benedictions, the Sheva Brachot, during the wedding feast.

¹¹⁸. B.T. Baba Metzia 86b explains that Michael and Gabriel were ministering angels. It teaches that God sent three angels to visit Abraham on that day, Rafael, Gabriel, and Michael. Some say that the noun rofeh, healer, is derived from the angel Rafael. Raphael had come to heal Abraham from the after effects of his circumcision; Gabriel had come to bring Sarah the good news that she would have a child. Gabriel had come to destroy the wicked city of Sodom.

blesses the bridegrooms, as it is written, "And God blessed them" (Gen. 1:28). God adorns brides, as it is written, "And God built the rib...into a woman" (Gen. 2:22). God visits the sick, as it is written, "And God appeared unto him.." (Gen. 18:1).

We are told specifically that by emulating God we are drawn closer to holiness. The talmudic passage we now explore gives direct instructions about how our behavior mirrors God. If it is possible to walk in the way of God, then it is only through our following God's path.

R. Hama, son of R. Hanina, further said: 'What means the text, "You shall walk after God" (Deut. 13:5)? Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the Shechinah?¹²⁰ for has it not been said, "For your God is a devouring fire" (Deut. 4:24)?¹²¹ But [the meaning is] to follow after the attributes of the Holy One. As God clothes the naked, for it is written, "And God made for Adam and for Eve coats of skin and clothed them" (Gen. 3:21), so do you clothe the naked. The Holy One visited the sick, for it is written, "And God appeared unto him by the

¹¹⁹. Genesis Rabbah 18:13. We find this theme echoed in a later tradition in Midrash Tehillim 25:11: "R. Simlai said: 'We find that the Holy One adorns maidens and seeks out husbands for them; that God visits the sick and buries the dead. And the proof that God adorns maidens and seeks out husbands for them? The verse: "And with the rib which God had taken from the man, God plaited the hair, banah, of the woman, and brought her unto the man (Gen. 2:22). The word banah suggests that the Holy One plaited Eve's hair, and brought her [thus adorned] to Adam, for in cities by the sea a woman's plaited hair is called binyata. And the proof that God visits the sick? The verse, "And God appeared unto him by the terebinths of Mamre" (Gen. 18:1).

¹²⁰. The Shechinah is understood as God's Indwelling Presence. As it says: "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them, yshachanti betocham (Ex. 25:8).

¹²¹. God described as a "devouring fire" (esh achlah) is found also in Deut. 9:3. Other examples depicting God's wrath through this metaphor are found in Joel 1:19, 2:3, and 2:15.

oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18:1); so do you also visit the sick.¹²²

In order to be close to God, we must perform the deed of visiting the sick. This visit is not a social visit, but one that fulfills a higher function.¹²³ This function is articulated for us in another talmudic dictum:

"And God appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre; and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day" (Gen. 18:1). What is meant by 'in the heat of the day?' R. Hama ben R. Hanina said: 'It was the third day from Abraham's circumcision, and the Holy one came to enquire after Abraham's health...'¹²⁴

Not only do we learn from the midrashim the central purpose of a visit to the sick, which is to inquire about their well being, but we are taught rabbinic protocol as well. We learn in Tanhuma ha-Nidpas something about professional etiquette concerning the visitation:

"And God appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre.." (Gen. 18:1). It is the custom of the world that when

¹²². B.T. Sotah 14a.

¹²³. Nachmanides, Torat ha-Adam, in Kitvei Ramban, ed. Charles B. Chavel (Jerusalem, 5723), II, 17 states that the mitzvah consists of two parts: 1) an endeavor to determine whether the patient requires care and actual provision of such medical or nursing care and 2) prayer on behalf of the patient. Nachmanides concludes with the comment, "One who visits the sick and does not pray on his/her behalf has not fulfilled the mitzvah."

¹²⁴. B.T. Baba Metzia 86a.

a student is ill, the Rabbi goes to visit him, and the students go after the Rabbi. So it is with God, that in the case of Abraham's recovery from circumcision, God said to the angels, 'Let us visit him.' First God went [to visit him] and then the angels.¹²⁵

Ultimately we learn that bikkur cholim is a laudable deed to perform. Not only is the visitor praised, but the relief gained by the patient is significant as well. The rabbis were quick to realize the medicinal value of psychological comfort generated by an appropriate visit. Centuries ago the sages taught how mental and spiritual well being enhance recovery. In the following passage we notice how the rabbis discuss the therapeutic value of bikkur cholim:

"If your brother be waxen poor" (Lev. 25:25) This bears on the text, "Happy is the person that deals wisely with the poor, for God will deliver this one in the day of evil" (Ps. 41:1). Abba b. Jeremiah in the name of R. Meir said that this refers to one who enthrones the Good Inclination over the Evil Inclination. R. Isi said that it refers to one who gives a perutah to a poor person. R. Johanan said that it refers to one who buries the dead. Our rabbis say that it refers to one who [assists a person] escaping from tyrants. R. Huna said it refers to one who visits the sick.

'For,' said R. Huna, 'if a person visits the sick, a reduction of one-sixtieth part of the illness is thereby effected.' The rabbis pointed out an objection to R. Huna: 'If that is so, let sixty people come in an enable the sick person to go down into the street!' He answered them; 'Sixty could accomplish this, but only if they loved this person like themselves. But in any case, they would afford

¹²⁵. Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, Ki-tissa 15.

the sick relief.¹²⁶

The tradition seems to be telling us that perfunctory "good deeds" are not sufficient to fulfill this mitzvah. As mentioned earlier, simcha shel mitzvah, joy of the commandment, must be integrated into a person's motivation. Rabbinic Judaism, realized that proper motivation was often more important than the deed - even though the doing of the commandment as a mere duty might lead to its eventual fulfillment in joy and in love.¹²⁷ God looks to the intention and the purity of the deed; quality rather than quantity, as it says in the Talmud: "It matters not whether you do much or little, your heart must be directed to heaven."¹²⁸ We will understand a greater sense of the rabbinic view toward intention, as we turn to the second mitzvah connected with healing; hospitality.

B. HOSPITALITY

Henri J. M. Nouwen, a Christian minister, has written extensively about the power of hospitality. He explains that

¹²⁶. Leviticus Rabbah 34:1.

¹²⁷. C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 272.

¹²⁸. B.T. Berachot 17a.

the link between hospitality and healing are extraordinary, in that hospitality allows the "patient" to unburden his or her tormented soul in a safe environment. Hospitality, according to Nouwen, is far more than polite external service of tea or supper, but rather it refers to the generous internal state of the listener. He utilizes the word "guest" when describing what we have termed as "the ill." His argument is convincing whether we apply his view of hospitality to actual guests in our home, or as a model of daily interaction. He writes:

"But it has become very difficult for us today to fully understand the implications of hospitality. Like the Semitic nomads, we live in a desert with many lonely travelers who are looking for a moment of peace, for a fresh drink and for a sign of encouragement so that they can continue their mysterious search for freedom."¹²⁹

Nouwen explains that hospitality is the ability to pay genuine attention to someone else. He notes how difficult this is, as we are so often preoccupied with our own needs, worries and tensions. These human distractions prevent us from sincerely paying attention to others. He links hospitality to healing when he defines a healing 'ministry' as one that does not try to "fix" anyone, but rather invites the other to share his or her loneliness.

¹²⁹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, The Wounded Healer (Double Day: New York, London, Toronto, 1979), p.89.

Jewish theology also speaks of this genuine encounter, although it uses a different vocabulary. Genuine encounter is reflected in the teaching of theologian Martin Buber. His contemplation about the I-Thou relationship versus the I-It relationship echoes some of Nouwen's thoughts. For Buber, relating to another as Thou connects him with God. He writes:

"The primary word I-Thou can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou. All real living is meeting."¹³⁰

Martin Buber was a mystic; his writings reflect what today we call profound spirituality. In a related way, Nouwen's writing about hospitality asks us to be genuine and present in our interactions with others. Both writers may have discovered the healing that comes with sincere interaction through studying biblical legends.

Two specific biblical stories dominate midrashim concerning the hospitality - healing motif. The themes are basically the same, however the names are different. In one story, the healer is Elijah (I Kings, chapter 17), while in the other story, the healer is Elisha (II Kings, chap. 4). Both stories involve a woman who welcomes the prophet. In the

¹³⁰. Martin Buber, I and Thou, (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1958), p. 11.

first scenario, the woman is a widow from Zeraphath. This widow already has a son who dies and Elijah brings him back to life. In the second scenario, the woman, known as the Shunammite woman, is married and barren. Elisha promises that she and her husband will be blessed with a child. This cherished son dies and Elisha brings him back to life.

We will now look at some midrashim stemming from these biblical hospitality tales. Though midrashic literature does not address hospitality as healing in the manner of Nouwen or Buber, it does allude to some life-saving qualities. The legends emphasize the benefit of taking in the stranger. In this way, hospitality becomes linked with healing:

R. Simeon b. Yohai then came forward and took as his text, "It once happened, that Elisha passed to Shunem, where there was a great woman; and she constrained him to eat bread" (II KINGS 4:8). R. Judah b. R. Simon said to him: 'Because it is written of her that "she constrained him to eat bread," did she merit that her son should be brought to life again?'

R. Judah b. R. Il'ai said: 'Elijah used to take even his own lamps and his own wicks from place to place so as not to trouble other people.' R. Judah b. R. Simon said: 'Did he eat of her food? Did not both she and he eat of his, as it is written, "And she, and he ... did eat" (I KINGS 17:15). But the truth is that because she gave him a good welcome and waited on him, she merited that her son be brought to life.'

R. Judah said in the name of R. Zeira and R. Johanan in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai: 'Great is the merit of maintaining the needy, since it causes the resurrection of the dead to come before its time. The woman of Zarephath, because she maintained Elijah was rewarded by having her son brought to life. The Shunammite woman [was rewarded] because she gave food to Elisha by having

her son brought back to life.¹³¹

The midrash states that because these women provided a roof, food and companionship to these men, they were rewarded with this miracle. We can only conjecture why their hospitality generated such blessing. We know that Elijah and Elisha were holy men. Perhaps the women's ability to see beyond their homeless status provided them with their unique reward.

Rabbinic legends not only fill in the gaps within the biblical text, but teach a moral as well. We find in the next example one of the ethical lessons regarding hospitality:

And thus you find with Elijah, at the hour when he went near the widow from Zerahath and her son died. He began praying and said; "You have also brought evil upon the widow with whom I lodge by slaying her son..And God heard the voice of Elijah and returned the soul of the boy and he was revived" (I Kings 17:20-22). And is it not but 'to create an opening for one's friend' (poteach petach lachavero). It is a greater obligation to give greater honor to someone more than to one's father or mother.¹³²

The rabbis explain that generosity beyond the obligation to one's family is praiseworthy. From this we infer that people are obligated to one another regardless of genetic or marital bonding. Hospitality is more than a mandatory burden.

¹³¹. Song of Songs Rabbah, II 5,3.

¹³². Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, Shemot, 16.

Hospitality should be offered graciously. Though the widow from Zerpeth and the Shunammite woman may have been preoccupied with their own metaphoric or literal poverty, tradition shows that they had the capacity to make room for someone else. Clearly Elijah and Elisha were special guests to be welcomed. We will find out more about these prophets and others in the following chapter concerning miracle workers.

MIRACULOUS HEALERS

One of the most revealing facts about Rabbinic Judaism was that God did not function alone in the universe. The opinions of the rabbis reflect a belief that human beings had the capacity to perform holy acts on earth. Moreover, in the evaluation of the rabbinic tradition regarding miraculous healers and the tracing of their biblical kernels, we find that some of these special individuals had the power to cure infertility, bring rain and resurrect the dead.

As we review some of the midrashim about these extraordinary acts, we are introduced to several names included in the category of "healer." Most often these prophetic individuals are recognized by their tenacity to challenge God, their humility, and righteousness. An illuminating picture of tenacity is seen in the following example portraying Moses and his sister Miriam:

Another comment: Remember, when Moses saw what befell his sister, he began to cry out and pray with all his heart and soul on her behalf, as it is said: "Heal her now, O God, I pray you" (Num. 12:13). The rabbis say: 'Moses said, Master of the universe, already long ago you granted me the power of healing. If you will heal her all is well; but if not I will heal her myself.'

Another explanation: what is the meaning of "heal her now, O God, I pray you" (Num. 12:13)? R. Abba b. Kahana said: 'This can be compared to a doctor's assistant who was consulted by a woman suffering from nausea, and he brought her to his teacher. Said the assistant to his master: 'Sir, you have already taught me the complete treatment for the plagues. If you heal her, all is well; but if

not, I will heal her.¹³³

It will become quite clear that miraculous healers were strong willed individuals. Integrity and a profound sense of justice substantiate their motivation to perform acts of healing. Most notable of these miraculous Biblical healers are Moses, Elijah, Elisha and Hezekiah.

Of interest also is the literary formula employed in the legends about these 'healers' often described in a repetitive structure: 'Just as God has performed X, so the special individual can/ do X.' In this chapter we will compare the legends concerning miraculous healers as well as focus upon some of these gifted individuals.

A. PARALLELS BETWEEN GOD AND PROPHET

It is noteworthy that most of the midrashim concerning the parallel between God and prophet come primarily from compilations from the late eighth to tenth centuries. Possibly, earlier correlations between God and human beings who performed miracles, would have been too great a risk for the Jewish leaders, as the rise of Christianity restricted rabbinic writing about these themes. From the rabbis' standpoint, it would not have been advantageous to discuss

mortal miracle workers when the sweep of people believing in Jesus had grown by leaps and bounds. By the eighth century, however, the political climate was such that exploration into this subject was safe and appropriate. More importantly, by this time, anti-semitism and other forms of oppression actually necessitated a renaissance of hope in a better world. By developing a tradition of Jewish rescuers, heroes, and miracles workers, the rabbis attempted to meet the people's basic need. In some ways, the rabbis of the eighth century paved the road for later proclamations of Jewish messianic hope.

Messianic tremors excited the Jewish people centuries later with miracle workers such as Isaac Luria (1534-1572). His contemplation on the mystical teachings of Judaism gave him an elevated status beyond the normal rabbi. Later in the 1600's, Shabbati Zevi another powerful figure in Jewish history, proclaimed himself to be the messianic king. Shabbati Zevi was followed chronologically by the miracle worker and mystic Israel ben Elezaer, known as the Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760). The Baal Shem Tov was the founder of Hasidism. Though there is much to write about these seminal charismatic leaders, this chapter is not devoted to their histories.¹³⁴

¹³⁴. For more on these charismatic Jewish leaders see: Robert M. Seltzer, Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History (Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. New York, 1980). For readings on Isaac Luria pp. 462-67, 487, 796; Shabbatai Zevi: pp. 470-74, 493-495; and the Baal Shem Tov pp. 487-88, 489-92.

What we observe, however, is that the rabbis of an earlier age planted the first seeds about miracle workers by freely expressing similar hopes of redemption.

In the following illustration, the rabbis utilize a biblical verse from Proverbs (Prov. 30:4). Initially, the verse relates to God. In the second part of the midrash, this same verse is utilized again, but this time the focus is Elijah followed by Moses.

[Yet as Scripture affirms, God comes and goes as God likes - indeed God's Power is endless]: "Who ascends up into heaven and descended? Who gathers the wind in his fists? Who binds the waters in his garment" Who raises up all those who have come to their end upon the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name, if you know?" (Prov. 30:4).

"Who ascends up into the heaven?": The Holy One, of whom it is written, "God ascends amidst the tremolo (teruah) [of the shofar]" (Ps. 47:6). And descended? "And God came down upon Mount Sinai" (Ex. 19:20). "Who gathers the wind?" "In God's hand is the soul of every living thing and the breath of all humankind" (Job. 12:10).¹³⁵ "Who binds the waters?" "God binds up the waters in God's thick clouds" (Job 26:8). "Who raises up all those who have come to their end on the earth?" It is "God [who] kills and makes alive" (I Sam. 2:6). "What is his name?" God's name is "Shaddai;" God's name is "God of Hosts." And "what is God's son's name?" God's son's name is

¹³⁵ In the Hebrew text we find a word play between ruach, breath, and nefesh, spirit. 'Who gathers the wind, ruach?' "In God's hand is the spirit, nefesh, of every living being and the breath, ruach, of all humankind" (Job 12:10). The text reflects the belief that God controls life.

"Israel, My first born" (Ex. 4:22).¹³⁶

The midrash extends the structure and highlights Elijah and Moses. There are some things that God can do whereas people can not. The most critical difference between the application of the Proverb's verse to God versus the prophets is the last section of verse 30:4: "...what is his son's name if you know?" The verse from Exodus, "Israel, My first born" (Ex. 4:22) is the response. The fact that only God is awarded with "offspring" called Israel sets a definite boundary between what is acceptable/in parallels with God and what is not. The prophets, Moses and Elijah are part of Israel, but God's relationship with Israel is that of Source. We will now follow this midrash as it introduces the miraculous acts of Elijah:

In another comment the questions are taken to refer to Elijah: "Who descended up into the heaven?" Elijah, as it is said, "Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11). "And descended?" "The angels of God said to Elijah, "Go down with him; be not afraid" (II Kings 1:15). "Who God has gathered the wind into his fists?" Elijah said "As the God of Israel lives, there shall not be dew nor rain these years" (I Kings 17:1). "Who has bound the waters?" Elijah, who "took his mantle and wrapped it together and smote the waters and they were divided" (II Kings 2:8). "Who has raised

¹³⁶. Pesikta de Rav Kahanna, pisqa 1.4. See also: Yalkut Shemoni, II, 165. In this later version, Elisha is mentioned as healing the sick (Na'aman). Moses is introduced as healing bitter waters. Both Elijah and Samuel are credited with bringing rain. Lastly, Elijah is acknowledged for the act of bringing down fire.

up all who have come to their end upon the earth?"
Elijah, who said: "See your son lives" (I Kings
17:23).

In this legend, we find that Elijah is attributed with raising the dead while Moses is not. Another significant difference between the Moses tradition and that of Elijah is that Moses is mentioned in relation to the Tent of Meeting. This holy place is associated with God and a sense of stability for the Jewish people. Moses' role is essentially that of leader tied to the wandering of the people and hence to the Tabernacle. By contrast, Elijah is seen more distinctly as a "miracle worker," rather than as a "leader" of the people. We note in the following section how Moses' unique role is woven into the legend:

In another comment the questions are taken to refer to Moses: "Who has ascended up into heaven?" Moses, as it is said, "And Moses went up unto God." (Ex. 19:3). "And descended?" "And Moses went down from Mount Sinai" (Ex. 19:14). "Who gathered the wind in his fist?" "As soon as I am gone out of the city, I shall spread forth my hands unto God" (Ex. 9:29). "Who bound the waters into a garment?" "The floods stood upright as a heap" (Ex. 15:8). "Who has established all the ends of the earth?" Moses, by means of the Tent of Meeting. For the verse says: "It was on the day that Moses brought to a conclusion the setting up of the Tabernacle" (Num. 7:1). This signifies that through the Tabernacle the stability of the earth was achieved...

We find a more concise rendition of this midrash in a slightly later compilation entitled, *Pesikta Rabbati*. The

primary difference between the two versions are the Scriptural proof texts. For example, where in the first part of the midrash, the proof text for God's name is not mentioned; in the later piece, it uses Isaiah 42:8, "I am God, that is My name." Also in this first section of Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, the theme of raising the dead utilizes only one proof text: "God kills and gives life: God brings down to the grave and brings up" (I Samuel 2:6). The Pesikta Rabbati tradition, however, includes the graphic verse of Isaiah 26:19 "The dead shall live, my dead bodies shall arise."

The thrust of the rabbis' discussion is that what God does, so can God's servants, in this case Elijah and Moses. It is important to note the anti-Christ polemic throughout this midrash. Only certain prophets, such as Moses, Elijah and Elisha can perform miracles, but not Jesus. The rabbis provide extensive expression of this position when the text focusses on the name of God's son (answer: Israel), God's name (El Shaddai), and speaks of resurrection. The rabbis are clearly stating that the Messiah is not Jesus, nor is God's named Jesus. In addition they inform the reader that resurrection is performed only by God, Moses and Elijah.

The tradition provides other examples of Biblical characters who serve as miraculous healers. The following illustration, for example, specifically states the good name earned by these extraordinary people. This midrash singles out the good name of Elijah, and once again we note the emphasis

laid upon the act of resurrection. The discussion states that Elijah did not become decayed, or become smelly on account of this deed. In some way, the rabbis seem to be de-mystifying the act of resurrection.

A good name is better than precious ointment. A good name descends and a good name ascends... An example of a good name is one which descends to the dead and does not become rotted. As it says: "And he [Elijah] stretched himself upon the child and the lad sneezed seven times" (II Kings 4:33).¹³⁷

Elijah is known for his powerful intervention and healing powers. In the following section, we will focus upon legends reflecting the dynamics between God and God's servants.

B. ELIJAH AND ELISHA

In the ninth century, the prophets Elijah and Elisha protested the idolatrous behavior of the Israelite people. They both opposed King Ahab (and his followers) who believed in the god of Tyre, Baal-Melkart. These two classical prophets addressed the people at large about their collective responsibility to YHVH. Though the tradition presents them as separate individuals, they share similar events which typify their lives. This similarity is most striking when comparing the two resurrection stories in the Books of Kings (I Kings,

¹³⁷. Midrash Shemuel 23b; see also Kohellet Rabbah 7:1.

chapter 17 and II Kings, chapter 4).

In the biblical story concerning Elijah (I Kings, chapter 17) the prophet asks God to revive the child of the widow with whom he is staying. The midrash elaborates upon this dialogue between Elijah and God. From their discussion in the midrash, we learn about the three keys that are involved in Elijah's ability to heal. These magical keys are linked to birth, rain and resurrection. Originally all three were in God's hands. Over time, however, they were distributed to Elijah, Elisha and in some traditions, Ezekiel, and Moses. Midrashic "proof" for these keys is found in the following talmudic passage:

Three keys have been entrusted to no deputy, the key of birth, the key of rain and the key of resurrection.¹³⁸

The midrash states that it pleased God to give over these magical keys to righteous people. This story of the keys and the exchange between God and Elijah has been reported several times over the centuries. One of the earlier legends is found in the Talmud where Elijah asks God to revive the child. In order to do so, Elijah had to release God from the promise of drought for:

¹³⁸. B.T. Sanhedrin 113a.

"Resuscitation from death is brought about by means of dew and this remedy was precluded so long as Elijah kept God to God's word withholding dew and rain from earth. Elijah saw there was nothing to do but yield.¹³⁹

The tale about this key of rain is intriguing. It seems that Elijah already had the key of rain. Now, since the widow's son died, he wanted the key to resurrection as well. Another talmudic passage tells us that when Elijah further requested that the "key of quickening the dead" should also be given to him, God said that it was not suitable that the Master should only hold one key and the servant two. Whereupon Elijah returned the "key of rain."¹⁴⁰

Having some sense of the magical keys, we will now focus upon one of the later midrashim concerning Elijah and the keys. Its developed form provides a better understanding of the keys; it tells us to whom they were lent and for what reason. In addition we also observe how the rabbinic tradition forges Elisha and Elijah's acts of resurrection into nearly synonymous acts.

"For God hearkens to the needy, and despises not the prisoners" (Ps. 69:34). These are women whose wombs are locked up in barrenness and whom the Holy One calls to mind.

¹³⁹. P.T. Berachot 5, 9b also P.T. Taanit 1, 63d which reflects the similarity of the "reviving of the soil by rain" and the "quickenings of the dead."

¹⁴⁰. B.T. Sanhedrin, 113a.

R. Nehemiah stated the following as an anonymous teaching, but R. Aha stated it in the name of R. Jonathan: There are three keys which the Holy One, does not give over, into the hand of the emissary: the key to the womb, for it is said, "And God ...opened her womb" (Gen. 29:31); the key to the graves at the resurrection of the dead, as it is said: "I have opened your graves" (Ezek. 37:13); and the key to the rain, as it is said, "God will open unto you God's good treasure .. to give the rain of your land in its season" (Deut. 28:12).

Nevertheless, when it pleased the Holy One to do so, God gave the keys over to righteous people. The key to the womb of a barren woman, God gave over to Elisha, whom God empowered to say, "At this season, when the time comes round, you shall embrace a son" (II Kings 4:16) and "The woman conceived and bore a son ... as Elisha had said to her" (Ibid. 4:17).

The key of resurrection for the child of the widow of Zarephath, God gave over to Elijah, whom God empowered to say, "Let this child's soul come back into him (I Kings 17:21). The key of resurrection for the child of the Shunammite woman, God gave over also to Elisha, for it is said "Elisha ... put his mouth upon his mouth ... and the flesh of the child waxed warm" (II Kings 4:34), and then Elisha declared: "Take up your son" (ibid. 4:36). The key of resurrection God gave over also to Ezekiel in the plain of Dura, for Ezekiel said: "The hand of God was upon me (Ezek. 37:1), and later said: "Come from the four winds, O breathe and breathe upon these slain, that they may live" (ibid. 37:9).

The key of rain God gave over also to Elijah, whom God empowered to say, "There shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word (I Kings 17:1). Only at Elijah's request did God release the rain for them, as it is said, "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the land" (ibid. 18:1). Hence it is said, God hearkens to the needy" (Ps. 69:34).¹⁴¹

In this example, the midrash includes the prophets Elisha, Elijah as well as Ezekiel in the company of miraculous

¹⁴¹. Midrash Tehillim 78.5.

healers. Ezekiel is mentioned in regards to the healing of resurrection. The famous "Dry Bones" passage (Ezekiel 37: 1-14) epitomizes extraordinary transformations from death into life. In the next section we will look at a parable recounting a mystical episode in the life of another striking individual, King Hezekiah. Frequently we hear of his righteous act of hiding the Book of Cure in midrashic literature. The rabbis believed that hiding this magical book of cures was a consequential deed.

C. HEZEKIAH

Hezekiah reigned from 715-687 B.C.E. in Assyria. He was known for his anti-Assyrian coalition during the early decades of his reign. The rabbis exalt him as he purged Jerusalem of pagan symbols including the Assyrian cults that his father had installed before him. His father, Ahaz, was judged as evil as was his son Manasseh.¹⁴² Despite his "evil" father and son, Hezekiah remained an outstanding beacon of support for the God of Israel. We will learn from the following midrashim some reasons for his positive legacy.

Our rabbis taught: King Hezekiah did six things; of three of them they approved, and of three they did

¹⁴². Manasseh's acceptance of Assyrian and other cults in Jerusalem was viewed by the biblical and rabbinic tradition as an unforgivable sin against God. In II Kings, he is noted as one of the most wicked rulers of Judah's history.

not approve. Of three they approved: he hid away the Book of Cures; and they approved of it; he broke into pieces the brazen serpent and they approved of it; he dragged the bones of his father [to the grave] on a bed of ropes and they approved of it. Of three things they did not approve: he stopped up the waters of Gihon, and they did not approve of it; he cut off the gold from the doors of the Temple and sent it to the King of Assyria and they did not approve of it; he intercalated the month of Nisan during Nisan and they did not approve of it.¹⁴³

The commentary on this passage explains that the Book of Cures was a book of remedies for all illnesses.¹⁴⁴ People were being healed so quickly that illness failed to promote a spirit of contrition and humility. As they recovered fast, they failed to acknowledge God as Healer. The Brazen Snake refers to the snake that Moses created to prevent the transgressing of people from dying of snake bites. It became a symbol of idolatry. Hezekiah's breaking this snake reflected

¹⁴³. B.T. Berachot 10b. See also: B.T. Yevamot 49b-50a.

¹⁴⁴. Louis Ginzburg, Legends of the Jews (Jewish Publication Society of America: Phil., 1909-1938). Vol. I p. 157 states regarding the Book of Cures: Now when God resolved upon bringing the flood on the earth, God sent the archangel Raphael to Noah, as the bearer of the following message: "I give you the Holy Book, all the secrets and mysteries written there in may be made manifest unto you. You will know how to fulfill it's injunction in holiness, purity and modesty. You will learn how to build an ark - where the family may seek protection. Noah took the Book and when he studied it, the Holy Spirit came upon him and he knew all things for the Book was made of sapphires. He hid it in a golden casket, and before his death he gave it to Shem, then to Abraham, then to Jacob, then to Levi, then to Moses then to Joshua, then to Solomon. All learned the wisdom and skills of healing and mastery over demons." This book was called Sefer Noah. It is suggested that there is a correlation between Sefer Noah and the Book of Cures hidden by Hezekiah.

his firm anti-pagan stance. The Bones of his father refer to the legend that his father, Ahaz, was a sinner. By dragging his bones to the grave, he effected atonement for him.

The rabbis emphasize the good deeds of Hezekiah more than his three transgressions. An example of their appreciation of his righteousness is found in a story in II Kings. Hezekiah had fallen ill and the prophet Isaiah warned him of impending death (II Kings 20:5). Despite his imminent death, Hezekiah turned to the wall and prayed for healing. One of the reasons for his recovery was not only his humble prayer, but the fact that he had hid the Book of Cures.

Metaphorically, hiding the Book of Cures represents the most prevalent rabbinic view of illness. A person should unquestionably turn to God in times of crisis and only second refer to physicians. God was viewed as the ultimate Healer. Prior to Hezekiah's intervention, human beings were healing so quickly from the Book of Cures that they neglected the repentance necessary for complete recovery. For Hezekiah, hiding this medicinal treasure was a means of establishing Divine sovereignty as well as gaining favor from God. For other people as well, there were alternative means of working with God for improved health. In the next chapter we will turn our attention to these remedies sanctioned by the rabbis as well as those which were rejected as they smacked of idolatry.

Human beings everywhere, at all times and places, have had to deal with the threat of disease and illness. Injuries to the human organism have always challenged the ingenuity of individuals and groups to devise means of prevention, control and treatment. In this way, the Jewish people were no exception in exercising their healing talents.

Constraints on Jewish cures were buttressed by faithfulness to God as Healer. Despite the rabbis' unwavering position opposing any hint of idolatry, certain treatments gained acceptance. Remedies, incantations, and special foods all became part of this somewhat "alternative" rabbinic model. Some of the sanctioned cures reveal extraordinary, even bizarre, rituals, while ironically, certain prohibitory remedies are relatively mild.

This chapter concerns treatments that were supported by the rabbinic world as well as those deemed idolatrous. Both sections on Sanctioned Cures and Prohibited Cures will examine food, rituals and signs of recovery. We will notice that the line between the accepted and forbidden becomes blurred at points. Within the midrashim cited, we will observe the way the rabbis struggled to sustain Judaism in periods of crisis.

A. SANCTIONED CURES

Ben Sira said: God caused drugs to spring forth from the earth; with them the healer heals the wound and

the apothecary compounds his preparations.¹⁴⁵

Why were some cures accepted and some not? The rationale for permitting a ritual or certain medicines may have been, like today, a desperate attempt at recovery. A life threatening illness can transform what once was "strange" into a viable option. Indeed, circumstances such as disease have the ability to recast a "conservative" attitude. Fundamentally, the rabbis believed that God created the world, therefore making use of God's creation for the purpose of saving life was all the justification they needed.

Before exploring the more unusual cures, we look at a legend which reflected 'good common sense.' The picture of a sick child who has to stay indoors longer than the illness is actually a metaphor for the Children of Israel who wade through the desert before receiving Torah. Despite its symbolic meaning, the rabbis' illustration depict an actual healing motif: individuals who have been sick should remain indoors, eating and drinking properly until they are certain of their strength.

R. Simeon b. Yochai taught: When Israel went forth from Egypt, what did they resemble? A king's son who got up from an illness, whereupon his tutor said to the king: 'Your son should now go to school.' The king replied: 'My son has not yet recovered his color and is still pale from his illness. Let him therefore have an easy time for about three months, and eat and drink well. Then he can go to school.'

¹⁴⁵ Genesis Rabbah 10.6.

So when the Israelites went forth from Egypt, there were among them many who bore the marks of their hard labor with mortar and bricks. The ministering angels said to God: 'Behold the hour has arrived. Give them the Torah.' The Holy One replied: 'My children have not yet recovered the bloom which they lost among the bricks and mortar. Let them be regaled for three months with the well, with the quails, and with the manna, and then I will give them the Torah. And when will that be? "In the third month.." (Ex. 19:1).¹⁴⁶

The proper procedure for a sick person is to drink fluids, rest and eat intelligently. We are left, however, with the nagging question of what should the sick eat? The rabbis' response to the question of medicinal cuisine is plentiful. In addition to studying the actual things they suggest, we also notice the midrashic form in which they are set. Typically, these midrashim include a list utilizing six, seven or ten items. Enumerations were employed as a mnemonic device. Within the following talmudic traditions we see a repetition of form as well as theme:

Has it not been taught: Six things heal a sick person of his disease with a permanent cure, namely: cabbage, beet, a stew of dry poley, the maw, the womb and the large lobe of the liver? What you must say is that the cabbage is good for sustenance also.¹⁴⁷

Cabbage, beets and a stew promoted the healing process.

¹⁴⁶. Song of Songs Rabbah II. 5:2.

¹⁴⁷. B.T. Berachot 44b.

These early practitioners had the uncanny sense of what was physiologically sound. We note that in the next passage, cabbage and beets are mentioned again, however the stew's ingredients have varied. The rabbis explain in this illustration that fish is a therapeutic food. However, we see that in addition to foods that heal there are foods that harm:

Six things help the sick to recover from sickness and with a permanent cure, namely: cabbage, beets, a decoction of dry sisin, tripe, womb and the lobe above the liver; some say, also small fish. Moreover small fish keep the whole human body in fit condition.¹⁴⁸

Ten things are liable to send the patients back to their illness and to make their illness severe; these are to eat ox-meat, fat, roast meat, bird's meat, roast egg, pepperworth, shaving, bathing, cheese or liver. Some also say nuts, others add melons. In the School of Ishmael it was taught: 'Why are they called kishim, cucumbers? Because they are kashim,¹⁴⁹ injurious to the whole human body as swords.

As mentioned earlier, the six healing items are repeated frequently in the talmudic aggadot. Similarly, the list of ten warnings are also mentioned in several talmudic tractates. We find a greater variation within the legends about warning, than those regarding healing items. The rabbis' subjectivity as to what makes them personally ill is communicated through the next passage:

¹⁴⁸. See: B.T. Berachot 57b for a similar listing.

¹⁴⁹. B.T. Avodah Zarah 29a.

Ten things bring a person's sickness on again in a severe form, namely to eat beef, roast meat, poultry and roasted egg, shaving, and eating cress, milk, or cheese and bathing. Some add, also nuts, and some add further cucumbers. It was taught in the School of R. Ishmael: 'Why are they called kishuim, cucumbers? Because they are painful, kashim for the body like swords. Is that so? See, it is written: 'And God said into her, Two nations are in your womb" (Gen. 25:23). Read not goyim (nations), but ge'im (lords), and R. Judah said in the name of Rab: 'These are Antoninus and Rabbi, whose table never lacked either radish, lettuce or cucumbers either in summer or winter! There is no contradiction; the former statement speaks of large ones, the latter of small ones.¹⁵⁰

From this list, the rabbis' advice suggests something akin to a vegetarian diet. Their suggestion is possibly derived from the Biblical text, which reads: "Behold I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth and every tree, on which is the fruit yielding seed, to you it shall be for food" (Gen. 1:29). In addition the rabbis caution against shaving and bathing. We conjecture that the world in which the rabbis lived was economically at a low level. A sick person in the midst of winter, for example, would not be protected if he or she bathed at that time. In both the passage from Avodah Zarah and Berachot there is a warning about cucumbers. Perhaps the danger of this vegetable was due to a common allergy.

¹⁵⁰. B.T. Berachot 57b.

The talmudic passages above leave the illness unnamed. In the following example, however, there is specification of the malady followed by a list of seven remedies. Magical properties were often ascribed to the number seven. One of the reasons for its sacred position stems from the seven days of the week, "For in six days God created the world and on the seventh, God rested" (Gen 2:2). This list of cures reflects superstition. As an example, note the mention of "seven hairs from the beard of an old dog which are to be tied in the nape of the neck with a white twisted thread." Commentary on this passage suggests, that the rabbis, though opposed to superstitious practices in general, were "children" of their age and recognized the efficacy of such rituals! In this example, pieces of substance are collected, and an act takes place while biblical incantations are uttered.

R. Huna said: As a remedy for tertian fever one should procure seven prickles from seven palm trees, seven chips from seven beams, seven pegs from seven bridges, seven [heaps of] ashes from seven ovens, seven [mounds of] earth from under seven door-sockets, seven specimens of pitch from seven ships, seven handfuls of cummin, and seven hairs from the beard of an old dog and tie them in the nape of the neck with a white twisted thread.

R. Johanan said: For an inflammatory fever, let one take an all-iron knife, go whither thorn-hedges are to be found, and tie a white twisted thread thereto. One the first day he must slightly notch it and say, "And the angel of God appeared unto him" (Ex. 3:2). On the following day, he makes another small notch and says, "And when God saw that he turned aside to see" (Ex. 3:4).

R. Aha, son of Raba, said to R. Ashi, Then let him say, "Draw not come near" (Ex. 3:6)? Rather on the first day, he should say, "And the angel of God

appeared unto him ...And Moses said, I will..." (Ex. 3:2). The next day, he says: "And when God saw that he turned aside to see" (Ex. 3:4). On the third, he should say, "And God said, Do not come near" (Ex. 3:6). And when he has recited the verses he pulls the bush down and says: 'O thorn O thorn, not because you are higher than all other trees, did the Holy One cause the Shechinah, God's indwelling Presence, to rest upon you. And even as you saw the fire kindled for Hananiah, Mishael and Azarial and did flee from before them, so look upon the fire (i.e., fever) of Peloni (So-and-so) and flee from him.¹⁵¹

The biblical proof texts from Exodus 3: 2-6 concern Moses meeting God through the miracle of the burning bush.¹⁵² The rabbinic authors drew a parallel to Moses discovering God in the lowliest of places. In order to grasp the relationship with the thornbush, we note the following regarding this Exodus passage:

A pagan once asked a rabbi: 'Why did God choose a bush from which to appear?' The rabbi answered: 'Had God appeared in a carob tree or a sycamore, you would have asked the same question. However, it would be wrong to let you go without a reply, so I will tell you why it was a bush; to teach you that no place is devoid of God's presence, not even a

¹⁵¹ B.T. Shabbat 67a.

¹⁵² Exodus 3:2-6 - "And the angel of God appeared to Moses in a flame of fire of the midst of a bush, and he looked and behold the bush burned with fire, but the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, 'I will not turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush was not burnt.' And when God saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush and said: 'Moses, Moses.' And he said, 'Here I am.' And God said, 'Do not come near: put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy.'"

lowly bush.¹⁵³

Just as Moses found God in a lowly bush, so, too, are healing aids found in obscure places. The grammatical use of the thorn hedge parallels the Exodus experience as well as the fact that both employ sneh, as bush. As for the incantation, it also stems from biblical sources, and thereby would connect the Jewish patient to his or her tradition.

Sanctioned incantations are found in another talmudic passage albeit with a peculiar style. In this case, unintelligible words form the chant. The "sing-song" mantra varies for different ailments. The unusual syllables may also refer to the names of 'demons.' By addressing the 'evil ones' by their name, the patient hoped to chase them away. This passage is interesting as a variety of illnesses are described along with their prescribed chant. Later Rashi added that the incantation formula was a valid one, but the angels mentioned in the legend were not actually sent from the land of Sodom. It is possible that had the angels been from Sodom, their participation would have jinxed the treatment!

For an abscess one should say thus: 'Let it indeed be cut down, let it indeed be healed, let it indeed be overthrown; Sharlai and Amarlai are those angels who were sent from the land of Sodom to heal boils and aches: bazak, bazik, bizbazik, mismasik, kamun, kamik, your color be confined within you, your color be confined within you, your seat be within you,

¹⁵³. Exodus Rabbah, 2.5.

your seed be like a kalut.¹⁵⁴ and like a mule that is not fruitful and does not increase; so be you not fruitful nor increase in the body of Peloni.

Against ulcers one should say thus: 'A drawn sword and prepared sling, its name is not Joheb, sickness and pains.' Against a demon one should say: 'You were closed up, closed up were you. Cursed, broken and destroyed be Bar Tit, Bar Tame, Bar Tina¹⁵⁵ as Shamgez, Mezigaz and Istamai'.¹⁵⁶

The rabbis sanctioned this incantation, while others, as we will read in the following section on prohibitive cures, were not allowed! The rhythmic pattern of bazak, bazik, bizbazik.... may have been a way of putting the patient into a meditative state as well as disarming and mezmorizing the "demon." In a similar way, centuries later, the Zohar suggested a healing incantation through the recitation, El na rafah na la. "[please God heal her]" (Num. 12:13). While the verse from Numbers appears more moderate than the unintelligible words above, we realize that it was often for subjective reasons that rabbis approved some rituals over others.

Extraordinary cures, like the thread wound around the thornbush, and the incantation reveal the extremes that rabbis could accept. The next illustration, however, reflects a

¹⁵⁴. A kalut is an animal with uncloven hoofs born of a clean animal. Rashi adds that it is one whose semen is locked up so that he cannot reproduce.

¹⁵⁵. Literally, 'the son of clay, son of defilement, son of filth.' These are the names of the demon.

¹⁵⁶. B.T. Shabbat 67a.

rabbinic tension. Instead of accepting a strange cure, the passage states that some of the patient's colleagues found it intolerable. The story concerns the treatment of drinking goat' milk:

There was once a pious person who suffered with heart trouble and the doctors on being consulted said that there was no remedy for him unless he sucked warm milk every morning. A goat was therefore brought to him and fastened to the legs of the bed, and he sucked from it every morning. After some time, his colleagues came to visit him, but as soon as they noticed the goat fastened to the legs of the bed they turned back and said, 'An armed robber is in the house of this man, how can we come in to see him?' They thereupon sat down and inquired into his conduct, but they did not find any fault in him except this sin about the goat.¹⁵⁷

Further along the midrash explains that at the time of the patient's death, he proclaimed: "I know that no sin can be imputed to me, save that of the goat, when I transgressed against the words of my colleagues." This legend exemplifies that genre of cure which occupied the boundary between medicine and sin. Sucking goat's milk directly from a goat above the rabbi's bed appeared more grotesque and outlandish than they could accept. His colleagues, watching their pious friend in this position, were so concerned that they suggested a "robber" was in the house! The bed ridden man was no longer the respected rabbi they had known; he had become a lunatic

¹⁵⁷ B.T. Baba Kama 80a.

in their eyes. Another interpretation could be that the "robber" was a metaphor for the bizarre treatment which was "robbing" their colleague of his dignity. Though his treatment was clearly not approved by his colleagues, the midrash insinuates that this pious person survived this particular illness.

If a particular cure was said to have worked, the next question we might ask might be: how did the rabbis know when a person was cured? Despite a lack of medical training, the sages discussed various signs of bodily functions. The listing for these signs is repeated frequently throughout the tradition. The midrashic authors had an uncanny talent of blending basic physiology and biblical text, as seen in the following series of midrashim:

Six things are a good sign for a sick person, namely: sneezing, perspiration, open bowels, seminal emission, sleep and a dream: Sneezing, as it is written, "God's sneezing flashes forth light" (Job 41:10); Perspiration, as it is written, "In the sweat of your face will you eat bread" (Gen. 3:19); Open bowels, as it is written, "If he that is bent down has to be loosed" (Isa. 51:14); Seminal emission, as it is written, "Seeing seed, he will prolong his days" (Isa. 53:10); Sleep, as it is written, "I should have slept, then should I have been at rest" (Job 3:13); A dream, as it is written, "You caused me to dream and make me live" (Isa. 38:16).¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ B.T. Berachot 57b. See also Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 19.5 for a similar passage. This later parallel shows greater development by use of the full Isaiah verse preceding the midrash. "I am..God who comforts you: When one is bent down by illness is speedily loosed, this person will not go down dying into the pit.." Also the order of the signs vary. In

These six signs of improved health are listed as five signs in another midrashic collection, Genesis Rabbah. Though the rabbis discuss the same signs, we notice several variations, such as the signs being listed in alternative order as well as a sixth sign, 'motion of the bowels,' added at the end. In earlier, as well as later midrashim, this has been included into the central body of the text. A noticeable change is that this discussion begins with the verse from Genesis, "In the sweat of your face will you eat bread" (Gen. 3:19):

"In the sweat of your face will you eat bread" (Gen. 3:19). R. Abbahu said, 'This is one of the five things which are a favorable omen for an invalid: sneezing, perspiration, sleep, a dream and semen. Sneezing, as it is said: "God's sneezing flashes forth light" (Job 41:10); Sweat: "In the sweat of your face will you eat bread" (Gen. 3:19); Sleep, "I had slept, then it were well with me" (Job 3:13); A dream, "Wherefore make me dream and make me live" (Isa. 38:16); and Semen, "He shall see seed and prolong his days" (Isa. 43:10).

Our rabbis of Caesarea said: Also the natural motion of the bowels. What is the proof? "When the waste matter is speedily eliminated, the sick person shall not die" (Isa. 41:14). R. Haggai said in R. Isaac's name: "Providing that God's bread will not

this later midrash, the order is: sneezing, perspiration, sleep, seminal emission, dreaming and open bowels. The conclusion to this midrash states: That is, as R. Haggai pointed out, so long as 'people don't lack their daily bread' (Isa. 51:4), these bodily activities are all good signs of improving health in sick people. See also Yalkut Shemoni, I:32 which provides the six signs of recovery.

fail" (ibid.)¹⁵⁹

Lists of remedies followed by lists of improvement infuse the midrashim with acceptable concepts. Why these specific cures? The thin line between sanction and prohibition grows more apparent as our focus turns to the darker side of healing.

B. PROHIBITED CURES

"I am Adonai, your God who brought you forth out of Egypt. You will have no other gods beside me. You will not make for yourself any carved idol or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You will not bow down to them, nor serve them (Ex. 20:1-3).

The Ten Commandments specifically state that worship of any other deity is a transgression. In the ancient world, Canaanite and other tribal groups espoused the worship of many gods. The Bible's unwavering position therefore forced the fledgling Israelite tribe to worship YHVH exclusively. The Ten Commandments were a religious, spiritual code. In addition, they served as a political device, separating the "Chosen" from pagan worship. For the purpose of monotheism and Jewish tradition, the rabbis enforced the biblical

¹⁵⁹. Genesis Rabbah 21:10.

jurisdiction against what they judged as "idolatrous" practice, particularly when the non-Jewish ritual concerned healing. This rabbinic bias is reflected in the following talmudic passage:

[An Israelite named] Zunin said to R. Akiba; 'We both know in our heart that there is no reality in an idol, nevertheless we see people enter [the shrine] crippled and come out cured. What is the reason?' He replied: 'I will give you a parable: To what is this matter like? To a trustworthy person in a city and all the townspeople used to deposit [their money] in his charge without witness. One person, however, came and deposited money in his charge with witnesses; but on one occasion this person forgot and made the deposit without witnesses.

The wife of [of the trustworthy man] said to [her husband]: "Come let us deny [that the person made a deposit]. He answered her, 'Because this fool acted in an unworthy manner, shall I destroy my reputation for trustworthiness!'

It is similar with afflictions. At the time afflictions are sent upon people, the oath is imposed upon them. 'You shall not come near these sick people except on such and such a day, nor depart from them except on such and such a day and at such an hour, and through the medium of so and so and through such and such remedy.' When the time arrives for the afflictions to depart, the people chanced to go to an idolatrous shrine. The afflictions plead, 'It is right that we should not leave them and depart; but because these fools act in unworthy ways, shall we break our oath [and keep them sick longer]?¹⁶⁰

The rabbis explain that recovery before a shrine is coincidental at best. The people were going to be cured anyway, as determined by God! Their entering a non-Jewish house of

¹⁶⁰. B.T. Avoda Zarah 55a.

worship had nothing to do with their recovery. The chauvinist attitude of this legend requires some explanation. As found in other rabbinic texts as well, the female person or image, represents a theme which is marginal at best and evil at worst. The chauvinist prejudice, however, is not the essence of the piece. Rather, this midrash served as a polemic ridiculing any Jew who might be wandering away from the belief in God as the ultimate Healer.

The theme of turning from God is discussed in numerous places throughout the rabbinic tradition. Idols and most healing amulets were prohibited at all cost. In the most extreme cases, the rabbis wrote that capital punishment, specifically hanging, should be limited to the two offenses of blasphemy and idolatry (B.T. Sanhedrin 6:4). One example of this stern position opposing idolatry in relation to healing is found in the Mishnah:

If one finds fragments of images, behold they are permitted. If one found the figure of a hand or the figure of a foot, behold it is prohibited because such an object is worshipped.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹. B.T. Avodah Zarah 41a. The commentary on this passage explains that the god of healing (Asklepios) was often thanked by invalids for their cure by the presentation of an image of the part of the body which had been affected.

The rabbis warned that "idolatrous" images for healing were beyond normative Judaism.¹⁶² If we wonder why the rabbis were so adamant about a "little charm," the tradition provides further explanation. Under no circumstance, argue some rabbis, should any pagan symbols be utilized. Under extreme circumstances, argue other rabbis, one can utilize pagan devices. The tension between when to cross the traditional line is highlighted in the Talmud. Commentary on the following talmudic passage suggests that the biblical proof text: "And you will love Adonai, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5) implies loving God even to the extent of giving one's soul (life) to God's service.

R. Jacob said in R. Johanan's name: 'We may cure ourselves with all things, save with the wood of the asherah.¹⁶³ How is it meant? If we say that there is danger (in the person's illness), even the wood of the asherah too [is permitted]; while if there is no danger, even all [other] forbidden things of the Torah too are not [permitted]? After all [it means] that there is danger, yet even so the wood

¹⁶². Instances of extraordinary punishment against idolatrous remedies, or sorcery are found in rabbinic texts. Under emergency situations, Hora'at Sha'ah, there are examples of harsh discipline. Simeon b. Shetah is reported to have sentenced and executed eighty women condemned as witches on one day (B.T. Sanhedrin 6:4). Such extra-legal punishments were considered to be justified or even mandatory whenever the court considered their infliction necessary for upholding rabbinic authority and Jewish law.

¹⁶³. The asherah was a sign for deity in Canaan. In this context it refers to a symbol of a Canaanite goddess, a sacred tree. Biblical texts regarding asherah included: I Kings 16:33, 17:16, 18:4.

of the asherah [must] not be used. R. Eliezer said: If "with all your soul" is said, why is "with all your might" said? Or if "with all your might" is said, why is "with all your soul" said? But it is to teach you: if there is a person to whom her person is dearer than her wealth, therefore, "with all your soul" is stated. And if there is a person to whom her wealth is dearer than her person, therefore "with all your might" (i.e. substance) is stated. When Rabin came, he said in R. Johanan's name: 'We may cure (i.e., save) ourselves with all [forbidden] things, except idolatry, incest and murder.¹⁶⁴

One can infer from this passage that even if one's life is at stake, it is better to die than to be dishonored through the transgression of the asherah. There was more to the prohibition against asherah worship, however, than simple idolatry. The asherah represented Canaanite goddess worship; and for the neonate Israelite tribe, goddess ritual was intolerable. Ancient Judaism developed from a patriarchal clan, laden almost exclusively with male images of deity. Women, goddesses, and female ritual could not be tolerated as valid forms of worship. Even the creation story in the book of Genesis placed the first human crime upon the woman.

Understanding this transformation from Canaanite practice to Hebrew tradition, the covenant's condemnation against women's ritual can be understood. By the 12th century C.E., these ancient prejudices were still alive as explicated in the following late midrash. In this legend we see how women,

¹⁶⁴ B.T. Pesahim 25a.

witchcraft and punishment were combined into a warning to the Jewish people:

Note the following universal parable in which a woman performs witchcraft upon herself and is not able to conceive. Doctors came to heal her. She tells them, 'You will not be able to heal me, for I have done this [evil] to myself.' As Scripture says: "My eye affects my soul because of all the daughters of my city. They chased me sore, like a bird, those who hate me without cause" (Lam. 3:51).¹⁶⁵

The rabbis' prohibition reveals that even doctors could not help this woman because she had resorted to witchcraft.¹⁶⁶ In addition, the Lamentations verse accentuates the rabbis' unflattering attitude toward women. The phrase "because of all the daughters of my city" (Lam. 3:51) represents women as the infidels within the Jewish people. Yet despite the prevalent anti-female slant in the Jewish tradition, history demonstrates that both men and women confronted opposition when utilizing certain alternative healing aids.

Prohibitions against female ritual and Canaanite worship were not the only stigmas attached to alternative healing aids. The Amorites, an ancient Semitic language group which

¹⁶⁵. Yalkut Shemoni, II, 845.

¹⁶⁶. See B.T. Nedarim 49a for another example of a doctor unable to help a person who became involved with an alternative cure: R. Jeremiah fell sick. When the doctor called to heal him, he saw a pumpkin lying in the house. Thereupon he left the house saying, 'The angel of death is in that house, yet I am to cure him!'

settled in Mesopotamia in the second millennium BCE, bore the brunt of condemned practice. The Amorites along with the Hittites, Arameans, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, and Philistines were among those tribes who defined paganism in the Ancient Near East. Any antagonism toward these tribes stems from the tension with the Israelites who's covenant insisted upon monotheism. The strain of interfaith turbulence is mirrored in this early legend:

He who says [when someone sneezes], "Healing" (merapeh lo), this is one of the ways of the Amorites. R. Eleazar b. R. Sadoq says, 'They do not say "Healing" on grounds that it is a waste of time [set aside] for study of Torah. The members of the household of Rabban Gamaliel would not say "Healing" because of the ways of the Amorites.¹⁶⁷

Whether it was mistrust of foreigners, or firm conviction that YHWH is the ultimate Healer, the rabbis' warned that certain practices would not be tolerated in the Jewish world. At the same time, some midrashim suggest that other peculiar rites were practiced. At times the boundary between these two poles was blurred. For example, while the image of a thorn bush evoked a sense of God's presence in some texts, wood from a certain asherah represented pagan religion in others.

One of the superstitions that pushed rabbinic rationale to an extreme was something called the evil eye. The evil eye related directly to the demonic forces in the universe. Rationally, it did not make sense; however in the realm of magic, it was widely accepted.¹⁶⁸ The relationship between sickness, death and the evil eye is woven together in the following passage. Rab, R. Samuel, R. Hanina, Jose b. Hanina and R. Eleazar discuss a mysterious plague. Rab argues that the deaths were caused by the evil eye, however his "irrational" position is opposed by the others:

"And God will take away from you all sickness" (Deut. 7:15). Rab said: 'By this, the evil eye is meant.' This is in accordance with his opinion expressed elsewhere. For Rab went up to a cemetery, performed certain charms and then said: 'Ninety nine have died through an evil eye, and one through natural causes. Samuel said: 'This refers to the wind. Samuel follows his views, for he said: 'All [illness] is caused by the wind. But according to Samuel, what of those executed by the State? Those,

¹⁶⁸. David Landy, Culture, Disease, and Healing, (Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc: New York, 1977), p. 223. According to the Amhara of Ethiopia, the beginnings of the evil eye go back to the creation of the world. It is said that Eve had thirty children, and one day God asked Eve to present her children. Eve became suspicious and apprehensive, and hid fifteen of them from the sight of God. God knew her act of disobedience and declared the fifteen children she showed God and God's "chosen" and cursed the fifteen she hid, declaring that they go henceforth into the world as devils and watch peoples of the earth. Now some of the children begged for God's mercy. God heard them and being merciful, made some of them foxes, jackals, rabbits, etc., so that they might exist as Earth's creatures in a dignified manner. Some of the hidden children God left human, but sent them away with the curse of being agents of the devil. These human counterparts of the devil became ancestors of a hated people called "Buda."

too, but for the wind [which enters and plays upon the wound], an ointment could be compounded for them [which would cause the severed parts to heal]. R. Hanina said, 'This refers to the cold.' For R. Hanina said: 'Everything is from Heaven excepting cold draughts, as it is written "Cold draughts are in the way of the froward, one who keeps his soul shall be far from them" (Prov. 22:5). R. Jose b. Hanina said; 'This refers to excretions, for a Master said: 'The nasal and aural excretions are injurious when in great quantities, but beneficial in small amounts...¹⁶⁹

When Rab determined that the ninety nine people died from the evil eye versus one person from natural causes, others argued against him. Some cited the wind, cold or excretions as causes of illness. Accepting something so incomprehensible yet threatening as the evil eye, ayin ha-rah, was problematic for Rab's colleagues. And yet, the belief in the evil eye's curse was transformed into an actual practice.¹⁷⁰ The widespread belief in ayin ha-rah led to the notion that an envious or begrudging glance had the power to work evil upon the person at whom it was directed. Similarly, the custom evolved where spitting three times could prevent a terrible

¹⁶⁹. B.T. Baba Metzia 107b

¹⁷⁰. For other meanings about the "evil eye" as well as the "good eye," see Pirke Avot 2:13-14, where it states that a good eye, ayin ha-toy, or generosity, is the best quality to which people should cling, and that an evil eye, ayin ha-rah, is the worst quality, which people should shun. Earlier sources for the evil eye may be found in Proverbs 23: 6-7 where we are told not to dine with a person who is stingy, rah ayin, and not to desire this person's delicacies. "Eat and drink" the person says to you, but this person's heart is not with you.

event from occurring. Tension existed between ignoring such superstition, such as spitting, and performing the act regardless:

Surely we have learned that one who utters an incantation over a wound has no portion in the world to come.. R. Johanan said: 'They taught [this law only] if he spits, for the Name of Heaven must not be mentioned in connection with spitting.'

In some cases, the rabbis sanctioned spitting three times to prevent a misfortune. They believed that spitting had the power of breaking an evil eye or evil spell. At the same time, says the preceding midrash, one must never perform this ritual while praying to the Holy One of healing. This concluding passage epitomizes the rabbis' struggle as they groped to find a balance between customs in their contemporary world and the strict guidelines of their ancestors. Often the development of sanctioned and prohibited remedies based on clear difference fostered a separation between Judaism and idolatry. At other times, the boundary was not clear. In the following chapter we will examine sanctioned healing imagery that focusses primarily upon the healing potential of light.

¹⁷¹. B.T. Shavuot 15b.

CHAPTER NINE:

THE HEALING POWER OF LIGHT

From the chaos and void, with darkness on the face of the deep, and the spirit of God fluttering on the face of the water, God said, 'Let there be light' (Gen. 1:2).

The first burst of light broke through the darkness, and the chaos and void were transformed. A literal reading of Genesis suggests that the leading act of creation was the emergence of primordial light. "And God saw the light that it was good, and God divided the light from the darkness" (Gen. 1:4). Some midrashim suggest that this light of the first day was extremely bright, by which one could see from one end of the universe to the other.¹⁷² From the instant of the first day's sparkling creation, light became a metaphor par excellence and contained within its beams attributes of healing for the world. In this chapter we will study several midrashim that employ the imagery of healing light through three key themes: protection, healing and redemption.

A. THE PROTECTION OF LIGHT

The image of sunlight, especially as imagined on a freezing winter day, is that of nurturing. Warm weather represents comfort and to an extreme degree, survival. In the following discussion concerning sunlight, the rabbis discuss

¹⁷². Tosefta Shabbat 22.1

a dualism, not unlike the gnostics. This dualism, however, is more subtle as they employ elements of sunshine and rain. Sun represents God's compassion, while rain expresses divine anger.

R. Isaac said: 'If rain falls on the eve of the Sabbath then though the years be [years of drought] as in the days of Elijah, it is still viewed as a sign of [divine] anger. This is in agreement with the statement of Rabbah b. Shilah who said: 'The day when rain falls is as hard [to bear] as a day of Judgement. Amemar said, 'Were it not that humanity must have rain, we would pray and have it cease.

R. Isaac further said: 'Sunshine on the Sabbath is an act of kindness towards the poor, as it is said, "But unto you that fear My name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing on its wing" (Mal.3:20).¹⁷³

R. Isaac argued that 'sunshine was an act of kindness.' Its warmth promoted comfort for the poor and the righteous. We know, however, that too much sun can be more of a curse than a blessing. Extreme sun causes dehydration and illness. In the next midrash, the rabbis acknowledge the debilitating hazard of sunlight. And yet within the tradition, we find that God utilizes even this potentially injurious side to sunlight, and with it protects the righteous. The setting for this midrash is the scene following Abraham's circumcision. Abraham is pictured sitting upon at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day:

¹⁷³ B.T. Taanit 8b.

"And God appeared to him in the plains of Mamre; and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day" (Gen. 18:1). What is meant by 'in the heat of the day?' R. Hama, son of R. Hanina, said: 'It was the third day after Abraham's circumcision, and the Holy One came to enquire after Abraham's health; [Moreover] God drew the sun out of its sheath, so that the righteous man, [Abraham] should not be troubled with wayfarers. He sent Eliezer out [to seek travellers] but he found none. Said he, 'I do not believe you.' [Hence they say in Palestine, slaves are not to be believed.] So he himself went out and saw the Holy One, standing at the door; thus it is written, "Pass not away, I pray you, from your servant" (Gen. 18:3).

But on seeing him tying and untying [the bandages of his circumcision], God said, 'It is not well that I stand here,' hence it is written, "And he lifted up his eyes and looked and lo, three men stood by him and when he saw them, he ran to meet them" (Gen. 18:3). At first they came and stood over him, but when they saw him in pain, they said, 'It is not seemly to stand here.' Who were the three men? Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. Michael came to bring the tidings to Sarah [of Isaac's birth]; Raphael, to heal Abraham, and Gabriel to overturn Sodom.¹⁷⁴

There are several themes within this passage that deserve mentioning. The first point concerns God's use of the sun. God did not want Abraham bothered by wayfarers. Following adult circumcision, he was in no position to deal with multitudes of strangers. Another agenda may have been that through the sufferings, Abraham would grow closer to God. Without the interference of travellers, God was able to 'appear' to him. In solitude, Abraham could be receptive to

¹⁷⁴ B.T. Baba Metzia 86b.

this spiritual encounter.

The midrash also informs us that God sent three beings, Michael, Gabriel and Raphael to Abraham. In this tradition, Raphael is delegated as healer. In other parallels, Raphael represents other functions, such as promoting beauty. Michael, in turn, is associated with healing. These roles are best represented in the following version:

Our sages teach that four winds blow each day from the four directions.¹⁷⁵ The east wind blows from morning until noon. This brings with it many breezes which bring healing to the world under the direction of the angel Michael. The west wind blows from noon until nightfall. It brings along breezes which give beauty to growing things, under the direction of the angel Raphael.

The south wind blows from the beginning of the night and it brings along many earth breezes which warm its coldness. All these are under the direction of the angel Uriel. The wind is harmful to the sick, but in general, it is beneficial for the world. This is also the time when the wicked in purgatory are judged, since everyone is asleep and there are none to pray for them.

The north winds blow from midnight to daybreak, and bring along many breezes. Strongest of all the winds, it is beneficial for the sick and for this reason, they feel better in the morning. God makes it blow before the righteous in the Garden of Eden, and they smell the sweet fragrances of its

¹⁷⁵ Pesikta Rabbati pisga 46.3. The tradition continues, "Even as the Holy One created four points from which the winds blow, so God placed four angels about God's throne, namely Michael, Gabriel, Uriel and Raphael....And why is he called Raphael? To intimate that the breach of Jeroboam - (Jeroboam was a scion of Ephraim whose standard was on the west side) would be healed. The meaning of the name is indicated by the verse: "El na rafa na la" (Please God heal her now, I beseech You) (Num. 12:13).

trees and herbs.¹⁷⁶

The tradition teaches that God employs angels to heal the sick. In addition, God's creations of light and wind play a role in the recovery process. We will emphasize the healing aspects of light in the following section on sunlight.

B. THE HEALING POWER OF SUNLIGHT

Many of the legends employing the 'light' motif feature Abraham. Frequently the biblical proof text concerns his circumcision. There are infrequent examples, however, which utilize Abraham's relationship with healing in other settings. Note one of these more unusual legends:

R. Simeon b. Yohai said, 'Abraham had a precious stone hung round his neck which brought immediate healing to any sick person who looked upon it. When Abraham, our father departed from this world, the Holy One suspended it from the orb of the sun.' Abaye said, 'This bears out the popular saying, 'As the day advances, the illness lightens.'''¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶. Zohar Chadash 13a. See also Yalkut Shemoni, I, 131 in which we find a similar rabbinic discussion concerning Michael as a healing angel. In this passage it states that Michael is called to heal. The other rabbis respond that in the future, healing will come with the sun for the wounds of the righteous.

¹⁷⁷. B.T. Baba Batra 16b. There is some discrepancy about illness becoming lighter as the day wears on. In B.T. Nedarim 40a and Yoreh Deah, 335:4 it states that a visitor should not come to see patients in the early hours of the morning since the symptoms are less severe. If patients look so well, the visitor may not feel compelled to pray as

The rabbis allude to a secret healing device tucked away in the sun. Once it was possessed by Abraham, now by an autonomous light. The sun is friendly, a healing force in the world. Other legends, however, depict the sun as painful. Yet even when the sun brings discomfort, it is still viewed as a blessing. In such legends, suffering caused by light remains a healing force. Following Abraham's circumcision, the sun's heat created even more pain! Yet, in the discussion which opens with the rabbis arguing over what the text actually means when it says: "In the heat of the day" (Gen.18:1); the opposite is emphasized:

"In the heat of the day" (Gen.18:1). R. Ishmael taught: "As the sun waxed hot, it melted" (Ex. 16:21). This means at four hours. You say, at four hours; yet perhaps that is not so, and it means at six hours? When it says, "In the heat of the day," that must refer to six hours. Yet perhaps it is the reverse." At four hours, it is cool in the shade and hot in the sun, whereas at six hours, both the sun and the shade are equally hot. R. Tanhuma said: "In the heat of the day" means when people cannot find shade beneath the sun.

R. Jannai said: The Holy One made a hole in Gehenna, making the whole world intolerably hot to its inhabitants for a short while. 'Shall the righteous be in pain while the whole world is at ease!' [That is the implication of] "In the heat of the day." From this, it follows that heat is beneficial to a wound.¹⁷⁸

passionately for their recovery.

The rabbis state that the heat from the 'irritating' sun promotes healing. In this passage, however, but there is another agenda as well. The other agenda, mentioned earlier, states that suffering brings a person closer to God. Abraham suffered and was visited by the presence of God. If people are righteous like Abraham, sunlight though painful, brings healing. However, if people are wicked then the light will scar. The rabbis utilize the verse: "But unto you that fear My name, shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in its wings" (Mal.3:20) as their text depicting the tension between blessing and curse as it relates to light/sun:

R. Simeon b. Zebid said in the name of R. Isaac b. Tabla, in the name of R. Hiyya Areka, of the school of R. Aha, in the name of R. Zera, in the name of R. Eleazar in the name of R. Hanania, in the name of R. Mi'asha on the authority of R. Judah b. Il'ai: What is the meaning of, "But unto you that fear My name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in its wings?" (Mal. 3:20). This refers to those people who fear to utter the Divine name in vain. "The sun of righteousness with healing in its wings". Abaye said, 'This proves that the small particles dancing in the sun's rays have healing power.' Now, he differs from R. Simeon b. Lakish, who said, 'There is no Gehinnom in the world to come, but the Holy One will draw forth the sun from its sheath: the righteous shall be healed and the wicked shall be judged and punished thereby. As it is written, "But unto you that fear My name the sun of righteousness shall arise with healing on its wings."

Moreover, they shall be rejuvenated by it, as it says, "And you shall go forth and grow up as calves of the stall" (Mal. 3:20). But the wicked shall be punished thereby, as it is written, "Behold the day comes that shall burn as an oven and all the proud, yea and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble. And the day that comes shall burn them up, says the God of Moses, that it shall leave them

According to the rabbinic mind, redemption implied the coming of the Messiah. No matter how oppressive the Jewish people found their lives, the hope of a better world illuminated their otherwise dismal reality. An example of their hope was the Messiah, which developed into the greatest aspiration of all Judaism. The imagery of light has been integrated into this cherished vision:

In the hour when the messianic king is revealed, he will come and stand on the roof of the Temple, and proclaim to Israel, saying, 'You meek ones, the time for your redemption has come, and if you believe not in me, look at my light which shines upon you. As Scripture says: "Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you" (Isa. 60:1). And upon you alone has it arise and not upon the nations, for it says, "For behold the darkness covers the earth, and gross darkness the peoples, but upon you does God shine" (Isa. 60:2). At that hour will God brighten the light of messianic kin and of Israel, so that all the nations who are in darkness and in gloom will walk in the light of the Messiah and of Israel, as it says: "And the nations will come to your light" (Isa. 60:3).¹⁸⁰

Ultimate redemption implies a sense of being lifted up from oppression and pain. Poverty, injustice and despair will be no more when the Messiah arrives. This vital moment will see the resurrection of the righteous. All Jews will enjoy the experience described as the Sabbaths of Sabbaths. People will not be obliged to work, but can rejoice in the mitzvah of

180. Pesikta Rabbati, pisqa 162. C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, A Rabbinic Anthology, (Schocken Books: New York, 1974), pp. 606-607.

will come and stand on the roof of the Temple, and proclaim to Israel, saying, 'You meek ones, the time for your redemption has come, and if you believe not in me, look at my light which shines upon you.' As Scripture says: "Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you" (Isa. 60:1). And upon you alone has it arise and not upon the nations, for it says, "For behold the darkness covers the earth, and gross darkness the peoples, but upon you does God shine" (Isa. 60:2). At that hour will God brighten the light of messianic kin and of Israel, so that all the nations who are in darkness and in gloom will walk in the light of the Messiah and of Israel, as it says: "And the nations will come to your light" (Isa. 60:3).¹⁸⁰

Ultimate redemption implies a sense of being lifted up from oppression and pain. Poverty, injustice and despair will be no more when the Messiah arrives. This vital moment will see the resurrection of the righteous. All Jews will enjoy the experience described as the Sabbaths of Sabbaths. People will not be obliged to work, but can rejoice in the mitzvah of study. These and other beliefs are attributed to the coming of the long awaited Messiah.

For the liberal Jew, the notion of a Messianic era has been preferred, still implying a time of peace and prosperity, of faith in God and Torah, of justice and love among all people. Whether the perspective is traditional or liberal, redemption (ge'ulah) is the supreme healing of the world. Should that redeemer, goel, appear in mortal form, or in

180. Pesikta Rabbati, pisqa 162. C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, A Rabbinic Anthology, (Schocken Books: New York, 1974), pp. 606-607.

ethereal time, Messiah is a vision much revered by the Jewish people.

Within rabbinic literature, facets of messianic hope are reflected through "borrowed" light imagery. Brilliant rays of Jewish redemption which suffuse our legends were influenced by two early groups of late antiquity, the Gnostics and Zoroastrians. For these ancient peoples, light symbolized the good God in contrast to the bad God. In this way, the dualism of light and darkness represented the foundation of their theology. Judaism retains some of this gnostic belief, even today; such as in the relationship between God and light. This gnostic remnant can be found in the morning prayer of creation, yotzeir or. Indeed, the theme of God's love, middat rachamim, its' associated with light in an early prayer book, Seder Eliahu. There it states that God is "from whom go forth brightness and light to a world, and who causes rain to fall and grass to grow."¹⁸¹

Though we may be indebted to the ancient Gnostics and Zoroastrians for their initial conception of light imagery, Jewish theology has significantly developed this theme as well. As we have mentioned earlier, the Messiah and the World to Come are introduced through light. We note in the following illustration the rabbinic attitude which relates radiance with the World to Come:

¹⁸¹. Max Kedushin, The Rabbinic Mind, p.52.

"This month shall be unto you" (Ex. 12:2). Another explanation: It is written, "Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare" (Isa. 32:9). Will there be 'new things' in the Time to Come? Is it not written: 'That which has been made is that which shall be..and there is nothing new under the sun' (Eccl. 1:9). We do, however, find ten new things which the Holy One will renew in the Time to Come. The first is that God will illumine the whole world, for as it says: The sun shall be no more your light by day ... but God will be unto you an everlasting light" (Isa. 60:19). Is there a person able to look at God? But what will God do to the sun? God will make it give forty-nine times as much light, as it says, "And the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold" (Eccl. 30:26). When a person will be sick, God will order the sun to heal her; as it says: "But unto you that fear My name, shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing on its wings" (Mal. 3:20).¹⁸²

In the World to Come, the healing power of light will be known to humanity, for it says that God will give 'forty nine times as much light.' Emphatically, it states that if people become sick, God will give the command for the sun to heal them. Although individuals may not have the ability to look directly at God in the World to Come, the text explains that the sun will be provide greater healing than ever before. Light, therefore becomes an extension for God and in this way, light imagery and God become interwoven.

If increased light is the promise the Jewish people can look forward to in the World to Come, how much the more so is the image of Messiah filled with light! In the following

¹⁸². Exodus Rabbah 15:21.

passage, the Redeemer is introduced through light. Juxtaposed next to the light imagery is that of darkness and evil. Note how the rabbis relate messianic hope with light, and darkness with a satanic figure.

"In Your light, we shall see light." What is this light which the congregation of Israel looks for? That is the light of the Messiah, as it is said, "God saw the light and it was good" (Gen. 1:3). God looked at the Messiah and his deeds before the worlds was created, and God hid the [primal or archetypal] light for God's Messiah and for God's generation under the throne of God's glory.

Then Satan said to God, 'God of the world, for whom is this light which You have hidden under Your throne of glory?' God replied, 'For him who will put you to shame.' Satan said, 'Show him to me.' God said, 'Come and see him.' When Satan saw him, he was appalled and fell on his face, and he said, 'Verily this is the Messiah who will cast me and all the princes [i.e., angels] of the nations of the world into hell.'¹⁸³

Though while in this legend the divinity is represented with light, in contrast to Satan as darkness, some Jewish mystical traditions proposed that darkness was not Satan! They taught that darkness was actually concealed light (goodness). This concept of darkness as concealed light, gave "evil" the potential for transformation. According to the mystics, God's plan was to hide primordial light for individuals to discover and redeem. Darkness as concealed light was proposed by a mystic of the sixteenth century, Isaac Luria. Luria's theory

¹⁸³. Pesikta Rabbati, 146b. See C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, A Rabbinic Anthology, p. 584.

explored light imagery through a story of a primordial vessel created by God.

According to this legend, at the moment of creation, this vessel was suffused with primordial light. Not being able to withstand the pressure of this splendor, it broke. The shards of the broken vessels became husks, kelippot; evil forces that surrounded and trapped the remaining sparks. Lurianic mysticism taught that the task of individuals was to rescue these shards, through a process called tikkun, healing; in other words, to bring forth the light from dark places. When all the shards have been redeemed, then the world will have achieved the light of the Messiah.

Until this momentous era arrives, human beings continue to search for shards of light. Gathering these shards is intrinsically related to performing acts of kindness. By performing mitzvot, an individual brings the concealed light into the world.

Rabbinic Judaism, despite its legalistic leanings, encouraged a less rational approach when it came to discussing images of God, light and healing. Even more "irrational" was the rabbinic attitude concerning death and after death experiences. In the next chapter we will look at those topics regarding traditions about healing which will involve death, resurrection and the world to come.

CHAPTER TEN:

HEALING AND RESURRECTION

Death, and what follows it, are a mystery defying all imagination. It is true that human beings will fight disease with all their strength, will, and the best medical technology money can buy, in order to salvage even moments of prolonged life. However on some level, we accept the calling from beyond ourselves, as this "beyond" holds an eternality of its own. Though we find in Jewish literature a sense of a world to come, there is no craving for death in the history of our piety. Mortal life is the precise domain in which we live out our covenant with God. And so we resist death.

Rabbi Maurice Lamm writes: "Death is a night that lies between two days."¹⁸⁴ This statement implies that the act of dying is not the end, but rather a transition from one state to another. Rabbinic literature has a great deal to say regarding the afterlife as articulated in the themes of the Messiah and the perfection in the World to Come. In addition, we will discover that the concept of healing is intimately related to dying, since the world to come offers promise of resurrection, and cure to all wounds. Some mystical strains of Judaism have proposed reincarnation, gilgul - a return of the soul as one possibility following death. Gilgul, transmigration of soul, implies that the soul returns many times in order to be purified. Once these life lessons or

¹⁸⁴. Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning (Jonathan David Publishers, New York, 1969), p.1.

purifications have been mastered, (lifetimes later) the soul joins the Holy One in rest. Though there is no single dogma attached to the world to come, Judaism certainly espouses that there is more to God's plan than what we see before our eyes today.

Human beings are simply not equipped to grasp what lies beyond the present. A philosopher who stressed our incapacity to know God's will was the 12th century physician/philosopher, Moses Ben Maimon (Maimonides). Maimonides wrote that although we could not claim knowledge of God's plan, what was within human power was intellectual development. For the intellectual (philosopher) there was promise of achieving a union with the Active Intellect, Maimonides' God. Leaving one's body at death, therefore was a great pleasure - for the elite. He wrote in this regard:

The philosophers have already explained that the bodily faculties impede in youth the attainment of most of the moral virtues, and all the more that of pure thought, which is achieved through the perfection of the intelligible that leads to passionate love of Him, may He be exalted. For it is impossible that it should be achieved while the bodily humors are in effervescence. Yet in the measure in which the faculties of the body are weakened and the fire of the desires is quenched, the intellect is strengthened, its lights achieve a wider extension, its apprehension is purified, and it rejoices in what it apprehends. The result is that when a perfect man is stricken with years and approaches death, this apprehension increases very powerfully to the point of joy over this apprehension and a great love for the object of apprehension. It becomes stronger, until the soul is separated from the body at that moment of this

state of pleasure.¹⁸⁵

According to Maimonides, death is actually the greatest of homecomings. Throughout one's life there is a search for God and only by leaving the limited confines of one's body can the goal be reached. Maimonides cites in other portions of this work rabbinic traditions that say that Moses, Aaron and Miriam died by a kiss.¹⁸⁶ Though most people fail to achieve the status of prophet and hence never experience this gentle death, Maimonides suggests that people can yet strive to draw close to God through intellectual achievement. The essence of Maimonides' creed is that death holds great potential because the human intellect is no longer impeded by the body.

Midrashic literature stresses that death is as an important release as well. Particularly when a person was suffering, death was deemed a merciful act. Certainly another approach toward impending death was to pray, repent and perform mitzvot. However, if one was unable to perform any more mitzvot, some even suggested that the moment for dying

¹⁸⁵. Moses Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, III:51.

¹⁸⁶. B.T. Baba Batra 17a: "And Moses, the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab by the mouth of the Lord" (Deut. 34:5). Regarding Aaron; "By the mouth of the Lord, and died there" (Num. 33:38). And they said of Miriam in the same way; 'She also died by a kiss.' Maimonides suggests in the Guide of the Perplexed, III:51, that in regard to her it is not said 'by the mouth of God;' because she was a woman and the use of the figurative expression was not suitable with regard to her.

had come. In the following illustration, a rabbi is critically ill. His disciples pray around the clock for his recovery. His handmaiden, however, realizes the severity of his illness. Despite their efforts to keep the rabbi alive through prayer, she interferes by breaking their concentration and thus allows the rabbi to die. In this example, we notice the tension between fighting for life versus surrendering to death:

On the day that Rabbi [Judah haNasi] died, the rabbi had decreed (prior to his death) a public fast and offered prayers for heavenly mercy... Rabbi's handmaid ascended the roof and prayed: 'The immortals desire Rabbi [to join them] and the mortals desire Rabbi [to remain with them]; may it be the will of God that the mortals may overpower the immortals.'

When, however, she saw how often he resorted to the privy, painfully taking off his tefillin, and putting them on again, she prayed: 'May it be the will [of the Almighty] that the immortals may overpower the mortals.' As the rabbi incessantly continued their prayers for mercy, she took up a jar and threw it down from the roof to the ground. For a moment, they ceased their praying and the soul of Rabbi departed to its eternal rest.¹⁸⁷

In this midrash, dying is actually healing, in that there is a cessation of suffering. The handmaiden was the most merciful of all when she prayed for Judah haNasi's (the Prince) comfort through dying. Commentary on this passage suggests that Rabbinic Judaism took a positive view of this

¹⁸⁷. B.T. Ketubot 103b.

handmaiden. The rabbis agreed that God wounded and God healed; the moment of death was destined by the Holy One; and in some cases was a relief from pain. This acceptance of death could not exist without some belief in an afterlife. In this chapter, we will explore the rabbinic attitude toward the afterlife through traditions concerning the definition of death, the promise of the healing, and the potential of resurrection.

A. DEFINITION OF DEATH

We find in the tradition an overwhelming number of texts reflecting a belief in the world to come. Within Rabbinic Judaism, belief in resurrection is imperative, as it states in the Talmud:

All Israel has a portion in the world to come. For it is written, "Your people are all righteous, they shall inherit the land for ever... But the following have no portion in the world to come: one who maintains that resurrection is not a biblical doctrine, that Torah was not divinely revealed and an epikorus (heretic).¹⁸⁸

Continuously Jews are reminded of the next world, and how their life on earth will be balanced after death.

¹⁸⁸. B.T. Sanhedrin 90a.

Given that a belief in resurrection, or at least some form of life after death, existed, it is interesting that the rabbis would persist in defining death! What we find in their discussion about death, however, is not that they were talking about death as we know it, rather their emphasis upon "death in life!"

What is death in life? One who experiences death in life falls into four categories: the leper, the blind, one who is barren and one who descends into poverty. These four groupings are discussed from the earliest writings of the Talmud until the middle ages. Though there is some variation as to the order of the groups, the prooftexts have remained constant. Note the following example:

R. Joshua b. Levi said: 'A man who is childless is accounted as dead, for it is written, "Give me children, or else I am dead" (Gen.30:1). And it was taught: Four are accounted as dead: a poor person, a leper, a blind person and one who is childless; a poor person, as it is written, "For all the people are dead, which sought your life" (Ex.4:19); a leper, as it is written, "And Aaron looked upon Miriam, and behold she was leprous. And Aaron said unto Moses, let her not be as one dead" (Num. 12:10-12); the blind, as it is written, "God has set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old" (Lam. 3:5); and one who is childless, as it is written,

"Give me children or else I am dead" (Gen. 30:1).¹⁸⁹

Because these living "deaths" are a focus of rabbinic thought throughout the ages, let us examine this tradition more closely. The first death specifically refers to Rachel's barrenness. The text, Gen. 30:1, reveals her agony and jealousy toward her sister Leah's fertility. She cries out to Jacob: "Give me children or else I die." Rachel's torment echoes the tears of matriarch Sarah, and later Hannāh. Within a Biblical, rabbinic and to some extent contemporary perspective, infertility is equivalent to death. Barrenness means that a generation's seed would not be passed into the next era. The exact gene pool of that union would not survive. Jewish tradition has failed to relate the infertility of a couple to the impotence of the husband; rather, it is the woman who bears the shame. It is always her inability to carry on her husband's name and this was perceived as fatal.

The second death was that of impoverishment. Impoverishment can be understood as a metaphor for the loss of position and status. By the amoraic period, two other names were associated with this particular theme of irrevocable

¹⁸⁹. B.T. Nedarim 64b. In the parallel in B.T. Avodah Zarah 5a, the order is altered - poor, blind, leper, barren. See Yalkut Shemoni I, 127. Exodus Rabbah 50:34 mentions one of the "deaths" within the context of another story. About death in living, it says: "And it came to pass in the course of many days that the King of Egypt died" (Ex. 2:23)...This means that he became a leper, who is deemed as one who is dead as it is said, "Let her not be, I pray, as one dead" (Num. 12:13).

personal defeat. Genesis Rabbah as well as Lamentations Rabbah utilize the characters Dathan and Abiram as an illustration of those whose "death" was extreme poverty. What was their poverty? These texts say:

And one who has become reduced in circumstances, as it says: "For all the men are dead that sought your life" (Ex. 4:19). Now these 'men' were Dathan and Abiram. They had become impoverished.¹⁹⁰

Dathan and Abiram are two men mentioned in the story of Korah's rebellion (Num. 16). In the wilderness, they had joined Korah in instigating an uprising against Moses. By not dealing with Moses and refusing to respond at Moses' bidding, Dathan, Abiram and Korah as well as their families were swallowed up by the earth. They were made poor by the isolation their rebellion created. Hatred against their leader forced them into alienation from their community. Separation from the people Israel was terminal punishment.

The third death is that of blindness. The verse from Lamentations 3:6 states: "God has set me in dark places, as those who were once dead." The words of this verse as well as those preceding it concern a person who has been tormented and who sees no path of salvation. Blindness - as a definition of humanity without God, illustrates the depth of biblical and rabbinic faith. Life without salvation, life

¹⁹⁰. Genesis Rabbah 71:6 and Lamentations Rabbah 3.2.

without hope is death.

The fourth example of death in life is leprosy which is represented through the biblical story involving Aaron and Miriam. Aaron and Miriam had engaged in slander against Moses, and God struck Miriam with leprosy. Some midrashim suggest that the greatest punishment was placed upon Aaron who had to bear witness to his sister's shame. The physical punishment of leprosy struck Miriam, however, Aaron did not leave unscathed. His punishment was having to see his sister suffer which may have been even more traumatic. The Bible says that he cried out to Moses: "Let her not be as one dead, of whom flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother's womb" (Num.12:12). The importance of Aaron's dialogue proves how severely the Israelites perceived leprosy. No one could approach a leper out of self-protection.

These four "deaths" are all related by the fact that they involve punishment of isolation. Though each death - blindness, barrenness, poverty, and leprosy - can be broadly interpreted, we gain a sense of their specificity. Actual death was beyond the grasp of people, however, severe illness was something with which they could struggle. We will discover that these severe ailments could be healed by God, either in this life or the next.

B. THE PROMISE OF HEALING

The rabbis believed that what was broken in this world would be fixed by God in the next. They believed that God was the Source of wound and balm. In the same way, God was responsible for death and the resurrection of the dead. A parallel existed between wounding and healing, and killing and resurrection. This thematic relationship is illustrated in the Talmud:

Raba cited two contradictory verses: It is written, "I kill and I make alive" (Deut. 22:39), while it is also written, "I have wounded and I heal" (ibid.). Since God even resurrects, how much the more does God heal! But the Holy One said: 'What I put to death, I make alive, just as I wounded and heal [the same person].

Our rabbis taught: 'I kill and I make alive,' you might say, I kill one person and give life to another, as the world goes on.¹⁹¹ Therefore it is stated, "I have wounded and I heal;" just as the wounding and healing [obviously] refer to the same person. This refutes those who maintain that resurrection is not intimated in the Torah.¹⁹² Another interpretation: At first what I slay, I resurrect and then what I wounded, I will heal.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Some people die and others are born.

¹⁹² B.T. Sanhedrin 90a.

¹⁹³ B.T. Pesachim 68a. A parallel midrash in Kohelet Rabbah 1:4 states: "I raise them [from the grave] with their blemishes, so that people will not say; 'Those whom God allowed to die are different from those God restored to life.' 'I kill and I make alive, I wound' and then I heal after resurrection."

Some midrashim suggest that God resurrects people in the state in which they die. If a person is disabled at death, then they will be resurrected that way. After resurrection, however, God will heal them of the blemishes they possessed in their former lifetime. There is therefore, an implied relationship between death, resurrection and healing. We find this theme reiterated in a later text:

"And he sent Judah before him unto Joseph (Gen. 36:28). This illustrates the verse. "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together" (Isa. 45:25). Come and see how all whom the Holy One has smitten in this world, God will heal in the future that is to come - the blind will be healed, as it says: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened" (Isa. 35:5); the lame - "Then shall the lame person leap as a hart" (Isa. 35:6) and the speech impaired - "And the tongue of the speech impaired shall sing" (Ibid.). Thus all shall be healed, save that as a people depart [this life] so will they return resurrected. If one departs blind, one will return blind; if one departs deaf, one will return deaf; if one departs dumb, one will return dumb; if one departs lame, one will return lame...

Why does one return as one went? So that the wicked of the world should not say: 'After they died, God healed them and then brought them back!' Apparently these are not the same, but others. If so, God says to them, let them arise in the same state in which they went, and then I will heal them.' Why? "That you will know that before Me there was no God formed, neither shall any be after Me" (Isa. 43:10).

After that animals too will be healed, as it says: "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together" (Isa. 45:25).¹⁹⁴ But the one that brought the blow upon all will not be healed, as it says, "And dust

¹⁹⁴ Possibly "healed" in this context is to be understood to mean 'from their evil bent'; thus the wolf will be 'healed' from its predatory instincts.

shall be the serpent's food" (Ibid.).¹⁹⁵

This legend teaches that a person is resurrected in the same state in which he or she died. This applies to even animals. Once resurrected, however, the person or animal is healed of the ailment. However, not everyone benefits from this healing. One who caused destruction will not be blessed with this positive transformation. The rabbis believed in divine retribution; justice was balanced out in the end of days and beyond.

We meet the theme of healing from disabilities suffered by the blind, lame and deaf in a later midrash, too. In this story, God wants to give the Torah to the Israelites; however, there were many people with ailments among them. As the Torah was pure it could not be defiled by people with physical blemishes. The midrash states:

God healed those who were blemished and then gave Israel the Torah. And the proof that God healed them? The person who had been blind was made to see, as it said; "All the people saw the thundering" (Ex. 20:18); one who had been deaf was made to hear, as it is said: "All that God has spoken we will do and hear" (Ex. 24:7); one who had been lame became whole, as it is said, "They even the lame, stood at the nether part of the Mount" (Ex. 19:7).

¹⁹⁵. Genesis Rabbah 95:1.

Thus we are told that God provided the necessary healing for receiving Torah. In addition, this same midrash includes discussion about healing in the world to come. The world to come parallels the event at Mt. Sinai. The rabbis suggest that that singular moment of God's presence at Sinai is synonymous with life after death:

Now, [said God] there is to be a renewal; as I make you new again, I show you a sense of the world to come. For in the time to come, "The eyes of the blind shall be opened" (Isa. 35:5), so at Sinai, "All the people saw" (Ex. 20:18). As in the time to come, "The ears of the deaf shall be unstopped" (Isa. 35:5), so at Sinai, "They said: 'All that God has spoken we will do and hear'" (Ex 24:7). As in the time to come, "The lame person shall leap as a hart" (Isa. 35:6), so at Sinai, "Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet God; and [even the lame] stood at the nether part" (Ex.19:7). As in the time to come, "The tongue of the speech impaired shall sing" (Isa. 35:6), so at Sinai "All the people sang out together" (Ex. 19:8).¹⁹⁶

The rabbis acknowledged that there were severe physical disabilities in life. One may have been born with them or smitten in later years. However, if one died with the ailment, he was resurrected and then healed. By emphasizing resurrection and healing, these examples minimize the great pain of death. We will find in other traditions, however, that in the world to come, this painful experience of death will be no more:

¹⁹⁶. Pesikta D'Rav Kahana pisqa 12.9.

"I wound and I heal" (Deut.22:39). In the messianic future, there will be no death at all, as it is said, "God will swallow up death forever" (Isa. 25:8).

No more death; no more loss; no more physical impairments; the rabbis believed that the world to come offered a complete healing of body and soul. Through the literature of midrash, life after death, world to come and messianic era become tangible concepts for the rabbis.

One midrash suggests that there will be 'new things' instituted in the world to come in addition to the peacefulness defined as the Sabbaths of Sabbaths. Ten wonderful ideals will be achieved: healing by sun, healing by water, healing by fruit, rebuilding cities (even Sodom and Gomorrah), rebuilt Jerusalem with precious stones, enemies living as friends, all of life will join in a covenant with God, no more weeping, no more death, and all will rejoice! The first three concern healing and the ninth, a vindication of death:

When people are sick, God will order the sun to heal them, as it says: "But unto you that fear My name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing on its wings" (Mal. 3:20). The second is that God will bring out living water from Jerusalem and heal therewith all those who have a disease, as it says: 'Every living creature wherewith it swarms where ever the rivers shall come, will live.. For these waters that come will cause all things to be

¹⁹⁷. Kohellet Rabbah 1.4.

healed" (Ezek. 47:9). The third is that God will make trees yield their fruit each month and when people eat of them, they will be healed, as it says: "And by the river upon the bank, on this side and on that side, shall grow every tree for food ..it shall bring forth new fruit every month, because the waters issue out of the sanctuary; and the fruit shall be for food and the leaf for healing" (Ezek. 47:12).

The ninth is that there will be no more death in the world, as it says: "God will swallow up death for ever, and God will wipe away tears from off all faces, and the reproach of God's people God will remove" (Isa. 25:8).¹⁹⁹

God will heal all the afflicted, wipe away tears of despair and swallow up death forever. Spectacular visions are promised in the world to come! Yet, in order to partake of the bounty, one must first believe. Specifically, one must believe in resurrection. Without this conviction, the Jew is left out of the eternal covenant with God. As is states in the Talmud: "All Israel will have a portion in the world to come...except for those who maintain that resurrection is not a biblical doctrine, that the Torah was not divinely revealed or a heretic."¹⁹⁹

C. RESURRECTION

One of the earliest examples pointed out by the rabbis concerning resurrection of the dead concerns the death of

¹⁹⁸. Exodus Rabbah 15:21.

¹⁹⁹. B.T. Sanhedrin 90a.

Joseph. Joseph was buried in Egypt; however he had requested being buried with his people in Shechem (Joshua 24:32). In the following tradition, Moses is responsible for carrying Joseph's bones as the Israelites made their way out of slavery. The question is asked of the text concerns where Joseph had been buried originally. The first response to this question of burial site is the River Nile, while the second is in a royal cemetery. In both resting places, Moses has only to call on the spirit of Joseph to rise.

Serah, daughter of Asher, was a survivor of the generation of Joseph. She went and said to Moses, 'In the River Nile Joseph is buried, And the Egyptians made for him metal spits and affixed them with pitch [to keep him down].' Moses went and stood at the Nile River and said, 'Joseph, the time has come for the Holy One to redeem Israel. Lo, the Presence is held up for you, and the Israelites are held up for you and the clouds of glory are held up for you. If you show yourself, well and good, and if not, we are free of the oath which you have imposed upon our ancestors. Then the coffin of Joseph floated to the surface and Moses took it and went his way.

Similarly, if Elisha, disciple of Elijah, disciple of Moses, could do things in such a way, Moses, master of Elijah, master of Elisha, all the more so should be able to do such things!

And some say that Joseph was buried in the royal cemetery and Moses went and stood at the graves of the kings and said, 'Joseph, Joseph! The time has come for the Holy One to redeem Israel. Lo, the Presence is held up for you, and the Israelites is held up for you. If you show yourself, well and good, and if not, we are free of the oath which you have imposed upon our ancestors.' At that moment, the coffin of Joseph shook, and Moses took it and went along.²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰. Tosefta Sota 4.7.

Joseph had made a vow that he would be buried with his ancestor as it says: "You shall carry up my bones from here" (Gen. 50:25). The midrash says that at the moment of Exodus, Moses's responsibility was to bring the bones of Joseph with him. The early rabbis report an illustration of resurrection through this legend about Joseph's coffin. The rabbis indicate a parallel between the power of Moses to summon Joseph's bones to the same acts of Elijah and Elisha.

Numerous legends speak of the resurrecting powers of these two prophets. The legends of Elijah and Elisha stem from the biblical stories in the First and Second Book of Kings. The power of Elisha to resurrect the dead is generally related to the incident of the three keys; rain, fertility, and resurrection. Several midrashim explain that there were magical keys that God handed over to righteous people. Initially God gave the key for rain to Elijah; the key to the womb, God gave to Elisha, and the key to resurrection, God gave to Elijah, Elisha and Ezekiel. When the woman of Zerephath's son died, Elijah bargained with God in order to gain the resurrection key.²⁰¹ Here is a typical example of the midrashic attitude toward the power of resurrection and Elijah:

²⁰¹. Midrash on Psalms 78:5; See also B.T. Sanhedrin 113a.

If a person should tell you that the dead will not come to life again, tell this one that there is Elijah, who came from Gilead - as it says, "And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead" (I Kings 17:1) and this person can bear witness that by means of him I have already brought back to life in this world the dead son of the woman of Zerephath (I Kings 17:17).²⁰²

Frequently when Elijah is mentioned via the theme of resurrection, we also read of Elisha.²⁰³ A typical example of Elisha's resurrecting power concerns the Shunammite woman's son. His power to resurrect is bound up with the Shunammite woman's hospitality. Her generosity actually generated Elisha's desire to heal her son:

The righteous have power over the same things as God, if one may say so. In which way? Everything that God does, the righteous do. How is this illustrated? Elisha, too, remembered the Shunammite woman. Whence this? For it is said, "At this season, when the time comes around, you will embrace a son" (II Kings 4:16). God quickens the dead; and Elisha, too, brought back to life the son of the Shunammite woman...²⁰⁴

The legends concerning resurrection and Elisha differ

²⁰² Numbers Rabbah 14.1; See also Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chap. 33.

²⁰³ Legends concerning the resurrection powers of Elisha and Elijah are found in Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 1.4; Pesikta Rabbati, pisga 5.1; and Numbers Rabbah 12.11.

²⁰⁴ Deuteronomy Rabbah 10.3 See also Songs Rabbah 5.3 for this notion that righteous actions lead to resurrection: 'Great is the merit of maintaining the needy, since it causes the resurrection of the dead before its time.'

from those about Elijah. In the Second Book of Kings, Elisha dies and is buried. However, after he is buried, another dead person is buried near him. At the moment of contact, the second corpse is revived and stands up! The biblical story insinuates that the second corpse came from an invading tribe of Moabites. Yet the rabbis emphasize that Elisha, a righteous person, who had power while living, had even more power after he died. We find in this example that Elisha's holiness while dead revived the "enemy" and caused him to move away from Elisha:

The Rabbi cried out: 'Such is the power of the righteous in their lifetime! How great must it be after their death!' For R. Hanina b. Hama asserted: 'The righteous are more powerful after death than in life, for it is written, "And it came to pass, as they were burying a man, that behold they spied a band and they cast the man into the sepulchre of Elisha and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he was revived and stood on his feet" (II Kings 13:21).²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵. B.T. Hullin 6a. See also B.T. Sanhedrin 47a which explains that Elisha had two resurrections to perform in his lifetime. The first resurrection was that of the son of the Shunammite woman (II Kings 4) and bringing the freshly buried man to life was the second. R. Aha b. Hanina refutes this idea and says: It is taught that he only arose on his feet, but did not return home. (In other words, the man stood for less than a few seconds.) Surely this is not the fulfillment of the second resurrection which Elisha was destined to perform. R. Aha b. Hanina argues that the reason for the resurrection was that the man was not righteous enough to be buried by Elisha.

Despite these wonderous tales performed by Moses, Elijah and Elisha, the rabbis acknowledge the difficulty in accepting the idea of resurrection. Perhaps this is why other legends warn that one who does not believe in resurrection will have no part in it! In the following three illustrations, we note the tension between the rational thinker and the believer. The first example is a pedagogic tale that concludes with a stern warning; the second threatens that if a person does not believe he will be slain with a second death void of deliverance, and the last text suggests that if a person fears God, he or she will share in the glory of after-life.

The School of R. Ishmael taught: One can be deduce [God's power] from [the metaphor of] glassware, if glassware, which, though made by the breath of human beings, can yet be repaired when broken, then how much the more so human beings, created by the breath of the Holy One!

A sectarian said to R. Ammi: 'You maintain that the dead will be revived; but they turn to dust, and can dust come to life?' He replied: 'I will tell you a story. This may be compared to a human king who commanded his servants to build him a great palace in a place where there was no water or earth [for making bricks]. So they went and built it. But after some time it collapsed, so he commanded them to rebuild it in a place where water and earth was to be found, but they replied, 'We cannot.' Thereupon he became angry with them and said, 'If you could build in a place containing no water or earth, surely you can where there is!'

'Yet', [continued R. Ammi], 'if you do not believe, go to a field and see a mouse, which today is but part flesh and part dust, and yet by tomorrow has developed and become all flesh. And should you say, 'that takes a long time,' go up to the mountains and where you will see but one snail, while by tomorrow the rain has descended and it is

covered with snails.²⁰⁵

This talmudic passage suggests that if a craftsperson can fix a broken glass, surely God can resurrect the dead. The discussion between the "heretic" and rabbi teaches that resurrection is for those who have the capacity for faith. Faith demands that we accept the irrational, that we allow ourselves to "see" what cannot be seen by eye. The legend explains it through metaphor; one sees a lone snail on a mountain, yet after a rainy day, there are hundreds. It seems an extraordinary feat! As this occurrence is typical within nature, all the more so is resurrection a natural occurrence for God!

Taken from Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, the second illustration threatens a cessation of all life for the unbeliever. Those, however, who swear loyalty to the One God will be "quicken" back to life. This example may be a polemic against other religious beliefs, such as Christianity, as it reinforces the belief in one God versus pluralism. As the belief in Jesus and other forces promised resurrection, the rabbis were compelled to emphasize Judaism's unique position.

Every nation which says that there is a second God, I will slay them with a second death, which has no resurrection; and every nation which says that there is no second God, I will quicken them for eternal life. And in the future I will slay those [first

²⁰⁶ B.T. Sanhedrin 91a.

mentioned] and quicken those, therefore it is said,
 "I kill, and I make alive" (Deut. 32:39).²⁰⁷

Believe in the one God of Israel, and there will be resurrection; believe in a second power and there is none. The rabbi's argument is unwavering. However, what does a person need to do in order to achieve eternality? This last example provides a glimmer of light into a lifetime's quest. Though the rabbis attempt to answer the question, their response maintains the mystery surrounding the world to come.

"God of Hosts; God is the Sovereign of glory, Selah" (Psalms 24:7). It signifies that God gives a share of God's glory to those who fear. How do you prove this? God is called Adonai and God called Moses a 'god.' "See I have set you as a god to Pharaoh" (Ex. 7:1). God quickened the dead, and gave a share of God's glory to Elijah so that he also revived the dead, as is proved by the text, "And Elijah said, see your son lives" (I Kings 17:23).²⁰⁸

Thus we learn that fear is necessary in order to share in God's glory. Fear is humility before the Creator. This last midrash maintains that people will partake of God's holiness after death. Holiness accentuates both success in life (i.e., Moses' success in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt) and victory after death (i.e. resurrection). The primary condition depends upon faith. If people believe that

²⁰⁷. Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, chap. 34.

²⁰⁸. Numbers Rabbah 15.13.

God is the ultimate Healer, then death is no longer the end. The midrashim of this chapter reflect an ideology based on the doctrine of an invincible God. The rabbis believed that there was healing in life, and with even more certainty, a healing within the mystery of death.

CONCLUSION:

The rabbinic traditions presented in this work provides us with insight into the world of the early rabbis. My investigation into midrashim which deal with healing has led me to appreciate both the milieu from which they were composed, as well as the artistry of the work. The proliferation of healing legends from the second through fourteenth centuries reflects periods of profound challenge, which was responded to with words of inspiration and faith.

A frequently reported theme in these midrashim concern the merit of suffering. Suffering was good, according to the rabbis, for it brought a person closer to God. The greater the suffering in life, the greater the reward in the world to come. The parables which speak of patience, belief in a saving God and hope for the Messiah were necessary homilies for the persecuted Jew to hear. By reiterating that redemption could come within their lifetime, the Jews developed a faith system which enabled them to endure the most brutal of worlds.

Another theme emphasized by the rabbis in this material was their preference for Torah study as a cure over that of medicine. One hypothesis might be that this statement reflects the rabbis' own agenda. If the Jewish people turned away from tradition toward secular medicine, then the rabbis feared that they would lose their standing in the eyes of the people. Another hypothesis is that the rabbis truly believed that the Jews would benefit from anchoring their faith to God and not

the secular world. Therefore, the midrash states frequently how the power of prayer can heal another person, and through repentance, charity and prayer, an evil decree can be altered.

My research uncovered themes rarely considered pertinent by liberal Jews today, though critically important for those living from the second through fourteenth centuries. These provocative legends depict miraculous healers, miracles and concern themselves with resurrection. Perhaps the rabbis' emphasis on miracle workers, such as Moses, Elijah and Elisha, was a polemic against the controversial healing stories associated with Jesus and other early figures. By introducing Jewish miracle workers who performed acts such as resurrection, the purification of water, as well as the curing of leprosy and infertility, the rabbis acknowledged miracles, from a Jewish perspective. Similarly, the tradition speaks longingly about the Messiah and the promise of healing sunlight which will accompany the Messiah's coming. Since Gnostics and Christians shared these visions with Jews, the rabbis crafted the tradition in a manner which was faithful to their agenda, differentiating us from the other religious groups.

I was surprised to discover so many conflicting traditions concerning the sanction or prohibition of healing rituals. What I discerned as a "peculiar" cure, such as when a sick person chanted: "bazak, bazik, bizbazik, mismasik, kamun and kamik" (B.T. Shabbat 67a), the rabbis sanctioned.

At the same time, they condemned a Jew who responded with the word "healing" (merapeh) when a person sneezed. Such a response was viewed as emulating the custom of a foreign nation, the Amorites (Tosefta, Shabbat 7.5). We can assume then that what may have been acceptable during one period, was problematic in another setting. They probably deemed as appropriate, certain behaviors for Jews based upon the religious, political and social climate in which they lived.

It seems clear to me that the rabbis invested themselves so deeply into the possibility of healing, because their people were suffering. The rabbis who composed the midrashim on healing and faith, lived in a world that called out for spiritual nourishment. From the rabbinic literature examined in this thesis, I submit that they responded well to the cries of their community.

There is yet much work needed to be done in the area of rabbinic attitudes toward healing. What I was not able to accomplish in this work, I would like to research at another time. I am interested in what the medieval Jewish scholars wrote on the issue of healing and particularly the area of mystical literature. It would be enlightening as well to ascertain how these midrashim affected the people in their communities. Was the burden an easier one to bear with a faith system which included God as healer, miracles and resurrection? What is the difference between a community built on faith principals such as these and one that is not?

Like the rabbinic authors centuries ago, I believe that as rabbis, we, too, have the responsibility to respond to the critical needs of our communities. I submit that the volatility of our current environment demands a similar effort. We need to expose our communities to themes of healing that will generate a sense of peace of mind and personal security. Given the issues confronting the Jew of the 21st century, I suggest that a concern about healing; spiritual regeneration, is as essential to us in our day as it was to our rabbinic predecessors.

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