

Complementary Therapies and Traditional Judaism

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Abstract

In Jewish tradition, physicians are obligated to heal the sick and patients are obligated to seek healing from physicians. Judaism also sanctions certain complementary therapies such as prayers, faith healing, and amulets, when used as supplements to traditional medical therapy. Confidence in the healing powers of God through prayer and contrition is encouraged, provided that the patient uses prayer alongside traditional scientific medicine, not as a substitute for it.

Key Words: Prayers, faith healing, amulets, nostrums, quackery.

Introduction

In Jewish tradition, a physician is given specific divine license to practice medicine. According to Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) and other codifiers of Jewish law, the physician is obligated to use his medical skills to heal the sick. Not only is the physician permitted and even obligated to minister to the sick, but the patients are also obligated to care for their health and life. Men and women do not have title over their lives or bodies, since they are charged with preserving, dignifying and hallowing these. They must eat and drink for sustenance and must seek healing when ill. Thus, the physician has an obligation and authority to heal, and the patient has a co-responsibility to maintain health.

Another cardinal principle in Judaism is that human life is of supreme value. In order to preserve a human life, even observation of the Sabbath and the Day of Atonement may be suspended, as well as all other rules and laws except the biblical prohibitions against idolatry, murder and forbidden sexual relations. Since every moment of human life is of infinite value, one is prohibited from doing anything that might shorten a life, even for only a very short time. Nor may a person turn to treatments known to be ineffective, since this would, by inference, be shortening life. Traditional Judaism does not distinguish between extending a healthy life and extending the morbid phase of life (by artificial means).

How does traditional Judaism view the use of complementary or alternative therapies? It may be somewhat awkward to speak of alternative or complementary therapies in the traditional world of the Bible and the Talmud. Today we refer to practices as “alternative therapies” when they are used instead of, or in conjunction with the accepted normative practice of medicine, which is codified in the world’s knowledge base of medical science defined by the canon of instruction in accredited medical schools. Although the concepts of “science” or “scientific” as we know them today first emerged in the nineteenth century, Moses Maimonides, seven hundred years earlier, clearly distinguished between “therapies which heal by nature and whose efficacy is proven by clinical trials” and “therapies of unproven efficacy” (M. Maimonides’ Mishnah Commentary on Tractate *Yoma* 8:6).

In talmudic times (2nd – 6th centuries, CE), healing arts were taught primarily through apprenticeships and from medical books, some of which were written by famous Greek and Persian physicians. None of these precluded a search for other healing modalities. Although the term “complementary or alternative therapy” has a decidedly modern ring to it, a rich biblical, talmudic and post-talmudic literature exists about prayers, amulets, incantations, astrology and nostrums for the healing and prevention of certain illnesses. Does Judaism condone their use, either as a supplement to or as a substitute for conventional medicine? This essay examines this question and concludes that some forms of what we consider “unorthodox therapies” are acceptable in Judaism, whereas others, such as quackery, superstition, sorcery and witchcraft are not. The criterion for rejection is the theological test of God as the Ultimate Healer. Those therapies that rely on God’s healing power are acceptable in traditional Judaism, even if they are considered complementary today.

Prayer

At one time or another, most human beings offer prayers for the relief of their own illness or that of others. These prayers may differ in content and in the manner in which they are offered, by both religious and non-religious people (1). Recourse to prayer in Judaism during illness is not necessarily an indication that the person lacks confidence in traditional medical therapy.

The patriarch Abraham prayed for the recovery of Abimelech (Genesis 20:17), and God healed him. David prayed for the recovery of his son (II Samuel 12:16), but his son died. Elisha prayed for the recovery of the Shunamite woman’s son (II Kings 4:33), and the boy recovered. King Hezekiah prayed for his own recovery (II Chronicles 32:24), and God added 15 years to his life. The shortest healing prayer on record is the famous one uttered by Moses for the recovery of his sister Miriam, who was afflicted with leprosy. Said Moses: *El na r’fa na la* [O God, heal her, I beseech thee] (Numbers 12:13), and she recovered. These incidents are anecdotal and hence do not constitute scientific, statistical evidence for the efficacy of prayer, but they are certainly worthy of mention.

One should never be discouraged from praying, even under the most difficult and troublesome conditions. The Talmud says (2) that “even if a sharp sword rests upon a man’s neck, he should not desist from prayer.” On the other hand, a person should never stand in a place of

danger and say that a miracle will be wrought for him. One should not count on being cured by direct intervention by God without first having sought out the advice and treatment offered by conventional human medical practitioners. The Jewish attitude toward prayer is succinctly summarized by Jakobovits (3) as follows:

...while every encouragement was given for the sick to exploit their adversity for moral and religious ends and to strengthen their faith in recovery by prayer, confidence in the healing powers of God was never allowed to usurp the essential functions of the physician and of medical science.

Amulets

Since antiquity, people have attempted to ward off misfortune, sickness, and “evil spirits” by wearing pieces of paper, parchment, or metal discs inscribed with various formulae which would protect or heal the bearers. Such artifacts, known as amulets or talismans, are frequently mentioned in talmudic literature, where they are called *kemiya*. Consisting either of a written parchment or of roots or herbs, the amulet is worn on a small chain, in a signet ring or in a tube. It was considered to be of proven efficacy when a physician certified that it had cured either one sick person on three different occasions or three different patients. In the ancient world, amulets were considered part of the legitimate therapeutic armamentarium of the physician (4).

According to most rabbinic authorities, there is little or no objection in Jewish religious law to the use of amulets for healing purposes. The rabbinic literature of the past several hundred years is replete with references to amulets as preventives to ward off the “evil eye,” to avert demons, to prevent abortion, and to cure a variety of diseases such as epilepsy, lunacy, fever, poisoning, hysteria, jaundice, and colic (5). Even Maimonides, who seriously questioned the efficacy of amulets, allowed them to be worn and/or carried, even on the Sabbath, because of their possible psychological and placebo effects on the patient’s illness (Code of Maimonides, Laws of the Sabbath 19:13–14). The use of amulets is quite widespread even today, particularly among Jews of Moroccan origin living in Israel, and other Sephardic Jews.

Astrology

The generally prevalent belief in astrology in ancient and medieval times was fully shared by the Jews, many of whom believed that the celestial bodies had the power to influence human destiny. Astrologers ascribed occult virtues of heavenly bodies to earthly objects. Treatment for various illnesses consisted of a special image made by an artist, with due reference to the appropriate constellation. For example, Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham Adret, known as *Rashba*, writes that people used to engrave the image of a tongueless lion on a plate of silver or gold to cure pains in the loins or in the kidneys (Response *Rashba* 1:167).

Moses Maimonides was one of the few authorities who not only dared raise his voice against this almost universally held belief, but even branded it as a superstition akin to idolatry.

He unequivocally prohibited anyone from being influenced by astrology, and claimed that such practice was an offense punishable by flogging. He categorically rejected astrology (and other superstitious practices and beliefs), and denounced it as a fallacy and delusion (6), an absurd idea (7), and an irrational illusion of fools who mistake vanity for wisdom, and superstition for knowledge (8). Many talmudic and post-talmudic rabbis believed in astrology; a few, such as Maimonides, did not. Traces of the belief are found in words and phrases such as *mazal tov* (meaning a good star or planet), still used by Jews today.

Medical Charms and Incantations

An incantation is a recitation over a patient, designed to neutralize harm or illness, and intended to induce healing. The medical effectiveness of incantations in classic Jewish sources was never in doubt. Incantations to heal a scorpion's bite are permitted even on the Sabbath, as is charming a snake or scorpion to prevent injury or harm. The Codes of Jewish Law of Maimonides and of Joseph Karo (1488–1575) point out that such incantations are absolutely useless, but are permitted because of the patient's dangerous condition, so that he should not become distraught. The main question concerning the permissibility of incantations in Judaism is whether or not they represent a form of forbidden heathen practice, since Jews are commanded not to go in the ways of the Amorites (Leviticus 18:3). Some talmudic sages declared that if one whispers a spell over a bodily illness, one is deprived of everlasting bliss, i.e., the world to come. On the other hand, the Talmud clearly states that whatever is used for healing purposes is not forbidden.

Zimmels (9) lists a variety of diseases supposedly cured by medical charms and incantations, including certain eye diseases, headache, infertility and epilepsy. .

Nostrums

Zimmels (9) also describes the custom of transference, whereby an illness can be transferred to an animal or a plant by a certain procedure with or without the recitation of an incantation. For example, patients with jaundice were told to put live fish under their soles to transfer the jaundice to the fish. In more recent times, pigeons have been placed on the abdomen of jaundiced patients to transfer the illness to the pigeons and facilitate recovery of the patient (10). This type of remedy is called a *segulah* or nostrum, a form of medical treatment that has no rational or scientific basis other than as a placebo. Nonetheless, the efficacy of this unorthodox therapy is not in doubt to those who recommend it. A *segulah* is an alternative or unconventional or unproven medical therapy having a place in traditional Jewish practice alongside traditional scientific medicine. The current popular belief among some Jews of the therapeutic efficacy of pigeons in the treatment of jaundice is based on the concept of organic disease transference from the patient to a non-human living animal; it has its parallel in the transference of sins from humans to animals in certain religious rituals.

The subjects of charms, incantations, nostrums, magic and other similar topics are complicated. There are rabbis who believe in them, those who oppose them, and those who say

they do no harm. The interested reader is referred elsewhere for more details (11–12).

Quacks and Quackery

Jewish law requires a physician to be skilled, well educated and ethical. And Judaism has always held the physician in high esteem. Ancient and medieval Jewish writings contain many expressions of admiration and praise for the “faithful physician.” In contrast, quacks are those who lie and deceive by pretending to have knowledge and skills that they lack.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the derogatory talmudic statement “the best of healers is destined for Gehinnom” (Tractate *Kiddushin*, Chapter 4:14) generated extensive discussion and commentary throughout the centuries (13). (Gehinnom is the name of the locale reserved for the wicked after death.) Jakobovits states that this phrase was never intended as a denunciation of the conscientious practitioner, but rather is addressed to quacks who claim to be “the best of healers.”

Physicians are among a group of communal servants who have heavy public responsibilities and are warned against the danger of negligence or error. The talmudic epigram with its curse is limited to physicians who are overly confident in their craft, who are guilty of commercializing their profession, who lie and deceive as do quacks, who fail to acknowledge God as the true Healer of the sick, who fail to consult with colleagues or medical texts when appropriate, who perform surgery without heeding proper advice from diagnosticians, who fail to heal the poor and thus indirectly cause their death, who fail to try hard enough to heal their patients, or who otherwise fail to conduct themselves in an ethical and professional manner (14).

Summary and Conclusion

Judaism considers a human life to have infinite value. Therefore, physicians and other healthcare givers are obligated to heal the sick and prolong life. Physicians are not only given divine license to practice medicine, but are also mandated to use their skills to heal the sick. Failure or refusal to do so with resultant negative impact on the patients constitutes a transgression on the part of the physician. Physicians must be well trained in traditional medicine and licensed by the authorities.

Patients are duty bound to seek healing from a physician when they are ill; they must not rely solely on divine intervention or faith healing. Patients are charged with preserving their health and restoring it when ailing in order to be able to serve the Lord in a state of good health. Quackery is not condoned in Judaism, even when it is practiced by physicians.

On the other hand, Judaism seems to sanction certain complementary or alternative therapies such as prayers, faith healing, amulets, incantations and the like, when used as a supplement to traditional medical therapy. However, the substitution of prayer for rational healing is condemned. Quackery, superstition, sorcery and witchcraft are abhorrent practices in Judaism. However, confidence in the healing powers of God through prayer and contrition is

encouraged and has a place alongside traditional scientific medicine (15).

Epilogue

Alternative or complementary medicine continues to be hotly debated in the scientific community (16). Many practitioners of herbal and other alternative therapies are physicians. Others argue that alternative therapies must never displace or replace proven conventional treatment (17). This essay presents a religious perspective based on ancient and medieval Hebrew writings on this modern debate.

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