

Healing in the Jewish Tradition

The Biblical Understanding of Healing

God heals (and makes sick!) directly

Numbers 12:9-13

9 וַיִּחַר־אַף יְהוָה בָּם וַיִּלְדָּ: 10 וְהֶעֱנָן סָר מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל וְהִנֵּה מִרְיָם מְצֻרְעַת כַּשָּׁלֵג וַיִּפֹּן אֶהֱרֹן אֶל־מִרְיָם וְהִנֵּה מְצֻרְעַת: 11 וַיֹּאמֶר אֶהֱרֹן אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בִּי אֲדֹנָי אֵל־נָא תְנִשְׁתַּעַלְיִנִי חֲטָאת אֲשֶׁר נִוְאלַנּוּ וְאֲשֶׁר חָטָאנוּ: 12 אֵל־נָא תְהִי כַּיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר בְּצִאתוֹ מִרְחֹם אִמּוֹ וַיֵּאכַל חֲצִי בְשָׁרוֹ: 13 וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר אֵל נָא רַפֵּא נָא לָהּ:

9. And the anger of the Eternal One was kindled against them; and [God] departed.

10. And the cloud departed from off the Tent; and, behold, Miriam had become leprous, white as snow; and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous.

11. And Aaron said to Moses, Oh, my lord, I beg you, lay not the sin upon us, because we have done foolishly, and because we have sinned.

12. Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother's womb.

13. And Moses cried out to the Eternal One, saying, Heal her now, O God, I beseech you.

Deuteronomy 32:29

רְאוּ עֵתָה כִּי אֲנִי אֶנִּי הוּא וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי
אֲנִי אֶמְיֹת וְאֶחֱיָה מִחֲצֹתַי וְאֲנִי אֶרְפָּא וְאֵין מִיָּדַי מְצִיל:

See now that I, I am the One, and there is no god with me;
I deal death, and give life; I wounded, and I shall heal;
nor is there any who can deliver out of my hand.

Jeremiah 17:14

רַפֵּא אֱנִי יְהוָה וְאֶרְפָּא הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי וְאֶנְשֵׂעָה כִּי תִהְלֹתִי אֶתָּה:

Heal me, Eternal One, and I shall be healed;
save me, and I shall be saved; for you are my praise.

It was common among the surrounding peoples for their priests to function as healers. Although the Israelite priests dealt with infectious diseases like leprosy, their control was only over containment of spread (avoiding impurity and contamination, not illness itself). There is no instance of priests acting as healers in the Bible. Physicians, per se, are mentioned only rarely: Joseph had physicians in Egypt, but these are not called to tend the dying Jacob - only to embalm him once dead (Gen. 50:2). More revealing about the attitude to physicians and other 'healers' are the following passages.

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II Chronicles 16:12-13

12. And Asa in the thirty ninth year of his reign was diseased in his feet, until his disease was severe; yet in his disease he did not seek the Eternal One, but rather the physicians.

13. And Asa slept with his fathers, and died in the forty first year of his reign.

Ezekiel 13:17-23

17. And you, son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people, who prophesy from their own heart; and prophesy against them,

18. And say, Thus says the Eternal God; Woe to the women who sew bands for all arms, and make veils for the head of people of every height to hunt souls! Will you hunt the souls of my people, and will you save your own souls alive?

19. And will you profane me among my people for handfuls of barley and for pieces of bread, to slay the souls that should not die, and to save the souls alive that should not live, by your lying to my people who hear your lies?

20. Therefore thus says the Eternal God; Behold, I am against your arm bands, with which you hunt souls, whisking them off to destruction; and I will tear them from your arms, and will let the souls go free, the souls that you hunt, whisking them to destruction.

21. Your head veils also will I tear, and save my people from your hand, and they shall be no more in your hand to be hunted; and you shall know that I am the Eternal One.

22. Because with lies you have cowed the heart of the righteous, whom I have not made sad; and strengthened the hands of the wicked, that he should not return from his wicked way, by promising him life;

23. Therefore you shall see no more vanity, nor divine divinations; for I will save my people from your hand; and you shall know that I am the Eternal One.

But the prophets (who speak and act for God) ARE sometimes healers:

II Kings 4:18-20, 34-35

18. And when the child was grown, he fell one day, when he went out to his father to the reapers.

19. And he said to his father, My head, my head. And he said to a lad, Carry him to his mother.

20. And when he had taken him, and brought him to his mother, he sat on her knees till noon, and then died....

32. And when Elisha came into the house, behold, the child was dead, and laid upon his bed.

33. He went in therefore, and closed the door upon the two of them, and prayed to the Eternal One.

34. And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and he stretched himself upon the child; and the flesh of the child became warm.

35. Then he returned, and walked in the house to and fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him; and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.

II Kings 20:7

4. And it came to pass, before Isaiah was gone out to the middle court that the word of the Eternal One came to him, saying,

5. Turn back, and tell Hezekiah the prince of my people, Thus said the Eternal One, the God of David your father, I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you; on the third

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day you shall go up to the house of the Eternal One.

6. And I will add to your days fifteen years; and I will save you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for my own sake, and for my servant David's sake.
7. And Isaiah said, Take a cake of figs. And they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered.
8. And Hezekiah said to Isaiah, What shall be the sign that the Eternal One will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the Eternal One the third day?
9. And Isaiah said, This sign shall you have of the Eternal One, that the Eternal One will do the thing that has been spoken; shall the shadow go forward ten degrees, or go back ten degrees?
10. And Hezekiah answered, It is easy for the shadow to go down ten degrees; no, but let the shadow go back ten degrees.
11. And Isaiah the prophet cried to the Eternal One; and he brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down in the dial of Ahaz.

Healing in Post Biblical Times

In less superstitious times (and arguably through the influence of Greek culture) the attitude towards physicians becomes much more recognisable to us. Consider this from the non-canonical - but still authoritative - tradition:

Ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 38:1-15

1. Honour physicians for their services, for the Eternal One created them.
2. For their gift of healing comes from the Most High, and they are rewarded by the king.
3. The skill of physicians makes them distinguished, and in the presence of the great they are admired.
4. The Eternal One created medicines out of the earth, and the sensible will not despise them.
5. Was not water made sweet with a tree in order that its power might be known?
6. And [God] give skill to human beings that [God] might be glorified through marvelous works.
7. By them the physician heals and takes away pain;
8. The pharmacist makes a mixture from them. God's works will never be finished and from [God] health spreads to all the earth....

So far, so good - but the idea that sickness and health come directly from God persists. The passage continues:

9. My child, when you are ill, do not delay, but pray to the Eternal One and [God] will heal you.
10. Give up your faults and direct your hands rightly, and cleanse your heart from all sin.
11. Offer a sweet-smelling sacrifice and a memorial portion of choice flour, and pour oil on your offering, as much as you can afford.
12. Then give the physician his place, for the Eternal One created him; do not let him leave you, for you need him.
13. There may come a time when recovery lies in the hands of physicians,
14. For they too pray to the Eternal One that [God] grant them success in diagnosis and in healing, for the sake of preserving life.
15. Those who sin against their Maker will be defiant toward the physician.

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One View from the Rabbinic Tradition

At least in the text below, from Bereshit Rabba (5th C.), the rabbis took the discussion in a whole new direction, looking at what we can gain from the various experiences of life: old age, suffering and infirmity. This approach may stem from their growing awareness of the inherent theological challenges in the Biblical approach - but they do not undermine it, choosing rather to shift the focus.

R. Judah b. R. Shimon 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 honour.' Said the Holy ONE, ever to be blessed, to him: 'As you live, you have asked a good thing, and I 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, Judgment threatens him; but if You caused him to suffer, Judgment would not threaten him.' God said to him, 'By your life! You have asked well, and it will commence with you.' Thus suffering is not mentioned from the beginning of the Book until here, but when Isaac arose, suffering was granted to him: *And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim* (Gen. 27:1). 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 two or three days ill, he would settle his affairs with his children.' 'By your life,' replied God, 'you have asked well, and it will commence with you': *And someone 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 brought a new thing - repeated sickness. 'Sovereign of the Universe!' he pleaded. 'You have [previously] kept man in good health until the day of his death! But if a man fell sick and recovered, fell sick and recovered, he would fully repent.' Said God to him, 'By your life! You have asked well, and it will commence with you. Thus it is written: *The writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness* (Isaiah 38:9)....

The rabbis still valued physicians, declaring in the Babylonian Talmud that every city was required to have a physician (Sanhedrin 17b). Unfortunately, at about the same time that this text was written, there was a marked falling off of scientific and medical enquiry in the whole region of the Middle East. The people at large, if not necessarily the scholars, fell back into quite primitive and superstitious ways of thinking. This was partly due to the disenfranchisement of the Jews, even in Persia. Jews were not allowed hold office, follow a craft or practice medicine. It was only on the rise of Islam that there was a new flowering of scientific and medical knowledge. It is not surprising that Maimonides, one of our greatest Jewish thinkers, worked as a court physician in Egypt.

A Modern Prayer for Healing

God of compassion, grant courage and strength to those who are ill, compassion and skill to their physicians and carers. May your loving presence always be with those who are ill, comforting and sustaining them and their loved ones who support them in their time of need. Faithful Healer, send a *refuah shleimah*, a perfect healing, to all who are ill, a healing of the body and healing of the soul, so that they may be quickly restored to complete health and a full life. You are ever near them in the healing powers that work within them. Give us all, we pray, trust in your love, confidence in ourselves and hope for the future. Heal us, Eternal One, and we shall be healed; save us and we shall be saved, for You are a faithful and compassionate healer. We bless You, Eternal One, Healer of the Sick.