

Medical Heretic: Dr. Robert Mendelsohn

by Lee Simons

“**T**he Jewish physician is a great threat today to Judaism,” claims Robert Mendelsohn. “There’s a special place reserved for him in hell.”

For Mendelsohn, those charges are deliberately brutal, his barbs intentionally sharp. A religious man and physician himself, the Evanston resident doesn’t make these statements lightly; instead, they come from years of observation and thought. He adds that being a doctor and a Jew can be a contradiction in terms.

“The Jewish physician does his best to get the Jewish patient to join the idolatrous religion of modern medicine, of which he is the priest,” Mendelsohn explains. “But the ethics and practices of modern medicine are anathema to Judaism.”

Mendelsohn escaped the snares of modern medicine by becoming what he calls a “medical heretic,” a concept explained in his first book, *Confessions of a Medical Heretic*. A second book, *Malepractice*, reveals the sexism rampant in medicine today, where women are treated both differently—and more often—than men. These books, together with extensive speaking engagements, have distinguished him as a foremost critic of modern practices. It is a role for which he is well-prepared.

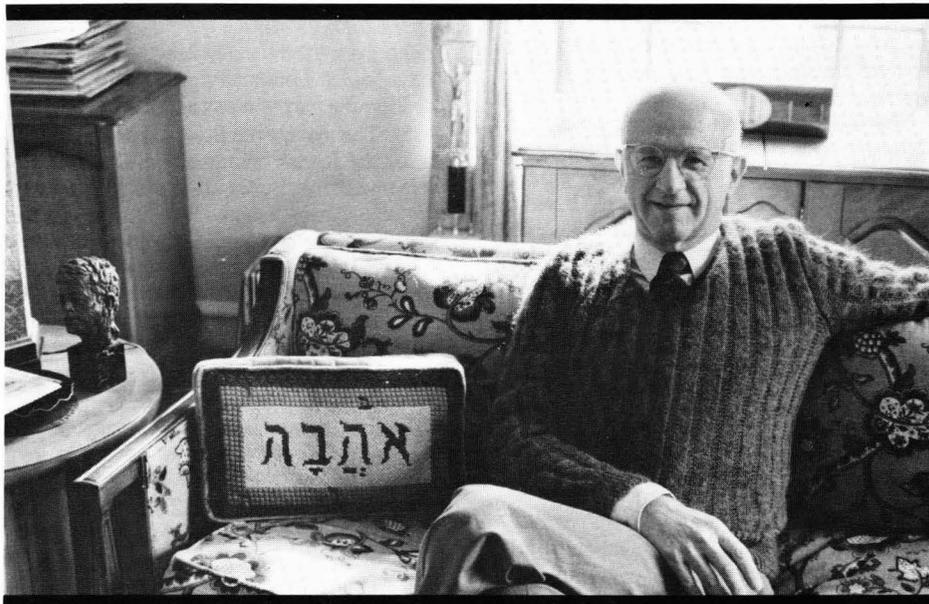
A congenial man who looks younger than his 57 years, Mendelsohn speaks vividly and with authority on what he admits has become a crusade. The walls of his home are decorated with pictures of his family; on this day, shafts of sunshine highlight a pillow embroidered with the Hebrew words, *ahavah*, or love.

Although he says he’s most comfortable staying home, he travels some 200,000 miles each year to make his points. And those points come quickly, with a slight trace of anger: for him, there is no way to practice the religion of modern medicine and at the same time be a good Jew.

“Doctors attempt to destroy family life,” he says. “They try to separate family members at the moment of crisis. If they can do that, they can take over as the authority figure. Instead of listening to your family, you become dependent on the physician. Judaism, on the other hand, is based on *mishpachah*.”

Mendelsohn says this habit begins at the start of life, when women deliver babies outside the company of family and friends. Although many hospitals now allow husbands in the delivery room, he notes that doctors are still one step ahead.

“Now they take women out of the delivery room and into the operating room for a Caesarian,” he says, “even though the morality



Dr. Robert Mendelsohn, who sees a contradiction between Judaism and standard medical practices, poses in his Evanston living room. The pillow contains the word, *ahavah*, which means love.

rate is 20 times higher than for a vaginal birth.” As might be expected, this practice alarms him: “The next thing we’ll have is husband-attended autopsies,” he claims.

He says that modern doctors also destroy family relationship at the end of life by forcing patients to die in intensive care. The person has 55 minutes of every hour in which to die, where no one can hear their last words,” he says. “Jewish law says you have to have family and friends around you.”

Besides that, doctors today are encouraged to prepare the patient for death by discussing how soon it will come. “That’s wrong,” Mendelsohn states. “In Judaism, you’re supposed to discuss the menu for the next day’s breakfast. If the patient is told he’ll die, you may actually hasten the death. It’s the one time you can’t be honest.”

Other than that, Mendelsohn says Judaism is based on honesty while modern medicine is based on deceit. He says doctors don’t tell patients the risks of surgery or drugs, or the long-range effects of practices like x-rays and ultrasound (he considers both dangerous).

In fact, differences in the two religions — Judaism and modern medicine—are so deep that they can’t even agree on when a person is considered dead. Jewish tradition waits till circulation and breathing stop, while modern medicine waits for a flat EEG, which often comes first.

“If a Jewish doctor waits until a patient is dead by the Jewish definition, there is no opportunity to harvest the organs,” Mendelsohn explains. “So the Jewish doctor leaves

his own criteria and goes by the EEG definition, which comes out of Harvard, the Vatican of modern medicine. While this may save some people’s lives through transplants, it’s certain to kill some people before their time.”

He also criticizes Jewish doctors for believing in Darwin instead of the Old Testament, although he admits he used to believe in the theory of evolution himself. “I used to believe that the world was created in six days, but that each day was ten million years long,” he laughs.

“Then I saw the six-day war. And I thought that in 2067, they’ll teach that three million Jews fought 20 million Arabs, and they won in 6 days; but they’ll say the days were longer then. And I decided it wasn’t so terrible to say that the war had been created in six days.”

Although Mendelsohn condemns Jewish doctors for adopting non-Jewish practices, he finds it ironic that one Jewish practice — circumcision — has become so popular among American males. He says that despite current beliefs, circumcision is simply a ritual without medical benefits.

Originally requiring Jewish parents to demonstrate their faith by exposing their child to death, the Jewish version had certain safeguards that are not practiced today: wine in the mouth as anaesthesia; waiting until the eighth day of life, not at birth; doing it at home instead of in a hospital, which Mendelsohn says has too many germs; and forbidding it altogether if a blood relative had died from

continued on page 73

it, possibly indicating hemophilia.

The only reason boys are circumcised today, Mendelsohn claims, is to show the doctor's power in the new religion. "Not only do they circumcise at birth, but they take x-rays to show they can see through you," he says. "They make you deliver against the force of gravity, so the doctors can say they delivered the baby. And they show their power at the time of death, when they need a \$10,000 machine to tell if you're dead — instead of putting a mirror in front of your mouth."

Finally, he laments that Jewish doctors consider keeping kosher an archaic practice which has limited psychological benefits. "They tell their patients to keep kosher if it make them feel better," he says. "They take this condescending, patronizing attitude toward it."

In spite of their differences, he claims that Jews seem to believe in doctors more than the population at large. "Everyone Jewish seems to have doctors in their family, and they're all looked up to," he says. "Jews seem to believe in doctors more than everyone else. They've really bought into the religion of modern medicine."

Because of this, Mendelsohn says he's never sure whether to offer congratulations or condolences when someone is accepted into medical school. He thinks about it for a minute, then comes up with the best answer he can find.

"I tell them to do what everyone should do when dealing with doctors," he says. "Look into what being a doctor is like. And don't trust them; look again. When dealing with doctors, you always should get a second opinion."

continued from page 28

"And what about your husband?"

"I don't know. I only know I am going to live in my country. Yes, I read what you wrote and ever since I have known I was wrong in Vienna. I'm going and my husband will follow, if he loves me."

A Shaliach's job is often ungratifying. But there are moments that make up for it.

Zeev Sabo is Director of the Israel Aliyah Center for Chicago and the midwest. He is a native of Vienna, Austria, and fled the Nazi occupation in 1938 for Israel, where he has lived ever since. He has been in America with the Aliyah organization for six months.

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dox Jewish women as antichoice. Ms. Schnair took the author's comment on Orthodox women out of context and misunderstood her intention. However, Ms. Schnair's letter does raise an issue of great importance to our community which needs to be addressed — that is the role of women in the Jewish community today.

The place traditionally assigned to women in the Jewish community excludes them from participating fully in many aspects of communal life. The synagogue is a local point of activity for the Jewish community and women are welcome there. But in many synagogues they cannot participate actively in religious celebrations or assume leadership positions in the congregation. Women do not count in a minyan, cannot read from the Torah, or receive aliyot in many traditional synagogues. The rabbinate is still not open to women in every denomination, only the Reform and Reconstructionist.

Due to these restrictions many Jewish women feel as if they are strangers in their own community. They want to participate fully in Jewish communal life. They want to pray without being shut off behind a *mehitza* (partition), to be allowed to lead the congregation in prayer or study, and to be given the same opportunities as men for learning. Many women and men who are not satisfied with the exclusion of women from Jewish communal life are seeking new ways of learning, praying, and celebrating as a community. As example of an alternative form of worship is the *egalitarian minyan*, of which there are several in the Chicago area. In this service men and women participate fully in a traditional setting. Women are called to the Torah, lead discussions concerning the Torah portion, and are active participants in the service.

I commend **JEWISH CHICAGO** for reprinting Ms. Pogrebins' thought-provoking article on anti-semitism in the women's movement. An equally important issue for the Jewish community to consider is the changing role of women in Jewish life. Our community must recognize a new social reality—that a significant number of Jewish women are no longer content with the traditional role assign-

ed to them and desire to become full and equal participants in Jewish communal life. I hope **JEWISH CHICAGO** will address this issue in the future.

Francis Zimmerman,
 Chicago

Eclectic Prayer

Several weeks ago, I proposed a rule change in the Illinois House of Representatives which sought to require the prayer at the opening of each days session be an ecumenical invocation, rather than a sectarian prayer that is offensive to Jewish members of the House. If a prayer is to be said, it was my intention to include all of the members of the House in that prayer, and not only those of Christian faiths. I quietly made this same complaint to the Speakers of the House, both Democratic and Republican, during each of my four years in that Chamber.

All of the Representatives should feel comfortable enough to be present during the opening minutes of each session. Often, this does not happen. Some members, myself included, wait out in the Rotunda until the opening prayer is finished in order to avoid participation in a prayer that is solely Christian in nature.

I am disappointed that my colleagues proved to be insensitive to this issue and to the feelings of their fellow Representatives. This rule change would have been in the best interest of the entire House of Representatives. With the many problems facing our State, we could all use a daily prayer—one with which we could all gain inspiration.

Rep. Lee Preston
 3rd Representative District

The recipe in the March, 1983 **FOOD** column for *Poulet Grille Dijonnais* calls for four servings or two pounds of chicken.

ANSWERS

