

Rabbis and Medicine

by Robert Mendelsohn, M.D.

The vast Jewish literature relating to medical matters is almost completely unknown to physicians and the public. Furthermore, it has not even received sufficient attention from the rabbis. I reached these conclusions as a result of leading a discussion on Jewish medical ethics, as part of a radio panel presented by The Chicago Board of Rabbis, discussing Religion and Medicine, and, probably most important, from the reading and the informal talking done before and after these programs.

While I have heard many pious generalities about "God as Physician," "Divine Healing powers," "ethical attributes of physicians," and vague references to Maimonides, Nordau and other outstanding Jews who were physicians, yet it seems to me that we are not using the Jewish tradition specifically enough in coming to grips with modern, timely medical situations. If the literature of the past is to be meaningful, then its applicability to the present must be demonstrated in a precise and meaningful manner.

There are many examples from which I might cite just a few:

1. *Preventive Medicine*: the tremendous historical emphasis on hygienic, eugenic, and public health measures designed to prevent disease. Much of this information could be instructive in issues such as fluoridation of community water supplies, compulsory immunization, and sterilization of mental defectives.

2. *The Practice of Obstetrics*: while Jewish attitudes towards preservation of life as contrasted with e.g., Catholic seem to be well known, other historical contributions are not. These include opinions on birth control, therapeutic abortion and artificial insemination.

3. *Research*: attitudes towards autopsies and experimental remedies are often very specific and instructive.

4. *Terminal Illness*: the behavior of



the physician in "telling the patient" may be greatly influenced by his religious background. A recent excellent study at Michael Reese Hospital showed an overwhelming number of physicians not informing their patients that they would soon die as a result of their illness. It would be interesting to extend this kind of study to non-Jewish hospitals to determine the possible effect of religion on day-to-day functioning of physicians.

I have heard many doctors say that religion plays no part in the way they practice medicine, and others even deny that it should be a factor. Therefore, it seems to me that an attempt should be made to demonstrate and clarify Jewish directions, and bring them to a conscious level so that physicians and their patients may secure the benefits derived from an understanding of the religious basis for their everyday actions.

I propose the following as an action program:

1. Creation of an active permanent committee on medical affairs by the Chicago Board of Rabbis.

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Rabbis and Medicine

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2. Efforts to have rabbis represented on the Boards of Directors and at other policy-making levels of our two Jewish hospitals, and other paramedical Jewish agencies.

3. Encouragement of studies by physicians, rabbis, medical students and rabbinical students in the relationship of medicine to religion.

This program is not intended in any sense to recommend any form of control by clergy, but rather to establish a kind of "information service," and to take advantage of the Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, and rabbinic literature, in the truest Jewish sense of learning and instructing. This should lead not only to a more profound knowledge of the relevant contributions of the past, but also to an extension of medical-religious thought to present and future problems. Creation of new points of contact, formal and informal, between rabbis and physicians is an appropriate and valuable goal in our times.

FROM THE "GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED"

"I am the man who, when the concern pressed him and his way was straightened and he could find no other device by which to teach a demonstrated truth other than by giving satisfaction to a single virtuous man while displeasing ten thousand ignoramuses — I am he, who prefers to address that single man by himself, and I do not heed the blame of those many creatures. For I claim to liberate that virtuous one from that into which he has sunk, and I shall guide him in his perplexity until he becomes perfect and he finds rest."

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204)

as translated by

Professor Shlomo Pines

P I S E R

Memorial Chapels R

Reverence for the Dead

North Memorial Chapel

5206 Broadway — LO 1-4740

North Town Memorial Chapel

6130 N. California —
LO 1-4740

Consideration for the Living

South Memorial Chapel

6935 Stony Island — DO 3-4920

North Suburban Memorial Chapel

9200 N. Skokie Blvd., Skokie —
OR 9-4740

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SOCIAL ACTION FUND

Last August, a fund for social action was established by The Chicago Board of Rabbis which was to help defray the expenses of its members who participated in the "March on Washington." Any unused portion of this fund was to be set aside for the future support of similar projects. The membership was encouraged to send in contributions designated specifically for this project, and contributions to this fund are still being accepted. Those who have responded to date are:

Rabbis:

Hillel Gamoran	Mark Shapiro
Arnold Goodman	Albert Shulman
Minard Klein	J. H. Simon
S. G. L. Kolpas	Sholom Singer
Harold Kudan	Edgar Siskin
Philip Lipis	Harold Stern
Ernst Lorge	Ulrich Steuer
Robert Marx	Joseph Strauss
Leonard Mervis	Ira Sud
Carl Miller	Allan Tarshish
David Polish	Jordan Taxon
William Sajowitz	Karl Weiner
Samuel Schwartz	Arnold Wolf
Stanley Schachter	

Also, from the general community:
Dr. Robert Mendelsohn.

GUEST SPEAKER AT DECEMBER 18 MEETING

Rabbi Harry Essrig, of Grand Rapids, Michigan, will be the guest speaker at the general meeting of The Chicago Board of Rabbis, which is scheduled for Wednesday morning, December 18. The topic will be: "The Rabbi as Marriage Counsellor."

Confrontation And Resolution

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Detouring this inviting plateau, Abraham guides God into the higher and the lower, but more viable peaks of compassionate justice. Terah and Isaac fuse with Abraham here, for compassionate justice is a pooled justice. It recognizes that the individual is not born in an antiseptic bag, but rather trailing clouds of glory and shame from the womb. His father's sour grapes have honed his teeth, and his mother's virtue has given him a credit face. The good lives after them, and the evil too, and God must be a good international banker extending to the present generation a credit based on past virtues and future promise, without, of course, unduly inflating the hard valuta of our currency. Abraham was satisfied that God's willingness to spare the wicked city for the sake of a *minyán* of righteous folk established such a viable currency.

Let us honor him for his divine *chutzpah*, for every thrust and parry and delay in that crucial bargaining. He clarified the image of a God who could hear our prayers, and hammered out a justice which could hold a community together.

He transformed a God of vengeance into a God of mercy, and a retributive justice into a compensatory justice, where brittle iron becomes malleable steel, and *tzedakah* tempered with *rachamim* becomes the societal womb in which the seed of love can mature in dignity and freedom, and the "I" merge into the "We" as naturally as the stream flows into the river.