

One fine day, Mrs. Blumberg took her two boys for a leisurely stroll in the park. Along the way, a passerby exclaimed, “What perfect angels! How old are they?” Beaming with great delight, the proud mother answered, “The thoracic surgeon is three, and the radiologist is two.” “Well, then, said the impressed stranger, “Maybe I could give their phone number to my daughter’s two girls!”

We know that physicians are considered a prime catch for the children of ambitious Jewish mothers . . . unlike rabbis. One can only wonder if the same were true of the *kohanim* in biblical times, long before doctors came into existence. As we read just a little while ago in this morning’s Torah portion, *Parshat Metzora*, the role of *kohen*, while not medical in nature *per se*, was akin to that of native American “medicine man.” In diagnosing various skin ailments and prescribing a course of isolation for those afflicted with leprosy, Aaron and his sons clearly straddled the line between medicine and religion. They were, arguably, the world’s first dermatologists.

There are those who would have us believe that this section of the Torah represents nothing less than a primitive form of germ theory. What our ancestors lacked in microscopic evidence, they more than made up with *sechel*, intuiting that isolation might curb the spread of infectious disease. Thus, we read: “כל ימי אשר הנגע בו יטמא טמא הוא בדד ישב מחוץ למחנה מושבו” -- He shall be impure as long as the disease is on him. Being impure he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp” (*Leviticus 13:46*).

Look more closely at the text, however, and you’ll see that the evidence warrants no such conclusion. It doesn’t take an epidemiologist to know that, when suspicion exists about a particular contagion, prudence dictates playing it safe. Innocent until proven guilty is a great principle of jurisprudence, but makes for terrible disease control; to take any other approach would be tantamount to closing the proverbial barn door after the horse has gone. Witness the desperate efforts to isolate the spread of Marburg virus in Angola, a devastating illness with a mortality rate approaching 90%, and the benefit of conservative prophylaxis should be clear. Surely an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Yet this week’s *sedra* draws the opposite conclusion. It is the diagnosis of leprosy by the *kohen*, not the manifestation of its symptoms, which occasions the individual’s quarantine. Indeed, until the *kohen* examines the patient, he or she is deemed free of the disease. At the end of the day,

Maimonides -- himself a physician -- offers us the last word on those who consider the Torah as a kind of ancient PDR: “Heaven forbid that the Torah be viewed as a minor medical treatise.”

We know better than to pretend that religion is the equivalent of science, though I imagine the advocates of so-called “Creation Science” will beg to differ. Still, I sometimes wonder whether or not our supremely rational selves have succeeded in throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Looking upon the *kohen* as a doctor is a fundamentally different issue than looking upon the doctor as a *kohen*. There is a spiritual element to healing, an important link between religion and medicine. In the words of Rabbi Avis Miller, “Major illness is a life cycle event, bringing with it questions of faith, spiritual longings and the need for community. If medicine speaks the language of cure, than religion speaks the language of healing.”

Yet at times medicine lives in a realm more remote to the average patient than the Holy of Holies once was to the average Israelite. In a mechanistic universe the world is a factory -- we are machines, doctors are mechanics, and medicine a metaphorical NAPA store where parts, tools, oils and lubricants may be purchased for our improved function. As to the question of whether you merit new all-weather radials, or are forced to settle for single bias re-treads, it all depends on the particulars of your HMO, PSO, PPO or POS. Once upon a time a pre-existing condition was simply known as an illness, now it become a prognosis in its own right. Once upon time, a healer was a doctor, now he or she is a provider; the commitment to healing termed an authorization -- unless one is too poor to afford health care, in which case one must first seek an entitlement. Despite the vast array of technology available to us -- arguably in part because of it -- the state of health care in America today is itself in need of a prescription, but for the fact that we can't seem to find any safe drug with which to treat its maladies.

Our society's approach to managed care hardly reflects the Torah's belief that we are fashioned *B'zelem Elokim*, in the Divine Image, created “מעט מאלקים -- but little lower than the angels,” as the Psalmist puts it (*Psalms* 8:6). To heal that which reflects God's own being is, a sacred task, not only a cost-effective one; even more, to tend to the sick is an example of *imitatio dei*, the commandment to imitate God's own behavior, for the liturgy refers to the Almighty as רופא ישראל, “Healer of His people Israel.”

“It is a grievous mistake to keep a wall of separation between medicine and religion,” wrote the late Abraham Joshua Heschel. “There is a division of labor, but a unity of spirit. To minister to the sick is to minister to God. Religion is not the assistant of medicine, but the secret of one’s passion for medicine.”

Today’s *sedra* has much to teach about ministering to the sick as a way to serve God. In the powerful image of a leper living outside the community, the *Leviticus* narrative gives expression to the reality of loneliness that is an unavoidable part of being ill. Sickness removes us from the mainstream, and limits our contact with others. It displaces us from the everyday rhythms of life, and cuts us off from the reassuring illusion of having a secure future, even as it alienates us from our own bodies.

The biblical leper lives outside the camp, yet everything that transpires in the text looks toward his return to the community. The multiple visits of the *kohen*, the purification ritual -- all these exist because we are not content with the status quo of loneliness suffered by the afflicted.

In the face of this isolation Judaism insists on *Biqqur Holim*, the *mitzvah* of visiting the sick. Indeed, the Talmud maintains that the Divine Presence is a constant visitor in a sickroom, while *Midrash* teaches that one who visits those who are ill diminishes their suffering by one-sixtieth. In other words, *Biqqur Holim* is about far more than the performance of a good, or helping an ill person pass the time of his confinement more pleasantly. Visiting the sick is itself a form of medicine, a therapy for the soul whose disposition can greatly help or hinder the healing process. Would that all doctors visited their patients not only to read their charts or inquire about their symptoms, but simply for the sake of *Biqqur Holim* as a form of treatment itself, to pull up a chair and administer a dose or two of human companionship.

Beyond diminishing the loneliness and sense of isolation experienced by one who is ill, it is incumbent to remember that a patient is a person, not just a pathology. . . וראה הכהן את הנגע . . . וראהו הכהן וטמא אותו -- As the *sedra* teaches, “The *kohen* shall examine the affliction on the skin

of his body . . . when the *kohen* sees him he shall pronounce it impure.” The Torah directs the *kohen* to do more than examine the bodily part suspected of *tza’ra’at*; rather he is commanded to look at the individual as an organic whole, to see what is healthy and vital in his life, to realize that we are far more than the sum of our ailments. Once this is realized, a person can assist in his own healing -- for if we are more than a collection of symptoms, there is always a healthy place deep within our spirit, a source of inner strength we can tap in coping with adversity.

In *Parshat Metzora*, the afflicted participates in his own recuperation -- for part of the process leading to *tahara*, ritual purity, requires that he -- not the *kohen* -- cleanse and immerse himself and bring a special sacrifice. It is the very participation of the patient in his own healing that marks the transformation from passive isolation outside the camp to becoming an instrument of his own restoration to health.

Some years ago I served as a chaplain at Memorial Sloan Kettering, a hospital devoted to the treatment of cancer in midtown Manhattan. One day I walked into a patient’s room, and saw a man in his early forties. He had been recently diagnosed with AIDS. This gentleman saw me and my hospital badge identifying me as a chaplain, and began to cry. Later in our visit he explained the reason for his tears. Never having been particularly religious and not having set foot in a synagogue for more than twenty years, he immediately assumed that the only reason that a rabbi would visit was to deliver a piece of catastrophic news -- why else would the hospital have sent a chaplain to talk to him, if not to inform him that his final hours were at hand.

Rabbis can have a powerful impact on the those who are ill. Needless to say, doctors can, too. Patients often imbue physicians with an oracular power they scarcely possess, scrutinizing the doctor’s every choice of word and turn of phrase. What did the neurologist mean by that? Why did the oncologist sound hesitant at that particular second? When we are sick and vulnerable we give our caregivers extraordinary power to bolster hope or dash it to pieces.

“Pray for me, rabbi,” is a request I frequently receive, but when I pray, I do so with the person, rather than simply for him or her. It is more than my knowing that God, who is *Rofeh Holim*, Healer of the Sick, doesn’t necessarily listens to my entreaties more than anyone else’s. I

ask the person who is ill to pray *with* me, because I believe it vital for an individual to be proactive in his or her own treatment. Whether talking to our physicians or pouring out our hearts to God, we need to believe that our involvement can and will make a difference. Indeed, in the doctor-patient relationship, it is the latter who, by rights, should be the senior partner. At a time when so much is taken out of our hands, it is essential we exert whatever control we can over our own lives.

A story is told in the *Gemara* of *Masekhet B'rakhot* about Rabbi Yohanan, who became seriously ill. Rabbi Hanina went to visit him, and gave him his hand, raising him from his sickbed. In explaining why Rabbi Yohanan couldn't cure himself, the Talmud answers, "אין חבוש מתיר, עצמו מבית האסורים" The prisoner cannot free himself from the jail" (*Brakhot* 5b).

But perhaps he can . . . if he knows where to find the hidden key. In considering the spiritual dimension of illness, may those diagnose, treat and seek to heal others remember the priestly dimension to their calling. As they come into contact with those who suffer, may God help them see the human being beyond the pain, and grant them ears to truly listen and empathize with the fears and hopes of those who are ill.

And may the Almighty grant all of us the voices with which to pray with the sick, and the gentle hands that can touch and assuage the hurt within others. Like Rabbi Hanina of old may we raise up those in need from their sickbeds, and bring them from a place of anxiety to peace of mind, from pain to comfort, from loneliness to companionship, from sickness to health and, in this season of Nisan, from the Egypt of physical restriction to the freedom of spiritual serenity.