

## JEWISH FOLK MEDICINE

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*“ And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over all the iniquities of the Children of Israel, and all their transgressions, even all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat and shall send him away by the hand of an appointed man into the wilderness.— (Lev. XVI 21.)*

The morning reading of the Law on the Day of Atonement describes the methods adopted by the High Priest for relieving his people of their sins by passing them on to a scapegoat which was subsequently destroyed.

Nowadays on the Eve of Atonement the custom still continues of passing one's sins on to a rooster for a male, or a hen for a female; the bird is twirled three times round the head, during which process a prayer is recited. The bird is then sent to be slaughtered.

Just as means existed for the relief of spiritual ills, so from time immemorial the Jews have had methods of dealing with bodily ailments and the study of folk-medicine forms a very interesting chapter in the history and evolution of the race.

Wherever the Jew has lived he has adopted the manners, customs and learning of the people around him so that a great deal of Jewish folk-medicine is interwoven with that of other races.

Early medicine was an admixture of religion, philosophy and natural science. The sound principles of sanitation as laid down in the Bible were practised as religious rite, and the priests were the doctors. For example in connection with the thorough methods employed for dealing with leprosy, the cured leper after being pronounced free from infection, had to bring a guilt-offering. The priest then took of the blood of the guilt-offering and put it upon the top of the right ear, the thumb of the right hand and the great toe of the right foot of him that was to be cleansed. (Lev. XVI 13-18.)

This practice continued for centuries. It was also believed that the normal as well as the pathological manifestations of organic life could be explained and eventually treated without consideration of their physical nature, by means of supernatural agencies. In the second century B.C. such speculations in theosophical and medical domains were at first most eagerly entered upon by the Essenes. They believed that they should not obtain their knowledge of the body either in health or disease by observation, but that they could actually learn the art of healing from a study of the sacred scriptures. For that reason they especially applied themselves to make a diligent examination of these Scriptures. They believed that they were able by various allegorical interruptions of different letters and words, as well as by subtle exploration of this or that sentence to acquire the knowledge necessary for the treatment of their patients. This gave rise to the science of Bibliomancy.

The Book of Leviticus was put under the head of a child when first put in the cradle. Sometimes the Torah scroll was brought into the lying-in room in order to facilitate the birth. When a person was dangerously ill the Pentateuch was opened and the name which first met the eye was added to the patient's name to avert the evil eye. Even at the present time when a person is very ill, a number of psalms are recited for him at the synagogue, and a name is added. The name chosen is usually Chaim for a male, or Chaiah for a female, words meaning life, thereby hoping to prolong the patient's life. In the case of a family where a number of children have died, the surviving one is usually called Alter (old one) thus hoping that he will attain old age.

Various bible verses and psalms were recited against various conditions. Exodus XV 26 was embodied in any prayer for health. “ If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in His eyes, and wilt give ear to his commandments and keep his statutes, I will

put none of the diseases upon thee, which I have put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord that healeth thee."

In addition to biblical passages biblical names were also used in amulets. Amulets containing the names of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, were for use in the lying-in room also the name of Satan. The name of Job against toothache.

The belief that disease was due to demons was universal at a certain stage of human culture, and this belief continued for centuries. The ancient Rabbis regarded demons in much the same light as we regard germs, and just as we differentiate germs causing various diseases, so they differentiated the demons. There were three classes: *Shedim* (demons in general), *Mazzikim* (harmers) and *Ruhin* (evil-spirits). Besides these there were *Lilin* (night spirits), *Telanc* (shade or evening spirits), *Ruah Palga* (spirit of headaches), *Ben Nefilim* (the demon of fits), *Shabriri* (demon of blindness) and a host of others.

"They surround man on all sides as the earth does the roots of the vine."  
"If a man could see them he would lack the strength to face them, though he can see them by casting the ashes of the foetus of a black cat about his eyes."

One demon was supposed to have the head of a calf, with one revolving horn in the middle, and an eye on the breast, and his whole body was covered with scales and hairs and eyes. "At times they are black goat-like beings, at other times seven-headed dragons." The queen of the demons is Lilith pictured with wings and long flowing hair. They were said to be created at the twilight of the Sabbath "after the souls were created the Sabbath set in so they remained without bodies."

To cure a disease, in other words, to drive out the demons causing the trouble, many methods were employed. Since words have power they too like the demons are alive, therefore incantations were employed to exorcise these evil spirits. Psalm 91 is known as "*Shir Shel Pegaim*" "son against demons," and was frequently recited both as a protection against and for the expulsion of them. Another method of dealing with them was to tie a number of knots in a cord to symbolise the hoped-for imprisonment of the spirit.

Another remedy suggested by one of the Rabbis "Take roots of herbs, burn them under him, and surround him with water, whereupon the spirit will flee."

Nasty and ill-smelling substances were often incorporated in a genuine medical remedy, the remedy to help the patient, and the nasty drug in order to disgust the demon. In this way the chicory plant is mixed with a green frog, pestilence root with the claw of a man's foot, a green vegetable of some kind with the dust of a man's foot. Swine's fat, swine's tail, neck of a dog, fat of a serpent, hair of a virgin goat, human bone, etc., were also employed. As demons were supposed to have different taste to mortals, they might enjoy the foul-substances and be appeased thereby. In this way the medicine would not only help the patient but would also divert the attention of the demon.

Incantations and charms and the words of medical formulæ were as important as the prescription itself. In the East there are still found patients who swallow the prescription as well as the medicine prescribed.

Amulets and charms were used extensively to protect man and his possessions from the evil influences of witches, demons and other mischievous powers likely to be encountered, or to counteract misfortune, illness and damage of various kinds already being endured. All ornaments worn on the person seem to have been originally amulets. An amulet might consist either of an article inscribed with the name of God or a scriptural passage as the mezuzah on the doorpost, or by the phylacteries, or of the root of some herb. Grains of wheat wrapped in leather sometimes served as amulets. The most frequent form of amulet was a small metal plate suitably inscribed. This still survives in the necklet bearing the word "*Mazel*" (luck). The magic word *Abacadabra* triangularly written has its Hebrew counterpart. *Akrabukus* similarly arranged.

Children owing to feeble powers of resistance were held to be much exposed to the danger of magic fascination. They were therefore protected by knots, written parchment, etc., tied round the neck. Even in recent times, children wore red bands round their wrists as a protective against "evil eye." Usually among men amulets were worn on the arm; women and children wore them on neck chains, ring or other articles of

jewellery. An amulet would sometimes be placed in a hollow stick, because unsuspected it was considered to be more potent. The egg of a grasshopper was said to protect against earache; the tooth of a living fox against sleepiness, and of a dead one against sleeplessness. A nail from a gallows protected against wounds. The sages of the Talmud however forbade the use of all such remedies as being heathen practice.

Disease was also attributed to the supernatural powers of an enemy. This belief still exists. Children on seeing a Chinaman will promptly take measures to prevent him seeing their teeth, lest by his counting them, the teeth should drop out. If by coincidence after a violent quarrel during which curses are freely exchanged a member of the family of one of the combatants should take ill, the accursed will do all they can to gain the pardon of the other party in the contest. A woman when reciting the unusual virtues of a child will take the precaution of adding "let no evil eye befall it" (others touch wood). Men still exist who are supposed to possess the power of neutralising the ill-effects of the evil-eye.

The soul or spirit of a man was regarded as the seat of life and with its departure death occurred. Numerous measures were therefore employed for the preservation of the soul. The custom of saying "Zu gesund" when a person sneezes has its origin in the belief that violent sneezing may expel the soul which was regarded as being held to the body by a very frail bond. To the soul many of the desires of the body were attributed. It was said to be very gregarious, and for several days after the death of a person, it was said to hover round the house of the deceased. For this reason mirrors and other reflecting objects in the house of mourning were covered, lest the unfettered soul of the departed entice into itself the soul of any living person present in the room, the soul of the latter being reflected on bright surfaces.

Palestine was the meeting place of many important trade-routes, and with the exception of relatively short periods in the 10th and 8th centuries B.C. the country was under the rule or vassalage of Egypt, Babylon and Assyria and other powers and throughout its history Jewish medicine would naturally bear the influence of these powers. During the middle ages the Jews were responsible for the introduction of the wisdom of the East

into Europe. With the advent of Arabian learning, astrology became the central interest. It retained this position until the triumph of the experimental method in the 17th century. Especial attention was always paid to the Zodaical signs and to the planets. Each Zodaical sign was held to govern some special region of the body, and each of the planets was held to influence special organs. The sun was said to govern the brain, nerves, right eye of the male, left eye of the female, and the entire right half of the body. Under the influence of the moon came the brain, mouth, belly, intestines, bladder, taste, reproductive organs, left eye of the male, right eye of the female, feminine liver and entire left half of the body. Mercury regulated mental processes, and so on. The fact that the sun, moon, planets and signs of the Zodiac shared the rule over the various organs of the body made it unnecessary for the physician to trouble himself at all with an examination of the patient to ascertain the cause and localisation of the affection. One glance at the constellations, and not only was the diagnosis made, but the outlook of the case was also determined.

Thus far only external measures in connection with disease have been considered. Jewish folk-medicine also abounds in domestic remedies. A great number are derived from their non-Jewish neighbours. It was noticed that disease could be conveyed unconsciously from one person to another, and it was therefore considered that disease could be purposely conveyed to animate or even inanimate objects, and by means of this transference the original sufferer could be cured. On this principle is based the widespread custom, and one still prevalent among certain sections of Jewry, in connection with the loss of milk-teeth. The child takes up the lost tooth and throws it into the fire at the same time saying "Little mouse, little mouse, here is a bone tooth, give me an iron one."

A patient suffering from fever was recommended to go to the cross-roads and seize the first cat with a burden that he saw crawling along. He was to seize it, place it in a copper tube which was to be covered with lead and then sealed. Then he was to shake the tube and say "What thou carriest on me that I carry on thee."

To cure warts, they were rubbed with red wool, the patient expectorated three times, recited a benediction and threw the wool

away. Anyone picking up the wool was said to develop the warts, and the original possessor was relieved. Giving money to charity is another form of transference of disease.

Sympathetic magic is another common form of treatment in folk-medicine on the lines of "take a hair of the dog that bit you." Thus for jaundice, the sufferer was enjoined to drink water in which something yellow had been cooked. Another cure for jaundice was to swing a dove round the patient's head twice saying at the same time, "Dove, take this illness from N. ben N.." and letting the dove fly away to carry the disease with it.

In nose-bleeding, the blood lost was baked into a cake and probably on the sympathetic principle given to a pig!

Headaches because of their common occurrence were regarded with great seriousness in antiquity. Any sickness except intestinal trouble, any pain except heart spasms, any ache except headache, any malevolence except that of a woman (Talmud Bible). Treatment "If without fever, take half a sheet of paper, spread camphor over it till the camphor penetrates, and apply to the temples. If accompanied by fever, take stale bread, remove the soft part in a little kummel, salt and strong vinegar, mix and apply to the temples." "If a man has a burning headache affecting his eyes which are blood-shot, take one-third of a measure of *Sikhlu*, crushed and powdered and knead with cassia juice, wrap it around his head, attach it (with a bandage) and do not remove for three days.

An interesting variation of the direct application is the direction to take certain kinds of clay, alkali, bone-dust, rancid oil and fish-oil, to mix together in a fire of thorns and to fumigate the head.

Fever is another favourite subject of Jewish folk-medicine. Among some of the remedies advocated are the following: "Spill a can of water suddenly over the patient," or "let him eat something he does not like, or lay a kreuzer on the bank of a stream at sunset, whoever finds it will take the fever away with him." Christian peasants of Galicia trust for the removal of fever to water in which a mezuzah stolen from a Jewish house has been placed.

Again epilepsy which owing to its mysterious character seems to have attracted the

attention of the folk-doctors, numerous cures were suggested. "Take the thin skin of an egg, and tie it round the little finger of the right hand of the patient, from the tip of the finger to the base, he will have great pain, but in one hour the skin will drop off, and the fits will disappear, but take care not to remove the skin, it must drop off of its own accord." Another remedy: "Put several crabs in a pot, pour some good wine over them and bury them for three days and three nights, then give some of the sauce thus made to the patient morning and night for nine days."

Stomach troubles were apparently as common in Talmudic times as they are to-day, and a number of remedies existed. Drugs of a varying number of ingredients given in wine water, milk, oil or in several of these substances were favoured. But other forms of treatment were also recognised. Directions were given to place the patient on his knees so as to relieve the tension of the abdominal muscles, or to place the head low and the feet high so as to bring about a more even circulation of the blood. Many references are made to the enema as a means of relieving the patient.

"If a man eats and drinks to his fill, and then his stomach cuts him and his insides are affected and swell up and he has colic, he is suffering from *Mushekinu*. To cure him take cedar-bark, juniper-bark, sweet reed (something like sugar-cane), myrtle, oleander, chop up these substances, add wine, heat the mixture, pour it off, add honey and refined oil, let it cool, rub it on his stomach and pour it on his anus."

"If a man has cramps, his stomach does not retain food or drink, he brings it back through the mouth and has vomiting spells—to cure him mix one-half of a measure of dates, one-half of a measure of cassia, add mint and let him drink it fasting, then his stomach will again retain food and drink and he will recover."

Though medicine has to-day attained a high degree of scientific development, traditions and customs die hard, and folk-medicine and superstition is still very much in evidence. The will to live will drive mankind to resort to all kinds of remedies. We can therefore expect the quack to flourish side by side with the qualified-practitioner for many years to come.