



Dr. Ellen Levine



Dr. Ellen Levine is currently research director of Psychosocial Oncology at California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco. She also holds positions as attending staff at Mount Zion Hospital, adjunct faculty member of California School of Professional Psychology-Alameda, and an investigator for a National Cancer Institute grant entitled Paths to Early Cancer Detection Among Urban Indian Women.

Dr. Levine attended the University of the Pacific (BA in Psychology & Sociology, 1982) and the University of Alabama at Birmingham (MA in Clinical & Medical Psychology in 1986, MPH in Epidemiology in 1988, and Ph.D. in Clinical & Medical Psychology in 1990). She has been noted among others in the Who's Who Among American Women and the International Who's Who of Intellectuals.

Dr. Levine has authored and coauthored numerous publications on health and psychosocial issues. These include her newest book, Jewish Perspective of Illness and Healing (2001) and the article "Jewish Views and Customs on Death" in the book Death and Bereavement Across Cultures (1997).

S*habbat Shalom: Do we have a Jewish concept of health?*

Levine: Absolutely! We have an obligation to respect and honor our bodies, as they are gifts from God and made in His image. We are also commanded to save the life of an endangered person, even if it is nonheroic such as making sure that someone takes his/her pills on time. We are also required to get medical attention when we are sick.

The Torah and the later writings (e.g., the Talmud) speak about the importance of health. Health involves the entire person, not just the body. The Hebrew word for health, *beritut*, derives from the word *bara*, to create, while the word for sick is *chalah*, which also means empty. So health can be seen as the re-creation of the body and the self in order to fill up the emptiness inside of us. In order to cure the person, the soul has to be cured as well. Therefore, in Judaism health is a mind/body process. The mind and the body are interconnected and depend on each other to maintain health. Both of these parts of us are also expressions of

the holiness in our lives. We have a finite time on earth, "A time to be born and a time for dying" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Therefore we must take the time that we have and be careful of ourselves. "Take utmost care and watch yourself scrupulously" (Deuteronomy 4:9).

Many sections of the Talmud emphasize the importance of good health and the role of emotions and psychological states in maintaining good health. We are

Health can be seen as the re-creation of the body and the self in order to fill up the emptiness inside of us.

told not to live in a city that does not have a physician. Jewish law also states "If you are in pain, go to a physician!"

We see God as the ultimate healer: "For I am the Lord, your healer" (Exodus 15:26). Many psalms and prayers in Judaism include words of healing, or ask God to heal us. In the Bible, 213 of the 613 commandments deal with health-related issues, such as

personal hygiene, care of the skin, dietary laws, isolation and quarantine and other public-health practices.

There are many places in the Bible where health is spoken of and advocated. For example, Exodus 31:14 states "If you do not keep the Sabbath you will surely die." This doesn't mean that a thunderbolt will come out of the sky and kill you, it means that we need a break in our lives, a time for rest so that we do not overwork and kill ourselves. Even God rested after creating the world: "On the seventh day God finished the work that He had been doing, and He rested on the seventh day from all the work that He had done" (Genesis 2:2-3). He then set aside that day as a holy day, a day of rest and recuperation from all the stresses in our lives.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Why is health important for Judaism?**

Levine: If we do not have good health, then there is emptiness in ourselves and in our souls. Judaism strives for wholeness, of who we are, of the world. God commands us to be healthy so that we can do His work. We are also commanded to live complete and authentic



lives. We cannot help to heal the world if we ourselves are not healthy.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Are Jewish dietary laws related to health?**

Levine: This has been argued for centuries. Why do we have the

laws about dietary practice? Some argue that it was a set of dietary laws for public hygiene and health. Others feel that it doesn't matter, that dietary laws are a commandment from God and that is that. But several Jewish scholars over the centuries, chiefly Moses Maimonides, felt that keeping dietary laws would help in being and staying healthy.

***Shabbat Shalom:* How is Jewish ethics related to health?**

Levine: In Judaism, the quest for health includes the search for self-understanding. We need to know who we are in order to maintain good health. In addition, once we can understand who we are and what our purpose in life is, then we can try

In Judaism, the quest for health includes the search for self-understanding.

to complete the tasks for which God placed us on earth. Good health is also seen as a path to being an ethical/moral human being.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What are the various areas of Jewish life that concern health?**

Levine: Being healthy impacts all areas of life, including spiritual, physical, psychological, and ethical. For example, one can violate the laws of the Sabbath, if he/she is in a life-threatening situation. If a person is elderly or taking medications, he/she should not fast. This presents interesting situations around Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is the holiest day in Judaism, a day when we fast and ask God for forgiveness for the acts that we have committed against God. So people think that they have to fast all day, no matter what. Now for the elderly and people with illnesses that

require them to take pills with food, they should not fast all day.



But people still do, thinking that they have to, and that it would be a sin if they did not. But maintaining physical health overrides the law of fasting, and they are therefore permitted to eat. It is just convincing them that it is all right that is the problem!

Emotional health is also important in all aspects of Jewish life. For example, if a person is depressed, he/she may not be taking care of his/her body, and can make him/herself physically ill. If someone is depressed during a holiday such as Purim that calls for joy, amusement and laughter, he/she will not be able to celebrate the holiday properly. If a person has agoraphobia, he/she may not be able to go to services and other temple activities. A similar problem exists if a person cannot come to temple due to physical limitations.

So if a person is in ill health, be it emotional/psychological or physical, he/she will not be able to follow many of God's commandments, which include temple worship and participating in joyous occasions. Unfortunately there are no surviving books on healing from biblical times.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Are Jews healthier than other people?**

Levine: I wish all Jews were healthy! There have been studies that show that people living in a *kibbutz* in Israel had a lower mortality rate than city dwellers, but I

am not sure of the reasons for that. There are certain illnesses that occur more often in Jewish populations such as Tay-Sachs disease, some forms of breast and colon cancer. There may be studies that compare people in a kosher diet versus a nonkosher diet, but I don't know the outcome.

Shabbat Shalom: What principles of health are promoted by Judaism?

Levine: In Judaism, good health is obtained by following God's commandments. In those commandments are laws concerning food, exercise, living where medical help is near, personal hygiene, and taking care of the soul (our psychological selves). So almost all of the modern health promotion techniques and systems coincide with Jewish law. One does not passively say "God will heal me"; one has to be active in the process, helping God to heal him/her. This is done by eating correctly (the right foods, at the right times, etc.), taking care of the body through exercise and hygiene, and using medical knowledge and guidance (e.g., taking medications, going to physical therapy, getting an annual physical examination, etc.).

Shabbat Shalom: Jewish history and tradition count many medical doctors. How do you explain this?

Levine: Yes, this is interesting, isn't it? In Judaism being a doctor is a very honorable thing to do. For doctors work with God to heal the body and the soul (in the case of psychologists). One of our most famous philosophers and physicians was Moses Maimonides who lived in the 12th century CE, and was physician to the Sultan of Egypt. He wrote many papers on Jewish logic, health, and keeping the commandments.

Since Jewish law views saving a

life is one of the most important things a person can do, those who were able to heal were held in high esteem. He/she was seen as the helper or instrument of God. In Jewish history many of these healing traditions were handed down from father to son.

Shabbat Shalom: Do we have a Jewish tradition of vegetarianism?

Levine: Some argue that because Adam and Eve were told that they could eat the produce of

A person in ill health, be it emotional/psychological or physical, will not be able to follow many of God's commandments.

the land and not animals that we were supposed to be vegetarians. But later after Noah saved the animals from the flood we were told that eating meat was permitted. The Noahide laws applied to all of



the people that came after him, so it is not just a Jewish issue, but applies to all of us. There is no commandment of vegetarianism that I know about.

Shabbat Shalom: How is the Hebrew concept of Shalom related to health?

Levine: Good question! *Shalom* means wholeness or completeness as well as peace. This implies that one can not be at peace unless one is complete in soul and body. Thus if one is ill, one does not have

shalom.

Shabbat Shalom: What is the message of health that Jews have given to the world?

Levine: I think the most important message is that we must take the responsibility of taking care of our bodies and our souls in order to feel a sense of peace and completeness in our lives. We cannot carry on God's work without that sense of completeness and peace. This is the basic principle and as a rabbi once said: "The rest is commentary."