

JEWISH MEDICINE

You may remember Alex Haley's book *Roots* which appeared in 1976 and was followed by a popular TV series -- well about that same time I suggested to my three teen-aged kids that THEY should work out our family's narrative. They looked at me as if I were crazy -- and I have to admit they probably were right. Why should they take on such a project? I should do it myself -- and what followed was a delightful decade or more of research by me. In truth, I soon became bored with merely gathering names and dates. I wanted more substance. Who were these people? What were their lives like?

Although eventually I studied all four lines of my ancestors -- and my wife's -- for some reason my major focus settled on my father's parents. During the 1890s they both emigrated from a tiny shtetl by the name of Dubrowa which was located midway between Bialystok and Grodno in what then was White Russia (or Byelorussia) and now is situated in northeastern Poland. When grandpa came down the gangplank at Ellis Island, his last name was Neviadomsky -- much too long for a wanna-be Yankee -- so when he spotted a Brooklyn street sign which read "Nevins Street" -- that became his adopted moniker. I don't know whether that's really what happened, but it makes a good story.

By the time that I belatedly became interested in our roots, my grandparents were long gone but there was one surviving

relative and a few *landsmen* whom I found through the Burial Society. Through them I gathered information and stories and because no one had ever written down the history of Dubrowa's Jewish community, I assigned myself the task to write a small *yisker* (memorial) book. By so doing, I became the world's leading authority on this forgotten place and after that there were many interesting outcomes -- but that's not today's subject.

When I began digging in our family's roots, I had the unrealistic hope that perhaps I'd find a doctor in there somewhere but, alas, they were all tailors or tradesmen. But, undaunted, I wondered what medical care was like in this *shtetl* – and others like it. After all, people got sick there – well who took care of them? As it turned out there were no real doctors in Dubrowa in those days, nor in nearby small towns, but there were lots of “healers” (*rophiim*) who although untrained, weren't necessarily unskilled. So I collected stories about some of these unsung practitioners and eventually wrote an essay which I called “Shtetl Medicine.” Many years ago, I was invited to speak on this very subject at Yale University in a program they still have about Medical Humanities -- and I got perverse pleasure in discussing *bonkes* and evil eyes in that Gothic building to a mostly gentile audience.

After that experience, my focus widened to include Jewish doctors at other times and places and eventually I wrote three

small books which -- like with my recent “meanderings” -- were collections of unrelated essays. Over time I grew more confident in my knowledge and, since very few people seemed to be interested in this arcane subject, I wrote a fourth book called “Jewish Medicine: What It Is and Why It Matters.” (As I’ve described before, I’d learned my lesson about boring titles with my first book and, ever since, I try to think up provocative titles.) So today I’ll try to explain what I mean by “Jewish Medicine.”

I presume most of you think that you already know a lot about Jewish doctors but probably haven’t ever heard the expression “Jewish Medicine” used. What’s he talking about? No offense intended to dentists, podiatrists, PhDs and the like, but today when I refer to “doctors,” I’ll be talking exclusively about physicians. If you happen to be Jewish, than it’s almost certain that there’s a Jewish doctor in your family or among your close friends – and even if not, I’m sure that every one of you has used a Jewish doctor some time or other. So you already know a lot about today’s subject. Right?

Well if that’s true, or almost true -- or even if it’s not true -- let me begin by asking a simple question. With two exceptions, can anyone tell me the name of even a single Jewish doctor who worked BEFORE 1900? Before the 20th century. Relatives don’t count. The two exceptions are Maimonides and Sigmund Freud. Everybody’s heard of them. Maimonides is a no-brainer because he lived in the 12th century, but Freud is tricky because his

professional career straddled the 1900 line – however, his fame came mostly during the 20th century.

So repeating my challenge – with those two exceptions, can you name even one Jewish doctor from before 1900? I've asked this question many times and no one has ever answered correctly. Think about that. If you're Jewish, you know that our liturgy is obsessed with our past -- every year at the seder table Jews discuss our group history and vow never to forget it. So how come none of you seems to know much, if anything, about Jewish medical history or about individual doctors before the 20th century? It's like a black hole in our collective memory.

Today I'd like to make a distinction between two things – on the one hand Jewish Doctors and on the other hand, Jewish Medicine. They're not the same and I'll propose that the distinction is important. I'll give you a hint about what's to come by suggesting that you don't necessarily have to be Jewish to be a Jewish doctor -- at least as I define the term in a generic sense. So let's begin by considering doctors.

I'm sure that every one of you is aware of the remarkable preponderance of Jews among Nobel Prize winners in medicine. During the 100 years after the first winner, Paul Ehrlich in 1908, there were 52 more, nearly one quarter of all laureates in medicine from a people which constitutes far less than 1% of the world's population. That's amazing! But it was strictly a 20th

century phenomenon – there were virtually no significant contributions to medical science by Jews before 1900. And, incidentally, although we can be understandably proud of all those Jewish winners, it's worth pondering that almost every single one of them was NOT religiously observant – in fact, some were apostates.

But although few people today remember their names, at certain times and places in past history, Jewish doctors were ubiquitous. They may not have been original thinkers but they were valued practitioners. For centuries almost every royal court had what they called a “Jew Doctor.” Maimonides was one of the Sultan’s court physicians in Cairo and during the Middle Ages several dozen Popes used Jewish doctors. This did not please their gentile rivals and during the 15th century a Franciscan monk complained, “The ecclesiastical prelates set great store by them, to such an extent that hardly one of them is to be found who does not harbor some devil of a Jew doctor.” So while in general Jews were reviled, Jewish physicians were revered – and sometimes feared. Indeed it seems that they had a certain mystique. Listen to what Martin Luther had to say:

If the Jews could kill us all, they would gladly do so, aye, and often do it – especially those who profess to be physicians. They know all that is known about Medicine in Germany, they can give poison to a man of which he will die in an hour – or in ten or twenty years. They thoroughly understand this art.

Various explanations have been suggested for this phenomenon. Early on some Jewish scholars had language skills which allowed them to translate and transmit classic Arabic and Greek medical texts. Perhaps it was hereditary intelligence, or innate curiosity, or maybe it involved Jewish reverence for learning -- transference of Talmudic reasoning to the scientific method. And, of course, there was the important matter of economic opportunity – because Jews often were banned from other ways of making a living. Also they had a reputation for being less concerned with theory than with practical results.

Today we may not be proud of it, but sometimes there also may have been a bit of Black Magic involved. Some historians believe that “the great art” of alchemy was introduced during the second century AD by a woman called “Maria the Jewess.” Remember those were superstitious times -- Kabbalists knew obscure incantations related to health and Jews were believed to be expert in avoiding the Evil Eye – so, no doubt, this added to their mystique.

There was a legend about the 16th century French King Francis I which illustrates my point – he was the same Francois Premier who brought Leonardo and the Mona Lisa to France and, not only was he a patron of the arts but, as described in a delightful short story by Balzac, he was a world class lecher. It seems that

King Francis also may have been a hypochondriac and when he suffered from a chronic ailment that his court doctors couldn't cure (considering his predilections, it may have been syphilis), he sent a courier to Spain to ask his cousin and frequent battlefield rival the Holy Roman Emperor King Charles V to send his best "Jew Doctor." When the selected man arrived at the French court, in order to break the ice the King joked, "Aren't you tired of waiting for the Messiah to come?" But the Spanish doctor wasn't amused. It happened that he was a *converso* -- a New Christian -- and he indignantly replied that he no longer was Jewish but now believed in the true God. Well that wasn't what Francis wanted to hear. Without another word, he dismissed the imposter and sent to Constantinople for a "real" Jew doctor. And when the new man arrived, he prescribed his most potent medicine -- No, not chicken soup ("Jewish penicillin") but donkey's milk! -- and it was reported that King Francis was cured. The story seems to have been reasonably authentic since it was written less than a century after the event -- although I have my doubts about the treatment.

During the late 18th and 19th centuries, first with Emancipation and then Enlightenment, some Jews were allowed into European medical schools but that wasn't good news for some very religious people. For them the notion of having a doctor in the family was a mark of shame -- not pride. When the famous Lithuanian Rabbi Israel Salanter's son left home to study medicine, his family sat *shiva*. After all, upon entering the gentile

world, young men might shave their beards, or wear worldly clothes, or violate Shabbat – or, God forbid, marry a *shiksa*. However, for most European Jews, when the chance presented itself, the passion previously spent on learning Talmud and Torah was quickly transferred to secular study. The People of the Book began reading new texts which provided opportunity for upward – and *outward* – mobility.

Increasingly, the Jewish doctor's dilemma became how to reconcile the past with the present – and I'll cite just one example. In 18th century Berlin, Markus Hertz was both doctor and friend of both Moses Mendelsohn and Immanuel Kant. He was a central figure in the Berlin Enlightenment; his wife Henrietta ran a famous salon and in the 1780s he published a so-called “physician's prayer”, which has frequently been mistakenly attributed to Maimonides. The prayer was so beautiful that even today, it's sometimes recited at medical school graduations instead of the Hippocratic Oath.

But Dr. Herz had a problem. As a man of science he was skeptical of received religious wisdom – he felt that he had to make up his own mind from personal experience. During the 1780s there had been several well publicized cases of people seemingly rising from the dead. Accurate diagnosis of death could be problematic before the invention of stethoscopes and cardiograms – and so a law was proposed that no one could be buried for at least 72 hours after death, lest the corpse might

wake up. (This reminds me of Mark Twain who when a mistaken announcement of his death appeared in newspapers, said, "Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.")

Of course delayed burial was a direct violation of Jewish tradition – so what was a religious Jew, even a reformed Jew like Markus Herz, to do? In 1787 Dr. Herz published a pamphlet in which he favored what seemed to be the logic of the secular law – better to wait and be sure. It was an example of modifying Jewish law based on current knowledge -- not surprisingly, orthodox rabbis were outraged.

With the coming of Emancipation and Enlightenment there were many similar examples of Jewish doctors having to choose sides -- and, increasingly, they chose the side of science. If they appreciated a framework of reference at all, it was likely to favor human reason – based more on results than relationships. To my mind, this loss of Jewish specificity was unfortunate for as modern medicine has become more depersonalized, the universal model hasn't served us very well.

I don't mean to say that traditional Jewish approaches always are the best way. Even today conflicts between religion and science still sometimes turn up. Consider the uproar about *mohels* sucking blood from the freshly circumcised penis (*metzitzah*) which has caused fatal herpes infections. Last year it

even became a political issue in New York City's mayoral race when candidates wanted to secure Hasidic votes in Brooklyn. Ironically, when Dr. Herz died in 1803, despite his pamphlet he was buried without delay within three hours—and he stayed put.

Markus Herz was a sophisticated intellectual, but in early times, few “doctors” of any religion attended medical schools – at least as we think of them. And in the typical *shtetl*, if there was a “doctor” at all, probably he wasn't a physician in the modern sense. More likely he was what was called a *feldsher* -- literally meaning someone who works in the field with shears. Starting in the 13th century, the German and Swiss armies developed a class of barber surgeons who worked in the front lines – like today's military corpsmen. In addition to cutting hair and shaving whiskers, barbers practiced blood-letting and applied cups (*bonkas*) and leeches and the custom spread eastward. By the 19th century, in rural Russia feldshers outnumbered trained physicians by two to one; sometimes by five to one. They were licensed by the government and nearly a third of them were Jewish. So if a Jewish mother in the shtetl bragged about her son the doctor – most likely, he was a feldsher!

I once had a Christian patient whose name was Joseph Feldsher. He was born in Cracow, Poland and told me that sometimes late at night his family was awakened by loud banging on the front door and some one shouting “Feldsher, Feldsher.” No one in the family had any medical background but -- no matter – someone

had a toothache or something and had seen their name written outside. My patient had an uncle of the same name who when he was drafted into the Russian army, naturally, was assigned to the medical corps. He was afraid to confess that he had no medical knowledge lest they send him to the front. He rose in the ranks and eventually became head of a large army hospital -- and was personally given a medal by Joseph Stalin. So you see - names matter! (Perhaps grandpa understood that when he changed from Neviadomsky to Nevins)

Now let's change the subject away from Jewish doctors to consider Jewish Medicine in general. Books have been written about Egyptian or Chinese or Indian medicine, but until mine appeared, there none specifically about Jewish Medicine. That's not entirely true because during the last 60 years three books were published with the very same title -- "Jews AND Medicine" -- but the only one without the prepositional link "and" was my *Jewish Medicine. What It Is and Why It Matters*. If you were to pin me down and ask me, is there now -- or was there ever such a thing as Jewish Medicine? I would give a classic Jewish answer: Yes and No -- on the one hand; but on the other -- it depends. Well it took me a long time to appreciate that and, no doubt, others would disagree with me -- which is fine; I'm not militant on the subject -- so let me try to explain what I mean.

Probably without exception current Jewish doctors go about their daily work without giving any thought to spiritual matters

or religious traditions. Moreover, they're reticent about discussing what influences them, although occasionally a few have tried. For example, several weeks before his unexpected death in 1995, the virologist Jonas Salk was honored at a testimonial dinner and in his concluding remarks said this:

We are all influenced by our ancestor's tradition and heritage. For me it was not a conscious influence, but there is something in my Jewish genetic or cultural lineage. Part of it may be the Jewish educational tradition. Part may be the Diaspora for nomadic in spirit, we Jews seem to be constantly searching for ways to make the world a better place for all human beings...[Our task] is to take the best from tradition and use it to build a world that is closer to our heart's desire.

Now lets consider some of those ancestral traditions and influences. We'll begin with Jewish hospitals. After all, they're tangible evidence of Jewish medicine aren't they? But do Jewish hospitals practice a unique style that could be characterized as Jewish Medicine? According to how I use the term, there's nothing particularly different which distinguishes Jewish hospitals from any others. I'll return to this soon, but lets stick with hospitals for a little more.

As early as the 18th century, Jewish communities in London, Berlin, Vienna, Jerusalem and other cities began establishing

their own hospitals. It wasn't just a Jewish phenomenon – other religions did the same thing. Often these sectarian hospitals were charitable institutions for the poor and in this country the movement toward Jewish hospitals was prompted by waves of immigration and, also, as a response to anti-Semitic discrimination.

The Jews Hospital in New York opened during the 1850s but during the Civil War changed its name to Mount Sinai. Before long there were six other Mount Sinai Hospitals across the country. In 1884 when the English philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore was nearing his 100th birthday, the trustees of a new chronic disease hospital in the Bronx figured that if they adopted the name of the wealthy British Lord, he might make a hefty donation – in appreciation, the old man sent them a bronze bust of himself, but in his will there was nothing more. Nowadays hospital fund raisers are more efficient! Jewish hospitals, then and now, are not exclusively limited to Jewish patients and doctors and are run essentially the same as non-Jewish hospitals – with some kosher food and an occasional visiting rabbi thrown in.

The same holds for hospitals in Israel. In 1907 Henrietta Szold joined a small Zionist women's group in Harlem who called themselves the Daughters of Zion. Two years later she and her mother visited Palestine and were impressed with its beauty. When they returned home, Henrietta challenged her women's

study group to get active – and within four years they formed Hadassah with Henrietta as the leader. Department store mogul Louis Strauss provided seed money for a hospital in Jerusalem and the rest is better known to many of you than to me. I don't know for sure, but I suspect that today's Hadassah Hospital, like all of the Mount Sinai's in this country, treats all its patients the same – in fact, one of the glories of Israeli hospitals is how well they treat Jews and Arabs alike.

Incidentally, Hadassah Hospital, the biggest and best in Israel and the Mid East, currently is bankrupt -- \$370 million in debt due to administrative mismanagement. Since it opened in 1939 it's been sustained by overseas contributions – no doubt including many of us. Allegedly the managers kept the philanthropic organizations in the dark about their cost overruns (annual deficit more than \$85 million) and whenever they went over budget, were given carte blanche.

Returning to my question about whether Jewish hospitals are exemplars of Jewish Medicine, its hard to say because the answer depends more on individual behavior than on institutional policy – according to my definition what matters is the interface between doctors and their patients. And if nowadays the concept of a Jewish brand of medical practice seems strange, as I've already explained, the dynamics were quite different in early times – not only about how gentiles

thought about Jewish doctors, but how Jewish doctors thought about themselves.

When I began reading the words of early Jewish physicians, I came to recognize a consistent theme -- that the best of them considered medical practice to be a moral obligation in which the doctor was actively guided by his Maker. The doctor may have been doing the hands-on work, but he was engaged with God in a joint venture. That shouldn't be so surprising since many Jewish doctors also were rabbis or religious scholars. Listen to these lines which were written by the great 12th century Spanish poet-physician Judah Halevi:

My medicines are of Thee – whether good or evil, strong or weak.

It is Thou who shalt choose, not I.

Of Thy knowledge is the evil and the fair.

Not upon my power of healing I rely.

Only for Thine healing do I watch.

Or this from a poem written 500 years later by Jacob Zahalon, a Roman doctor who urged all Jewish doctors to recite it at least once a week:

Thou art the physician, not I. I am but as the clay in the potter's hand....I pray that I may discover the secrets of Thy wonderful deeds and that I may know the peculiar curative

powers which Thou has placed in herbs and minerals...that through them I shall tell of Thy might to all generations to whom Thy greatness shall come.

I found many more humble statements like this which suggested that doctoring should be more than a livelihood.

(Recall the words of Michael Shadid – the dust bowl doctor whom I discussed last week – that a doctor who thinks only about money should have become a stockbroker.)

So at least in early times, unambiguously, doctors saw themselves as doing God's work and, by so doing, they drew closer to God. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, medicine is prayer in the form of deed. That meant doing for others before oneself for as Hillel said, "If I am only for myself, who am I?" Martin Buber might have explained that a doctor's relationship to his patient should be an example of I-thou, not I-it. Personal more than professional.

Obviously, justice, mercy, humility, social action are not exclusively Jewish values– other religions preach the same things -- and they've been embedded in secular codes of medical ethics ever since Hippocratic times. At the end of the 19th century the famous Johns Hopkins physician William Osler admonished his colleagues to "care more particularly for the individual patient than for the special features of the disease." Harvard's Francis Peabody famously told his students,

“The secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.”
Nowadays, students are taught to be patient centered rather than disease centered. Indeed, the very word “professional” implies putting the patient’s interest before self-interest – doctors profess to do that. But, as we discussed last week, our current health delivery system makes it difficult to follow these fine dictums.

Another problem is that abstract terms that are often used in ethical codes, e.g. virtue, humanism, beneficence, altruism all sound good, but are confusing to apply in the real world. The challenge is how to encapsulate these values in an easily understood way that can be passed on to others. After years of thinking about this, I came up with an idea which is rooted in Ashkenazic Jewish culture as much as religion. It’s what I call being a “medical mensch” and it neatly expresses what I mean when I speak about an idealized style of Jewish Medicine.

The same values which characterize a mensch are fundamental to Judaism – and certainly to other religions as well. So you don’t have to be Jewish to be a mensch – you don’t even have to be a man -- for whether in Yiddish or German, mensch means “man” in the universal sense, like “All men are created equal.”

Being a mensch is very much in the eye of the beholder. When someone’s behavior is described as being “menschlichkeit”, it suggests that their actions speak louder than their words. When

we call someone a mensch we mean that they are admirable, trustworthy -- human in the best sense of the word. Medical menschen are not necessarily the wealthiest or most prestigious doctors, but they're someone whom you'd trust with your own or your family's life.

To my mind, medical menschen take the time to listen -- and they look beyond the patient to the person. Of course there are other admirable models, but Judaism provides an ethical framework which at least has stood the test of time. So when I think about Jewish Medicine, it's in a generic sense -- not as a specific body of knowledge but, rather, as a standard of behavior. Because qualities which define a mensch -- humility, empathy, social responsibility -- are traits to which any physician should aspire, a simple prescription for any conscientious physician is to be a medical mensch. And understood in this way, you don't even have to be Jewish to be a Jewish doctor.

Nowadays the word mensch is understood by nearly everyone -- it's become part of our common vernacular. A few years ago, I was invited to discuss medical ethics at a conference for interns and residents at St. Barnabas Hospital in Livingston, NJ -- I doubt if any of them was Jewish and probably few even were born in this country. Yet when I described my ideas about medical menschen, they loved it -- and afterward, several Indian

and Asian doctors came up to tell me how much they embraced the concept – how they too aspired to be menschen.

Others have promoted the same idea of value-based medicine in different ways but common to all is the notion that doctors are most effective when they go about their daily work within a moral framework. Rachel Remen is a particularly sensitive Jewish doctor in California who contends that the root cause of medicine's crisis today is that it has lost its meaning. She writes, "We need something stronger than our science to hold on to, something more satisfactory and sustaining...We need to help students to find meaning as skillfully as we educate them to pursue medical expertise."

I'll close by describing a friend of mine who I consider to be the ultimate medical mensch – perhaps some of you may have heard of him. His name is Rick Hodes and for 24 years he's practiced in Ethiopia -- one of the poorest countries in the world where he heads the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's medical operation in the capital city, Addis Ababa.

Rick had a conventional upbringing on Long Island – he attended Middlebury College, then the University of Rochester's medical school and he trained in internal medicine at Johns Hopkins. He always had a hankering to travel and in 1990 he wound up in Ethiopia at a time of civil war and famine. It also was the time of the covert rescue mission that was called

Operation Solomon in which 14,000 emaciated natives were flown to Israel by El Al in giant cargo planes. Rick helped supervise the medical aspects of that exodus and then stayed on to work for The Joint. By now, more than 120,000 of these primitive people who trace their origins back to King Solomon's time have made *aliyah* – only a few are left, how many is arguable –but the Joint continues to provide non-sectarian services in Addis and Rick still heads their operation.

“Doctor Rick”, as his patients call him, treats an amazing array of sickness, things hardly ever seen in this country. Several times each week he volunteers his services at Mother Teresa's clinic for orphans and destitute people. Although he works in the third world, he has a global network of specialists with whom he consults on-line. To his patients in Addis he's become a beloved figure and he likes to say that when he visits Israel, about 1% of the population there once were his patients.

Perhaps most amazing is the fact that Rick Hodes currently boards 19 orphan teenagers in his own home and – get this -- he's adopted five of them as his sons – that was in order to get them onto his health insurance plan so they could come to the United States for complex surgery. A few of his sons now are in colleges in this country. Under Rick's leadership, several years ago the Joint opened a Spine Center where he's treated more than a thousand of what he calls “the most distorted backs in the world.” He's sent more than 200 of them to Ghana for

complex orthopedic surgery – and his before and after pictures are incredible – and some of them who couldn't walk before, now can. He once described his mission this way:

I perceive my role on this planet as helping people at the margins whom nobody else would help. I'm a believer in the Woody Allen school of thought: showing up is a lot of the job. At the end of the day, what keeps me going is my reward knowing that a few more people may be alive because I went to work that day.

Rick is unmarried and over the years he's become religiously observant. He keeps kosher by being a vegetarian and every Friday evening his children and extended family, and visitors from all over gather in his cottage; they stand together in a circle, hold hands and then sing Pete Seeger's song, *If I had a Hammer*. You all know the last line of the refrain – *I'd hammer out justice. I'd hammer out love between my brothers and my sisters ---All Over this land.*

Next they sing *Shalom Aleichem* and then they sit down and enjoy a Kosher Shabbat meal. To my mind, Rick Hodes is a mensch who practices Jewish Medicine. He's concerned with people as much as with disease. Although few of us can follow his example, we all can aspire to be more compassionate -- not only to talk the talk, but to walk the walk. You may or may not

agree with my definition of Jewish Medicine, but I hope that, at least, I've given you some Kosher food for thought.

This was the fourth of six lectures given in a course called "Meanderings in Medical History." It was presented at The Learning Collaborative in Orangeburg, NY on April 1, 2014
