If history is studied by reading literary forms other than dry scholarly texts, sometimes a more vivid insight can be appreciated. What follows here is a survey of how certain Jewish doctors, in different times and places, coped with challenges in their personal or professional lives as depicted in prose, poetry, prayer and even fiction. Naturally, there will be overlaps between the general Jewish condition and the experiences of individuals, but distinctions specific to medical practice will be evident.

GOD’S AGENTS: Nearly one third of the 615 commandments in the Torah refer to some aspect of medicine and the Talmud abounds with maxims related to health. Jewish Law teaches that to save one life is akin to saving the world (pikuach nefesh). Moreover, since man is considered to be only a tenant in his body -- not having title, he is obliged to take care of what doesn’t belong to him. In early times, although cure of sickness was considered to be in the hands of God, healers (rophiim) were assumed to play a legitimate role as God’s agents -- humble facilitators in a joint venture -- and this dynamic was unambiguous. One of the first Jewish physicians whose name and writing is known to us was Asaf HaRofe who lived sometime between the 3rd and 7th centuries, probably in Syria. Asaf translated Greek medical texts into Hebrew and his Sefer Asaf HaRofe summed up medical knowledge of the period. Asaf taught medicine at an academy and would lead his students in a prayer that was strikingly similar to the oath attributed to Hippocrates that was written nearly a millennium earlier. Whereas, the Hippocratic Oath began with the physician swearing to Apollo and other gods and goddesses, Asaf’s students pledged allegiance to “the One God, the Lord of Israel and the
whole world, the true Healer of the sick." The Oath of Asaf contained various positive obligations, including caring for the poor free of charge, and failure to comply with these prescriptions would result in loss of God’s support: “The Lord is with you as long as you are with him.” 1

The 12th century Spanish poet-physician Judah Halevi wrote, “My medicines are of Thee – whether good or evil, strong or weak. It is Thou who shalt choose, not I.” Maimonides understood that “a sound body is essential for attaining perfection…knowledge of medicine, therefore, is a way of serving God.” Some five centuries later, Isaac Cardozo, who fled the Spanish Inquisition and settled in Venice, defended Jewish doctors against various calumnies. He explained that the primary objective for Jewish doctors like him was to study religious law and meditate on its precepts in order to keep and do them: “We shall investigate nature and its founder so that from the world and its multitude of things, as if by a ladder, with enlightened and instructed mind, we may be lifted to God…[Studying] His creatures is the ladder by which we ascend to God, the organ with which we praise God and the school in which we learn God.” Cardozo’s Roman contemporary would have Jacob Zahalon agreed and in 1665 composed a prayer that he urged all physicians to recite at least once a week. Paraphrasing Isaiah, it began: “Thou art the physician, not I. I am but as the clay in the potter’s hand.” From comments such as these, it is evident that early practice of medicine by Jews occurred within a religious framework and, as we shall see, this would characterize what can be called “Jewish Medicine” until relatively recent times. But if Judaism and medicine once were in harmony, this synergy gradually faded during the 18th and 19th centuries until a challenge of modernity became whether or not the two could even co-exist.
UNDER CRESCENT AND CROSS: Those Jews who lived “under the Crescent” were relatively more secure than their brethren living “under the Cross,” although most infidels (dhimmis) were considered to be second class citizens. However, wherever they lived, Jews were perceived as the “other” and struggled just to survive. Perhaps an exception to the rule was an 11th century Catalanian physician Joseph ben Meir ibn Zabara (b. 1040) who wrote a book called *The Garden of Dreams* (*Sefer Sha’ashu’im*) in which he appeared both as narrator and protagonist. The book was kind of a proto-novel and contained numerous short tales and proverbs interspersed with medical discussions. In the beginning, Joseph described how a tall stranger had appeared to him in a dream and, together, they embarked on an imaginary journey to faraway places. As they wandered, the two men discussed wine and women, the relative merits of food and medicine, and traded quotations of Aristotle, “saintly” Hippocrates, Galen and other sages. Zabara was wary of excessive bleeding or overreliance on drugs, favored judicious diet both for prevention and cure, and relied on the diagnostic value of uroscopy. *The Garden of Dreams* was dedicated to the author’s medical patron. Rabana Sheshet ben Benveniste whom he praised as “a man in whom is the spirit of God...a man of wisdom and discernment, a master of kindness and faith, great in works and good deeds...a prince and a noble in Israel.” Joseph’s exemplary mentor Benveniste was fluent in Arabic, had elegant manners and was consulted on both political and medical matters by King Pedro II of Aragon. In the book’s final chapter Joseph Zabara expressed his desire to return to his home city Barcelona to “spend my days in peace with my kinsmen and my neighbors.”
Peace in 11th century Spain sounds rather strange, but Joseph Zabara lived in relatively untroubled times during the so-called “Golden Age” of Jewish culture. Of course Jewish fortunes fluctuated according to time and place, and some two centuries later (1391), Barcelona’s prosperous Jewish community would be massacred in Christian riots. The family of Maimonides (Rambam), who was five years older than Joseph Zabara, fled Cordoba in 1043, shortly after Andalusia was invaded by the Almohades who were fanatical Berbers from north Africa. Whereas Zabara’s travels were fictitious, not so for the Rambam’s family who, after a decade long odyssey through the Mediterranean world, finally settled in the outskirts of Cairo where Maimonides would become one of Sultan Saladin’s court. Acclaimed in his own time as “The Eagle of Physicians,” Maimonides practiced according to the Greco-Arabic tradition, but he was skeptical of received wisdom and insisted on confirming the efficacy of treatments for himself. Rambam’s theological ideas were relatively radical for the time and after his death bitter rabbinic controversy erupted between traditionalists and rationalists. In turn, this created a professional dilemma for Jewish doctors – whether to accept or reject new scientific findings. In the preface to his translation from Arabic to Hebrew (1279) of Avicenna’s medical textbook, known as the Canon, Nathan Ha-Meati made a revealing confession:

We [Jewish doctors] have become dispossessed of the medical works which were composed in the days of Solomon and other sages of our nation who lived before us….Our fathers told us of them but we have not seen them; therefore…. I girded up the loins of laziness; and I said to my thoughts: be strong and mighty for the sake of our nation, the remnant of the exile... to translate this great book for her.  

3
Evidently most of Nathan's colleagues were not disposed to integrate the emerging system of Latin-based medical learning, now being taught in newly formed universities in Salerno, Padua and Montpellier, into their practices. And as a result, the reputation of Jewish physicians entered a long period of decline. Previously Jewish prominence in medicine was attributable to their skill in translating and transmitting Greek and Arabic medical texts, but now the Christian system of scholarship had caught up and surpassed Jewish expertise. This challenge of whether to adhere to traditional approaches or embrace new ideas was described in the prologue of a medical book written during the early 15th century by Leon Joseph of Aragon (d.1418). Seeking respectability and knowledge, Leon travelled to Montpellier to hear the science of medicine from the mouths of Christian scholars and to purchase their books -- at double the usual price. He soon discovered that what was being taught in the universities was "more rational than in the bosom of our people, as far from them as east is from west, and all the more so from the fundamentals of Torah and of religious faith." Leon lamented that after the time of Maimonides, many Jewish physicians had grown intellectually lazy. As he explained in the preface of his Hebrew translation of a Christian medical text:

*When I lived among the Christians, I was of an inferior condition in their eyes, for there is none in our nation who is honored in their eyes... The majority of those who practice medicine among my people do not intend to fathom the depths of their object; even if they were able to go into it in greater depth, they do not wish to tire their intelligence with this, and they mutter: this science is not a true science, but rather a skill; and with a "sound of tumult" everybody wishes to turn it into a means of existence. ..They say that a learned physician is he who asks*
large amounts of money and does not heal free of charge... We saw with our own eyes that learned Jews had empty hands and lacked arguments....It is not because our intelligence is inferior to that of the Christians, for we possess the same capacity for understanding; indeed, it is the circumstances that have kept us apart...exile and oppression...For this reason the Christians have continued to advance in the profane sciences while we have continued to lose ground as a consequence of distress and oppression.4

Leon Joseph was so impressed by what he learned in Montpellier that he converted and took the name Leon Benedictus, Others did likewise so that by the 16th century there were few competent Jewish practitioners left in Christian Europe, especially compared to in the relatively tolerant Ottoman empire. To be sure, some unschooled Jewish healers retained a certain medical mystique because of their knowledge of kabalah, folk remedies and alchemy, and frequently were consulted by royal and ecclesiastical patrons. All of these phenomena were illustrated in the following tale which appeared in a book, Examen de Ingenios (The Examination of Men’s Wits)5 that was written in 1575. The book was written by Juan Huarte, who was a converso (New Christian) physician, and although it reads like fiction, it is historically plausible. The author begins by relating a seemingly well-known legend:

When Francis de Valois, king of France, was seized with a very tedious sickness, and the physicians of his house and court could give him no ease, he said that every time the fever returned, that it was not possible for any Christian physician to cure him...He ordered a courier to be dispatched to Spain, to [ask] the Emperor Charles the fifth, to send him a Jew doctor, the best of all the court...There was no little
laughing in Spain at his request, and all concluded that it was no other than the conceit of a man with fever...They sent him a physician newly turned Christian, hoping thereby to comply with the king's request. [When] the physician arrived in France and brought to the king's presence, there passed between them a most agreeable dialogue, wherein it was discover'd, that the physician was a Christian, and therefore the king would take no physic at his hands....

In order to break the ice, the French king jokingly asked whether the Jewish consultant wasn't tired from waiting so long for the Messiah to come, but the doctor indignantly countered that now he was a sincere Christian. That was not what King Francis wanted to hear:

Then said the king, be gone to your own country in good time, for I have Christian physicians enough in my own court and house. I took you to be a Jew, who in my opinion are those that have a natural ability for cures. And so [the king] took leave of him without allowing him to feel his pulse or examine his urine, or mingle the least word concerning his distemper, and forthwith sent to Constantinople for a Jew who recovered him only with donkey milk [!]

Having told this amusing tale, Juan Huarte suggested that the ancient Israelites, sharpened by harsh desert conditions – eating manna, drinking water from Moses's rod -- combined with their "sadness and toil" had developed such unseemly character traits as craftiness and cunning [!] which he believed made them particularly well suited for the proper diagnosis and cure of disease. How or why was not made clear. As for Jewish doctors of his own time, Huarte conceded "true it is that they are
not now so quick and sharp as they were a thousand years ago... because they have mingled among women of the Gentile race who lacked this difference of wit. But this [talent] is not to be denied they who have not yet utterly lost it." Two centuries earlier, Leon Gordon certainly would have agreed with Juan Huarte’s assessment and it’s noteworthy that, like them, many Jewish doctors chose conversion in order to facilitate their entry into the medical mainstream. Each of the anecdotes cited so far were derived from primary sources, but some of these same issues were addressed in literary works that were written centuries later. Some may scoff at the accuracy of historical fiction, but if they have been carefully researched, novels can provide useful context. With this in mind, now let’s consider three novels which expanded upon social and professional conditions relating to Jewish medical practice during the Middle Ages and the early modern period.

As was described in Juan Huarte’s vignette, many Christians perceived a Jewish mystique related to medical matters and this was described in Walter Scott’s Ivanhoe which, although written in 1819, took place in England during the late 12th century. The beautiful and brilliant heroine Rebecca is described as being a Jewish healer (not a physician) who was taught how to use balms and botanicals by Miriam, “a sage matron of the Tribe.” Later, Miriam was accused of being a sorceress and was burned at the stake, a fate narrowly averted by Rebecca. In the novel, Rebecca’s father Isaac of York is depicted, like Shakespeare’s Shylock, as a greedy money-lender. In contrast, she is courageous, loyal to her religion and portrayed as the antithesis of the Jewish stereotype represented by her father. When Ivanhoe is seriously wounded in a jousting tournament, Rebecca nurses him back to health and falls in love with him -- but not so much as to consider abandoning her faith. (She stands out in contrast not
only to Ivanhoe’s Christian fiancée Rowena, but also to Shylock’s daughter Jessica in The Merchant of Venice who as soon as she was able, ran away, converted and married a Christian.) In the end Ivanhoe marries blond Rowena while the dark-haired Jewess and her father sail off to Granada in less prejudiced Spain where she plans to tend to the sick. Of course, the novel was set during the late 12th century when the Golden Age of tolerance in Spain was still a reality. Although Rebecca was a secondary character in Ivanhoe, the novel exemplifies how Jewish healers, regardless of gender or education, were viewed with a mixture of respect and fear because of their knowledge of folk medicine and black arts.

The tribulations of medieval Jewish physicians were described further in two novels written by Noah Gordon (b. 1926.) He had a successful career as a medical reporter and publisher of medical journals, but Gordon’s most ambitious literary work was a trilogy of novels about three generations of doctors, each with the same name R. J. Cole. The first of the trilogy, The Physician (1986), traces the life of Robert Jeremy Cole from his boyhood in 11th century London, followed by his travels through England and Europe until he arrives at a famous Arabic medical school in Persia. What kind of a Jewish name was Robert Jeremy Cole? In fact, it wasn’t, for it turns out that Robert was a counterfeit Jew. As a young orphan he was apprenticed to an itinerant barber surgeon and soon became a skilled healer. In his travels Robert Cole became impressed by the surgical skill of a Jewish physician whom he learns had trained halfway across the world at a medical school in Persia which was headed by the great Arabic physician Avicenna. Robert decided to commit his life to becoming a learned physician and vowed to study at Avicenna’s school. He learned that the academy banned Christian students, but
occasionally accepted a few Jews, so Robert disguised himself as a Jew in order to gain admission. He took the name Jesse ben Benjamin, was accepted in the school and became one of Avicenna’s favorites. Torn between life as a pseudo-Jewish medical student and his former identity, eventually he married his Christian girl friend and after many trials, found his way back to his homeland. The Physician had enormous success over the years, selling more than 20 million copies. Although the novel got off to a slow start in this country, a German publisher loved it and eventually the novel sold more than 8 million copies in Europe. When a German movie version opened in 2013, it was seen by more than a million people in the first ten days and later was aired as a mini-series on Germany’s public television station. In 1999 at a book fair in Madrid The Physician was named one of the ten most beloved books of all time.

Another novel written by Noah Gordon (not part of the trilogy), The Last Jew (2000), takes place nearly five centuries later in Spain at the time of the Inquisition and expulsion of Jews from Iberia. The protagonist, Yonah is a fifteen year old, every one of whose family had been killed, and the plot follows his picaresque journey through Christian Spain. When Yonah meets a converso physician, serves as his apprentice and eventually takes over his mentor’s practice. Although he knows little of Jewish observance, Yonah is determined to cling to his secret Jewish identity at a time when all other survivors either had fled or converted. As a doctor Yonah comes to care for the same scoundrels who had killed his father, but resists temptation to kill them because this would violate his medical ethics. As he tells himself, once he had become a healer, he was ruined for work as an assassin, that if he committed murder it would spoil him as a doctor; in effect medicine had taken the place of religion for him. Perhaps similar dilemmas happened to real-life Jewish doctors, but by the late 18th
century, as a result of edicts in France and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Jews no longer needed to convert in order to enter the emerging world of science. However, acceptance would come at a steep price – attainable only through conformity to the norms of Gentile society and as they adopted different behaviors, there was gradual fading of the distinction that previously characterized Jewish Medicine.

**FITTING IN:** During the 18th and 19th centuries, the status of Jews in Western Europe was profoundly changing; Emancipation led to Enlightenment and assimilation to acculturation. Although new opportunities arose for those willing to jettison former beliefs and customs, for some doctors the tension between traditional religious thinking and emerging secular science created an identity crisis. On the one hand there was the shame and racial stigma attached to the medical profession in certain religious quarters; on the other hand, the self-esteem of university graduates was enhanced as they were absorbed into the intellectual elite. Tuviah Cohn was a transitional figure between the old and new ways who received a medical degree from the University of Padua, Like Leon Joseph some three centuries before him, Tuviah was concerned that Jewish medical scholarship had fallen far behind. In 1707 he published a medical encyclopedia, *Ma'aseh Tuviyah* (Tuviah's Tales) in which he described “a flowering of a new medicine which dwells in the bosom of physicians of our time.” Tuviah acknowledged the need to explore new scientific information rather than rely upon rabbinic tradition, but this was a difficult task. Moreover, he remarked that students like him were challenged to preserve their Jewish identities if they immersed themselves too deeply in secular studies. Based on his own experience, he had a caveat: “No Jew in all the lands of Italy, Poland, Germany and France should consider studying medicine without first filling his belly with the written and oral
Torah and other subjects." (1707) Tuviah’s personal odyssey took him throughout much of Europe. After obtaining his medical degree in Padua, he moved to Constantinople where he became a wealthy court physician for eight consecutive sultans. Although he prospered, Tuviah was spiritually frustrated and eventually abandoned medical practice and his comfortable life, moving to Jerusalem in order to study Torah full-time. However, his timing was unfortunate, there was corruption, extortion and rioting in the Holy Land. When Tuviah Cohn died in 1729, his wallet was empty – but hopefully, his belly was “full” of the Holy Books.

In the shtetls of eastern Europe, haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) was the antithesis of hasidism. In 1790 Moshe Marcuse, a German-born trained physician who practiced in Poland published a self-help book of home remedies that was written in Yiddish. He explained in the preface, “I wish to benefit many thousands of people with my book…to save them from quacks and defectives as, for instance, old women, bad midwives, excisors of the evil eye…terribly wicked people, inept preachers..."little doctors" whom have made themselves doctors or who have been called such by foolish old women.” In his polemic against charlatans, Marcuse criticized the debilitating effects of prolonged religious study on the health of young children and specifically chastised the hasidim for drinking alcohol excessively. In retaliation, they bought every available copy of his book – and burned them. Of course, trained physicians like Moshe Marcuse represented an economic threat to the rebbes – indeed, the founder of the hasidic movement, the Baal Shem Tov, was a purveyor of herbal remedies.7

In 1782 a Physician’s Prayer was published anonymously in a German magazine which became so admired that in modern times it sometimes
was read at medical school graduation ceremonies instead of the Hippocratic Oath; William Osler described it as “one of the most precious documents of our profession.” The full title was Daily Prayer of a Physician From a Hebrew Manuscript of a Famous Jewish Physician in 12th century Egypt and that perfectly described Maimonides, who was well known in 18th century Germany. Indeed the sublime prayer often is referred to as Maimonides’ Prayer, but modern scholars believe that the true author was a Berlin physician Markus Herz (1747-1803.) A central theme of the prayer – that the mind of man is ever expanding – is in keeping with 18th century rationalism (bildung): “Knowledge is immense and the spirit of man can also extend infinitely to daily enrich itself with new acquirements. Today he can discover his errors of yesterday and tomorrow he may obtain new light on what he thinks himself sure of today.”

Although his name now is obscure, Markus Herz was in the vanguard of intellectual change known as the Berlin Enlightenment. He was the son of an impoverished Torah scribe but through good fortune found a wealthy patron who paid for his medical education and, in time, he was so esteemed that he was appointed as the first Jewish professor of medicine in Prussia. Dr. Herz and his wife established a salon in their elegant home where leading intellectuals would gather, including the philosopher Immanuel Kant and Rabbi Moses Mendelssohn, both of them his friends and patients. He viewed Kant as his mentor in philosophy, acknowledging in a letter written in 1770, “Had it not been for you, I would be like so many of my brethren dragging a burden of prejudices, leading a life inferior to that of a beast….a soul bereft of intellectual powers...”8 For Jewish rationalists like Herz, it was as if they had emerged out of darkness into a brighter place and were dazzled – or, to use a different metaphor, it was like being offered drink after a long period in the desert. Because Jewish
doctors now viewed themselves as independent thinkers, this sometimes created tension concerning medical matters, especially when current scientific thinking deviated from Jewish custom related to circumcision and burial customs. Dr. Herz also was an outspoken critic of adapting Jenner’s new method of vaccination to prevent smallpox.

A line from Judah Leib Gordon’s poem Awake My People (1866) became a popular slogan of the haskalah: “Be a man abroad and a Jew in your tent.” However, many acculturated Jews didn’t practice religion even in private. No doubt many Jewish doctors retained the conviction that their work was a moral enterprise, but now saw themselves as autonomous soloists more than God’s helpers. Opportunity for social mobility led to an enormous proliferation of Jewish physicians and during the 20th century, their achievements were exemplified by the phenomenal number of Nobel Prize winners in Medicine, over than one quarter of all Laureates. The first of them in 1908 was the German immunologist Paul Ehrlich and it’s telling that in her published memoir, his devoted personal secretary Martha Marquadt noted “I had been working for Ehrlich for several years before I knew he was a Jew. He would never have thought of changing his religion for the sake of deriving any advantage by so doing, but he paid very little attention to the Jewish holidays and rites.” To be sure, in 1913 Ehrlich agreed to Chaim Weitzmann’s appeal for him to support what would become Hebrew University in Jerusalem, but he died two years later. Indeed, hardly any of the Jewish medical Laureates who followed Paul Ehrlich showed any public evidence of Jewish observance and several (e.g. Landsteiner, Warburg) were apostates or publicly rejected their religious roots.
A fictional example of the life of an assimilated German doctor appeared in *The Family Carnovsky* (1943) a novel written by Israel Joshua Singer, the elder brother of Isaac Bashevis Singer. The book described three generations of a Polish family that during the late 19th century had moved to Berlin, “the city of enlightenment.” Young George Carnovsky meets a busy Jewish practitioner, Fritz Landau, who eventually becomes his medical role model. Dr. Landau shows George an old medical book saying, “You see only a few hundred years ago, physicians treated the kings and princes with black magic potions and incantations. Now we have the X-ray machine and the microscope.” Landau exhorts his patients to stop smoking, drinking beer or eating too much: “What do you expect from your stomach when you go on abusing it? You stuff it with meat, drown it with beer, and smother it with smoke so it growls, belches, fills with gas, and stinks like a garbage can.” He talks bluntly to women who “pollute their bodies with grease, fat, sweets, coffee and alcohol and then ask for medicines.” He says that he won’t prescribe that “hogwash,” that “colored water,” for the way to health lies through adherence to the rules of hygiene. If in exceptional cases he prescribes potions, pills or powders, he makes them up in his own office and, needless to say, draws the wrath of the pharmacists. His colleagues also are dismayed that he allows his patients to pay only as much as they can afford. If they need money, Dr. Carnovsky, encourages them to take some from his collection tray.

Another idealistic Jewish physician was depicted in Dr. Arthur Schnitzler’s play *Professor Bernhardi* (1912), which takes place in fin-de-siecle Vienna. Schnitzler’s father was a successful otolaryngologist who taught him that “the religion of the doctor is humanity…the love of mankind,” and for a while Arthur unenthusiastically followed the family trade before becoming
a full-time writer and leader of the intelligentsia. In his various novels
Schnitzler described the plight of the assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie who
idealized egalitarian principles at a time when liberalism was
disintegrating before a rising tide of Austrian nationalism and anti-
Semitism. *Professor Bernhardi* had an ironic subtitle, “A Comedy in Five
Acts” – but there was nothing funny about it; rather, it resembled a Greek
tragedy. The protagonist Dr. Oskar Bernhardi is a scrupulously honest
physician who finds himself in conflict with his hospital’s anti-Semitic
administration. The play was set in 1900 at a time when Jews constituted
nearly ten percent of Vienna’s general population and about half of
practicing doctors. Dr. Bernhardi, an internist and the head of a small
hospital, naively puts his patients’ interests first in the belief that the only
essential for a physician is to serve humanity and science. He is undone
when he refuses to allow a priest to give the sacraments to a young
woman dying as a result of a septic abortion. In a terminal state of
euphoria she believes that she is getting better and the doctor prefers the
subterfuge of withholding the true prognosis, thereby allowing her to die
happily. Instead of being praised for an act of mercy, he is accused of
sacrilege. The event becomes a cause célèbre, Bernhardi loses his job
and his license and is briefly jailed. The apolitical and impractical doctor
only wishes to practice good honest medicine and is blind to social and
political currents which characterize Viennese society. As he sees it, when
there is a battle between houses of God and houses of healing, rationality
will prevail. However, Professor Bernhardi gets caught up in intrigue,
hypocrisy and overt anti-Semitism among his medical colleagues and
hospital administrators. One cynical gentile doctor attempts to set him
straight:
There are still among you gentlemen who do not know how to read the signs of the times and to reckon with popular tendencies...The fact is that there are many people who do not consider it right that in an institution where a Prince and a Bishop are curators, and where, according to statistics, 85 percent of the patients are Catholics, the house-doctors should in preponderating numbers belong to another religion. That sort of thing causes bad blood in certain quarters.

Arthur Schnitzler believed that anti-Semitism was a response to the Jews’ historical position as outsiders and, deriding those who hid their identities, placed his faith in tolerant Enlightenment values rather than Zionist nationalism. He remained hopeful about the prospect of Jewish survival and believed that every individual would have to make his own adjustment. Like many other Jews who were in denial, Schnitzler believed that salvation would come by ever greater assimilation, adaptation and self-reliance. But the Enlightenment’s commitment to tolerance was more theory than practice and there were limits to acceptance into German society. Before its first production in 1912, Professor Bernhardi was banned by Austrian censors. Arthur Schnitzler died of a stroke in 1931, two years before Hitler assumed power and seven years before the Nazis invaded Austria. The first English language production of the play was given in 1936 and rarely has been produced since, although there was a short-lived off-Broadway repertory production in New York City in 2012.

IN AMERICA: Jewish physicians in America also encountered personal and professional dilemmas and a literary equivalent to the idealistic Professor Bernhardi appeared in Sinclair Lewis’ novel *Arrowsmith* (1926.) The author was offered the Pulitzer Prize for the book but refused it, explaining that “all prizes are dangerous...the seekers for prizes tend to labor not for
inherent excellence but for alien rewards. They tend to write this, or timorously to avoid writing that, in order to tickle the prejudices of a haphazard committee.” That notwithstanding, Sinclair Lewis accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930. In the novel, the mentor of young Martin Arrowsmith was Max Gottlieb, a world-famous immunologist who scorned commercialism in science. That Gottlieb was not intended to be a minor character is evidenced by the fact that Sinclair Lewis originally intended to call his novel, “In the Shadow of Max Gottlieb.” Born in Saxony in 1850, Dr. Gottlieb had studied with Pasteur and Koch, married a gentile girl and immigrated to America in 1890 in order to escape German militarism and anti-Semitism. Colleagues described Gottlieb variously as a pessimist, cynic, intellectual snob, pacifist, anarchist, atheist, Jew. He was a dedicated researcher who was more interested in pure science than in people. He knew nothing about diagnosis or dosage and taught students that the “ultimate lesson of science is to wait and doubt,” sarcastically adding, “There are two kinds of M.D.s – those to whom c.c. means cubic centimeter and those to whom it means compound cathartic. The second kind are more prosperous.” The assimilated Max Gottlieb represented complete dissociation between religion and science; however, at one point, Sinclair Lewis described him in a reflective moment: “Gottlieb, the placidly virulent hater of religious rites, had a religious-seeming custom. Often, he knelt by his bed and let his mind run free. It was very much like prayer, though certainly there was no formal invocation, no consciousness of a Supreme Being – other than Max Gottlieb.”

Gerald Green’s novel The Last Angry Man (1956) which did not receive critical acclaim comparable to Arrowsmith. The book described the life of a physician Dr. Samuel Adelman who was on the lowest rung of
professional success and a very different breed than Max Gottlieb. An immigrant from Rumania, he was a general practitioner in a run-down Brooklyn neighborhood whose patients included teenage hoodlums, kosher butchers and policemen who rarely paid his small fees. This gruff, irascible man, who paradoxically loved gardening and reading Thoreau, was a fine clinician who was unafraid to speak out, or even to physically fight when he recognized an outrage of justice. Here’s how novelist Green described a house call during the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918:

The father is a barber and after paying the one dollar fee and walking him to the door asks, “Hey doc, okay if I use a cup?” “Cupping?” “Sure cup, a match, you know. Bring up skin, bleed out bad blood.” “You do and I’ll punch your nose,” the doctor says angrily. “What the hell you think this is, the Middle Ages? Don’t you bleed that kid with cups or anything else.” “No leech? Nice leech?” “No leeches, goddammit! She may get very sick before we’re through. Grip they get better from. But she might get pneumonia, meningitis, an inflamed ear. So be careful. Listen to me for a change. Would I tell you how to cut hair? He knew that the barber would bleed his daughter anyway and while it would do no earthly good, it could not harm the little girl. For six years he had been warning patients not to employ cupping – “bankes” as his Jewish patients called it – knowing that they disobeyed his injunctions with impressive regularity.

What was Dr. Adelman, “the last angry man,” so angry about? He was less sophisticated than his fictional colleagues Drs. Bernhardi, Carnovsky and Gottlieb but, like each of them, he was depicted as a paragon of virtue who was in conflict with a world which didn’t share his values but was committed to serving the cause of mankind through medical science.
Having divested themselves of any Jewish trappings, these assimilated physicians were tolerated in polite society but had to proceed with caution. A case in point was the Philadelphia eye specialist Isaac Hays whose passion for exemplary medical behavior was embedded, not in fiction, but in a document of great historic importance – the Code Of Ethics of the American Medical Association. At the organization’s first meeting in 1846, Dr. Hays promoted the notion that medicine was a moral enterprise more than a business and proposed that “it is expedient that the Medical Profession in the United States be governed by the same code of Medical Ethics.” Curiously, this architect of the AMA’s code of ethics seemed reluctant to take public credit for his contribution. Historian Robert Baker had an explanation, suggesting that as a practicing Jew in gentile America, Hays feared provoking anti-Semitic backlash and that “It was far safer, and probably more effective, to deny authorship and place it in the hands of that eminently Christian gentleman, Thomas Percival.” Although Isaac Hays preferred to remain invisible, he successfully promoted a Jewish-inspired ethical agenda which, just as with the Physician’s Prayer probably written by Markus Herz, was composed as a secular document that would be acceptable to all.

**AT AUSCHWITZ:** Amidst the vast holocaust literature, there are innumerable first-person accounts that document horrific events, but perhaps none was read by more people than *Man’s Search for Meaning*, written in 1946 by Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankel, which sold more than nine million copies in nineteen languages. During transfer from Terezin to Auschwitz, Dr. Frankl lost the coat into the lining of which he had sewn a manuscript summarizing his life’s work and, later, spent months trying to reconstruct his ideas on pieces of stolen paper. After the war, Frankl published his *magnum opus* in which he asserted that everyone can rise above their
fate if they are able to discover for themselves the meaning in their own life. He observed that those who were without hope were the ones who died quickest in the camps, while those who held on to a positive vision of the future were more likely to survive. In explaining that humans control their own destiny, Viktor Frankl wrote that “in the concentration camp, we witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions, not on conditions.”

A core value of Western medical ethics is to do no harm and the Jewish tradition emphasizes the paramount importance of life, but are there ever extenuating circumstances which justify exceptions? When the world goes mad and inhumanity reigns supreme, do conventional moral rules always apply? Perhaps the most excruciating dilemmas ever encountered by physicians occurred during the Holocaust, especially those who were imprisoned at Auschwitz and exposed to Dr. Mengele’s infamous “scientific research” on prisoners. Miklos Nyiszli was a Hungarian Jewish pathologist, who collaborated with his captors in their grisly “experiments,” seemingly in order to save his own skin. Dr. Mengele valued his efficiency in performing autopsies on twins, dwarfs, gypsies, parents and their children. The doctor survived the war and in 1946 published a memoir in which he denounced the Nazis and justified his behavior by explaining that he survived by performing his assignments as professionally as possible, and not fixating on the purpose for which the work was used. He seemed to take pride in his skill irrespective of its ethical implications. Dr. Nyiszli was not the only prisoner physician who collaborated, although he may have been the only one who wrote about it, and when his self-serving memoir appeared, both the book and its author were criticized by many. Conversely, many prisoner doctors refused to follow orders and
behaved heroically in the camps. Even by performing small acts of kindness for their patients, some doctors achieved a triumph of the spirit. As Viktor Frankl wrote, “Man is that being who invented the gas chambers and he is also that being who entered the gas chambers upright with the Lord’s Prayer or the S’hma Israel on his lips.” Of course, the subject of human behavior during the Holocaust is profound and controversial – circumstances differed and choices had to be made under duress for which there were no easy answers. But the questions remain: Were those who stood idly by or chose to acquiesce to inhuman orders morally culpable? What would we have done under like conditions?

A similar dilemma was addressed in a bizarre sequence of events, both true and fictitious, which began in 1964 when the American writer Leon Uris was sued for libel in an English court by a Polish physician, Wladislaw Dering. Some six years earlier, when his famous novel Exodus was published, it contained a single sentence which said that a prisoner physician at Auschwitz, Dr. Dering, was a collaborator and had “performed 17,000 ‘experiments' in surgery without anesthetics” – many of these operations involved castration of Jewish prisoners. After the war, the Polish government, then under Soviet control, petitioned to have Dering extradited as a war criminal, but he was exonerated in an English court and went on to have a distinguished surgical career and was knighted. However, when Leon Uris mentioned Dr. Dering by name in Exodus, the surgeon denied guilt, insisting that whatever operations he had performed were under direct threat of execution by the Nazis. He sued Uris and his publisher for defamation but, although the publisher apologized and settled, not Uris. He was famous for doing extensive research for his works of historical fiction and after some two years of locating first-hand witnesses, Uris decided to contest the suit. A lengthy jury trial followed with
many witnesses called representing both sides. Some former prisoners testified that Dering was a hero who had saved lives; others denounced him as a monster. The medical ethics of what is permissible under extreme duress was reviewed and during the trial several unsavory facts came out about Dr. Dering’s past – including that he was an anti-Semite. But as one witness noted, “He [Dering] faced terribly hard dilemmas everyday. Whom to save? The one who was in pain, or the one who had a chance to survive? To carry out an SS order or to refuse because of some moral issues and to bring capital punishment on his own head? It can not be unambiguously settled by any human court.” In the end, Dr. Dering was awarded damages, but only the minimum amount permissible -- a halfpenny! Although the jury had ruled in his favor, Dering’s reputation and his health were ruined. Leon Uris admitted that the precise number of operations performed by Dering and some other details in Exodus could not be proved and agreed that future editions would omit the doctor’s name. Technically, Uris may have lost but he saw it as a moral victory and insisted that “the world should not be allowed to forget what happened during the Nazi era,” What he did next was extraordinary.

In 1970 Leon Uris published another novel QB VII that not only recounted what had happened at Auschwitz, but also at the subsequent Dering trial. Actual events in the concentration camp had led to the single sentence that appeared in Exodus and then Dr. Dering’s defamation suit, so that by the time QB VII appeared, it was difficult to distinguish truth from fiction. In an accompanying author’s note, Uris insisted that the characters in QB VII were purely fictional and that he’d used “reasonable literary license...within a framework of basic truth and credibility.” QB VII was the name of the London courtroom in which the trial was held and the names of all the individuals were changed --- Leon Uris became Abraham Cady,
Dr. Dering was called Adam Kelno -- the title of the novel *Exodus* changed to *Holocaust* and Auschwitz to Jadwiga. To be sure, Uris didn’t spare his alter ego who was depicted as a womanizer and sometime alcoholic; moreover, Dering was a sympathetic character, at least at first. The novel became a bestseller and later an award winning television mini-series. Wladislaw Dering died one year after the actual trial and several years before the second novel appeared. Leon Uris died in 2003, thirteen years after *QB VII* was published, so he had the last word and it is troubling that in the process he might have colored the story in order to support his point of view. Among the witnesses who testified against Dr. Dering in the real trial were several prisoner-physicians, including a French psychiatrist, Adelaide Hautval, who had defiantly refused to perform experimental procedures at Auschwitz and yet was not punished – undercutting Dering’s claim that he surely would have been killed if he didn’t follow orders. In 1945 Dr. Hautval was awarded the Legion of Honor for bravery and in 1965 she was honored by Yad Vashem as one of the “righteous among nations.”

As Viktor Frankl had observed in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, many physicians faced similar dilemmas and although some behaved badly others were heroic. Among the latter was a young Rumanian Gisella Perl who was one of five doctors chosen by Dr. Mengele to run a hospital ward for 32,000 Hungarian women – a hospital with no beds, bandages or drugs. Sometimes she could only offer a kind word or a song to her patients, to give them hope. Mengele commanded her to report every pregnant woman for him to experiment upon, but knowing that none would survive the agony, she performed hundreds of secret abortions on dirty floors. After the war, when Gisella learned that her husband and son had been executed, she attempted suicide but was nursed back to
health by a Catholic priest. In 1947 she came to the United States but was interrogated under suspicion of being a Nazi collaborator. It took four years before she was granted citizenship and all during this time, as what she called “an ambassador of the six million,” she publicly bore witness and described her experiences in a memoir *I Was a Doctor at Auschwitz* (1948). One day Eleanor Roosevelt heard Gisella speak and invited her for a kosher meal at the White House. Mrs. Roosevelt told Gisella to stop tormenting herself and to become a doctor again. Dr. Perl opened an office in Manhattan and, in time, the former abortionist became an expert in treating infertility. She delivered more than 3,000 babies and before every one, would say to her God, “You owe me a life – a living baby.”

**LIFE UNDER SOVIET CENSORSHIP:** I’ll conclude with two novels written by Jewish authors that addressed the general condition of all Jews in Russia during the Revolutionary and Stalinist eras, albeit with a medical twist. Because both books were refused publication in the Soviet Union, the manuscripts had to be smuggled to the West and the dilemmas faced by their authors related to personal choices they had to make. The admirable poet-physician protagonist of the novel *Doctor Zhivago* was not Jewish, but the book’s author Boris Pasternak was. He was born into a wealthy assimilated Jewish family -- his father Leonid was a famous post-Impressionist painter, his mother a concert pianist and they were friends of numerous prominent intellectuals. Censors considered *Doctor Zhivago* to be anti-Soviet and refused to publish it in Russia. In 1958, one year after a smuggled manuscript of the novel was published in Italy, Boris Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature to the chagrin of Soviet authorities. Under intense pressure, Pasternak declined travelling to Stockholm to accept the honor and begged Soviet authorities to forgive
him. Many Zionists also were outraged because of Pasternak’s assimilationist views. In the novel (which was written before Israel became a state) Pasternak advised Russian Jews, “Come to your senses, don’t hold on to your identity. Don’t stick together, disperse. Be with all the rest.” (Zhivago, chapter 12.) Indeed when Boris Pasternak died of cancer in 1960, he received last rites from a Russian Orthodox priest.

In contrast with the international acclaim afforded Dr. Zhivago and the uproar over Pasternak’s situation, another novel that was written by a Jewish physician, Leonid Tsypkin, was hardly noticed when it was smuggled to the United States in 1986. Fourteen years after it was published there, *Summer in Baden-Baden* was discovered and reviewed by Susan Sontag who described it as “among the most beautiful, exalting, and original achievements of a century’s worth of fiction and para-fiction.” So why is it that you probably have never heard either of the novel or its author? Although there’s hardly anything specifically medical in the book, I include it here because the author was a Jewish doctor who appears, rather obscurely, in a semi-autobiographical role as the narrator. And here’s another surprise: the novel’s protagonist is Fyodor Dostoevsky who, ironically, was a virulent anti-Semite.

Leonid Tsypkin was born in Minsk in 1926 during Stalin’s reign of terror. Both parents were physicians and most of his family were murdered either by the NKVD or during the German invasion in 1941. Despite official anti-Semitic policies, Tsypkin graduated from medical school in 1947, found a job as a pathologist and, among many professional activities, worked in field trials of the Sabin oral polio vaccine. Like many other physician authors (e.g. Anton Chekhov, A.J. Cronin, Somerset Maugham, William Carlos Williams) he wrote sketches, poems, short stories, but none of them
were published – it was too dangerous to try; as he said, he wrote for the desk drawer. After Dr. Tsypkin’s son and daughter-in-law immigrated to America in 1977, as a “refusenik” he was demoted, his salary slashed and he was denied permission to leave Russia. However, in 1982 the manuscript of *Summer in Baden-Baden* was smuggled to his son in Boston who got it published in a Jewish weekly. Seven days later, Dr. Leonid Tsypkin, a published author at last, died of a heart attack in Moscow at age 56.

*Summer in Baden-Baden* is a fictional account of Dostoevsky’s visit with his wife to the German spa-town -- he was a compulsive gambler and hoped to recoup financial losses through roulette. Leonid Tsypkin’s writing style was unusual – sentences run on for a page or more in length, as if in a hallucinatory stream of consciousness – or semi-consciousness, some during epileptic fits. Multiple characters and surreal impressions are jumbled together, including references to some of Dostoevsky’s novels and his impressions of literary rivals. The unnamed narrator, a physician, hardly speaks about himself but eventually it becomes clear that it is Dr. Tsypkin himself who is writing while on a train ride from Moscow to St. Petersburg – his trip is a personal homage retracing Dostoevsky’s steps. But something puzzles him -- how to reconcile the vicious anti-Semitism of his literary hero with his humanely sympathetic writing?:

*A man so sensitive in his novels to the suffering of others, this jealous defender of the insulted and injured who fervently and even frenetically preached the right to exist of every earthly creature and sang a passionate hymn to each little leaf and every blade of grass – that this man should not have come up with even a single word in the defense or justification of a people persecuted over several thousands
of years – could he have been so blind? – or was he perhaps blinded by hatred?

In the novel, the Tsypkin character tries to discover “some ray of hope...some effort to view the whole problem of anti-Semitism from a new angle.” But there is no resolution to the enigma nor of the “unnatural attraction” which Dostoevsky seems to possess for Jews like himself, his “tribe.” Dr. Tsypkin, wonders whether this was a “desire to hide behind his [Dostoevsky’s] back, as if using him as a safe-conduct – something like adopting Christianity or daubing a cross on your door during a pogrom?" In the end he concludes that the fervor of Jews for the greatness of Russian literature in general – reminiscent of German Jews worship of Goethe, Schiller and Wagner-- was a way of their identifying with Enlightenment values – in effect, a futile effort to fit in -- still another literary example of a Jewish doctor’s struggle to survive in a hostile society.

**CONCLUSION:** As described in these non-scholarly literary forms – memoirs, prayers, novels -- throughout the ages Jewish doctors encountered various challenges which effected both their personal and professional lives. Early on, Jewish doctors were respected for healing skills that were based on their knowledge of Greco-Arabic medical theory in addition to their own traditions. As Christian medicine emerged out of the dark ages to become legitimate science, the empiric Jewish approach to healing was challenged and, as a group, they fell behind. With 18th and 19th century Emancipation and Enlightenment, they regained traction and entered the medical main stream, but, in the process, Jewish Medicine lost its distinguishing feature that it was a joint venture with God. Modern medicine is rooted on reason and evidence and its ethical structure is based on professional codes of behavior, but lacking an obligatory
religious framework, it relies on choices made by morally autonomous practitioners. Throughout the ages, Jewish physicians responded differently to a variety of challenges – not least how to survive amidst hostile cultures, even Holocaust – and perhaps the fact that most doctors remained committed to ethical behavior may have reflected their roots. In 1995, shortly before his death, the virologist Jonas Salk, in a reflective mood, remarked that the fact that he was Jewish had nothing directly to do with his success, but indirectly it meant everything: “We are all influenced by our ancestor’s tradition and heritage. For me it was not a conscious influence...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.”14

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SOURCES


