“DOCTOR RICK” HODES

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What is essential in visiting the sick is to pay attention to the needs of the invalid, to see what must be done for his benefit, and to give him the pleasure of one's company. Also to consider his condition and pray for mercy on his behalf...[As the Talmud instructs] if one visits the sick but fails to pray for mercy, he does not fulfill his religious duty.

Rick believes that his work in Ethiopia has made him a kinder person: “You’re touching so many suffering people... I ask myself how am I responding to this human being; is there anything else I should say; what should I do to make him smile or somehow improve his life? It puts life in perspective.” Although he rejects facile comparisons of him to Albert Schweitzer or Mother Theresa, role models are on his mind. Sometimes he recalls St. Francis of Assisi, “Start by doing what's necessary, then do what's possible, and suddenly, you are doing the impossible.” Or Mother Teresa, “I alone cannot change the world. But I can cast a stone across the waters, to create many ripples.” Or the wisdom of the Talmud, “Saving one life is like saving the entire world.” He protests that he’s no saint, that his life style is plush compared to his patients’.

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This last essay is adapted from several things that I’ve published in the past. Strictly speaking it’s not about medical history, but in my opinion the subject is timeless – it speaks of medical tradition both past and present.

Medical educators nowadays strive to develop new ways to incorporate “humanism” or “professionalism” into the curriculum but these abstract terms mean different things to different people. True, they endorse virtuous behavior, but don’t necessarily provide a useful prescription of how to do it. Generalizations are not enough. What’s needed is to find meaningful new language to pass on the best traditions of medical practice that are culturally diverse and authentic to individual physicians of different backgrounds.

Several years ago, as an alternative to abstraction, I proposed a concept which although rooted in Ashkenazic Jewish culture is easily understood by all and has become part of our common vernacular – the mensch. You don’t have to be Jewish to be a mensch – you don’t even have to be a man. Whether in Yiddish or in German, mensch means “man” in the universal sense, like in “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 a person of high character, admirable, trustworthy, human in the best sense of the word.

When applied to physicians this concept is particularly suitable. As I see it, medical menschen are specialists in what often is called “the art of medicine.” It’s not the kind of specialty that one learns in school; a mensch’s training comes long before that. A doctor can be a Nobel Prize winner or a distinguished department head yet not be a mensch. Conversely, we all know of physicians whose careers may be undistinguished in terms of material or academic success, but whom are admired nonetheless; sometimes you hear them described as “a doctor’s doctor.” They may not be the most prestigious, but they are the ones
whom you would trust with your own or your family’s life. Why? Because he or she is a *mensch*.

Medical *menschen* are sensitive to relationships. They take the time to listen. They look beyond the patient to the person, treat sickness not disease. When I appropriate this familiar Yiddish term to use in a medical context, it is intended to serve as a behavioral model for any doctor. That the moral framework in which a medical *mensch* works is not specific to Judaism was brought home to me several years ago when I spoke at Grand Rounds at a hospital none of whose house staff were Jewish, nor probably born in this country. After I finished giving my pitch about medical *menschen*, several of the young doctors came up and enthusiastically endorsed the concept as an appropriate role model for themselves. What follows here (written in 2013) describes an individual who to my mind is a perfect example of what I mean.

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A medical mensch indeed!