

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE IN JUDAISM

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According to most reports, more than 50% of people with illnesses today seek out medications and physicians that are not conventional. These include medicines that are called "alternative," "complementary," "integrative," or "holistic." The alternative therapies include acupuncture, naturopathy, chiropractic, herbal remedies, homeopathy, metabolic therapies, amulets, crystals, touch therapy, vitamin and mineral therapies. Specifically in treating cancer, many patients are willing to try unproven methods and cures in addition to conventional therapies.

Judaism has a long recorded history of individuals who have used non-conventional approaches to cure disease. How does Judaism view these therapies? Could there possibly be any problem from a Jewish perspective in trying them if no harm comes to the patient? If these methods prove successful in reducing pain and symptoms, would there be any objection from the medical community or the rabbis? Judaism has much to say about these questions and alternative treatments that have very practical implications for today.

Before we can discuss non-conventional medicines, however, we must first understand the normative Jewish attitude to medicine and doctors in general, and define what makes certain medicines "alternative" from a Jewish perspective. (For an expanded discussion about doctors, see the chapter "Jewish Attitudes to Doctors and Visiting the Sick.")

THE OBLIGATION OF A JEW TO BE HEALTHY AND HEALED

One of the 613 Torah commandments incumbent upon every Jew is to be healthy and protect oneself from harm, as the Torah tells us to guard ourselves from sickness and anything that may bring harm to the body. The Talmud equates sustaining even a single human life with the infinite value of an entire world.¹ Therefore, every Jew has a special obligation to do whatever it takes to remain healthy. This appears to include taking any medications that would bring someone back to health as well as protect the body from becoming ill in the first place. The Talmud² understands this principle to be the logical way to live one's life, and even asks why a verse is necessary. When a person is sick, he or she should call a doctor, says the Talmud. The Torah specifically tells us that a sick person should be healed by a doctor.³ Maimonides seems to indicate that just as a doctor has an obligation to heal a patient (see below), so, too, a patient has an obligation to try to protect his or her health and prevent sickness.⁴ In a different context, Maimonides

¹ Deuteronomy 4:15, Sanhedrin 27a

² Bava Kama 46b

³ Exodus 21:19

⁴ Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishna Nedarim 4:4

emphasizes a Jew's obligation to strive to be healthy⁵, explaining that someone who is not healthy cannot fulfill his mission on earth to serve G-d properly. Furthermore, in building a Jewish community, there are certain rudimentary elements that must be present even in the case of the smallest Jewish population living together. In addition to a synagogue and a teacher, every Jewish community must have at least one doctor.

DEFINING CONVENTIONAL AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE IN JUDAISM

The fact that doctors hold an important place in Jewish communities does not negate the fundamental Jewish belief that all healing does not come about due to any medicine or a particular doctor, but only through G-d. G-d is called "your Doctor" in Scripture,⁶ in order to highlight Judaism's core belief that everything comes from G-d, including the healing that is derived from medicines and the advice of doctors. In fact, traditional Jews pray three times daily for G-d to relieve their illnesses, without placing their faith on doctors or medicines.⁷ Thus, in Judaism, prayer is no less an effective "medicine" to achieve healing than any physical pill or treatment. If prayer is a recognized and legitimate Jewish "medicine," it becomes increasingly difficult to define specifically what conventional medicine is and what constitutes alternative medicine from a Jewish perspective. Since all healing comes from G-d anyway, what difference does it make if the medicine is officially sanctioned by doctors who have a license or not? If we define medicine as "anything that is used to cure, halt, or prevent disease, or ease symptoms," then how does Judaism differentiate between conventional and alternative medicines?

Perhaps we can define conventional medicine as constituting only those remedies whose *modus operandi* scientists and doctors can understand precisely (i.e., how they work to heal the body), while alternative medicines are those treatments whose ability to heal is not well understood. But if this were the major distinction between the two forms of medicine, then many common remedies like Statin (which is used to lower cholesterol), as well as Lithium and Tylenol, are examples of medicines that doctors still do not know exactly how they work, so they would have to be classified as alternative medicines! Perhaps, then, conventional medicines are simply those approved by the FDA (Federal Drug Administration) and licensed doctors are permitted to use them, while alternative medicines have not been approved. However, this distinction is also a fuzzy and artificial one, since many new medicines and practices used by doctors around the world today were originally not sanctioned and authorized for years until official approval came after testing, and now they are recognized as conventional medicine. Thus, today's "alternative" medicine may actually be tomorrow's conventional medicine. Therefore, simply defining the term "alternative medicine" is indeed difficult. From a Jewish perspective as well, it is a challenge to define what is "conventional" and what is "alternative" if they both seem to work in healing ailments. Yet, as we will see later on, for purposes of Jewish law, we will indeed have to make this distinction at some point.

THE NEED FOR DOCTORS FROM A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

⁵ Maimonides Hilchot Deot 3:3, 4:23

⁶ Exodus 15:26

⁷ Daily Shemoneh Esreh, Blessing #10

If G-d indeed does all the healing, why have doctors at all? Why not simply pray to G-d every time someone is sick and G-d will either answer the prayer and heal the patient or not? This philosophically sound argument is the actual practice of some religious groups such as Christian Scientists and Jehovah Witnesses who shun doctors and rely only on G-d for healing. This theological question was also asked by the Talmud,⁸ and it answers that had G-d not sanctioned doctors with a specific verse permitting them to practice medicine,⁹ perhaps Judaism also would not have permitted doctors to heal as this would have been a realm left exclusively to the Almighty. In fact, several well-known commentaries write¹⁰ that in an ideal world, Jews would indeed pray and rely on G-d's mercy and not need doctors. People who were ill would go to the prophets, not doctors, for healing, since all sickness is derived from our misdeeds and G-d's consequent non-protection, and only G-d can ultimately cure any malady. However, since most people today are not on the high spiritual level required to be healed directly by G-d, people require doctors for healing, and G-d specifically desires doctors to be part of the process of treatment. In the same sense, it is similar to man's obligation to help poor people. One could simply ask that if G-d wanted to eliminate poverty, He could see to it that poor people were given adequate funds to live. But just as G-d put poor people in the world specifically with the intention that Jews (and others) should give them money to remove their poverty, G-d also desires that qualified physicians be part of the process of healing, since He causes (most) of sickness today (see chapter "How Much G-d, How Much US?" for an expansion of this theme.)

Therefore, anyone with the necessary knowledge (or a physician's license) is now not only permitted to treat the sick, but is obligated to heal, since a Jew may not stand by when someone else is hurting and can be helped. Moreover, there is an additional commandment to return lost objects to someone. Good health is considered something that a doctor can return or restore to his or her patient.¹¹ Since the Torah "allows" doctors to heal and serve as a messenger of G-d, Nachmanides¹² and others say it is an obligation and commandment for doctors to be part of G-d's process of helping. Thus, the Talmud¹³ naturally assumes that a sick person should go to a physician to be healed, and it says that when someone is bitten by a snake, his first response should be to go to a doctor. The Code of Jewish Law thus rules¹⁴ that it is not only "allowed" for a Jew to be a doctor, but it is an obligation to heal – so much so, that if a doctor refuses to treat a patient, it is as if that doctor is guilty of murder. Thus, physicians are needed for their role in the process of healing, but Judaism (and observant doctors) nevertheless believes that all healing comes from G-d.

DEFINING CONVENTIONAL DOCTORS, MEDICINE & ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE IN JUDAISM

⁸ Bava Kama 85a

⁹ Exodus 21:19

¹⁰ Turei Zahav 1, on Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 336, based on Nachmanides's commentary to Leviticus 26:11

¹¹ Leviticus 19:16, Deuteronomy 22:1-2

¹² Nachmanides, Torat HaAdam 6

¹³ Yoma 83b

¹⁴ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 336:1

In discussing doctors, Shulchan Aruch adds¹⁵ that the doctor who is obligated to heal in Judaism is only someone who is officially recognized by a Jewish court as having specific expertise in healing (there were no licenses for doctors in the 1500's). Thus, Shulchan Aruch mandates that Jews go only to doctors who are approved by the Jewish community (through the courts) as conventional doctors prescribing conventional medicines. He then adds that those people who claim to be doctors but are not recognized by the Jewish courts and their communities who then administer medicines (alternative medicine?) run the risk of being sued and must pay damages if their non-conventional remedies do not work or if they cause additional sickness. However, a recognized conventional doctor in the Jewish community who acted in good faith cannot be sued and is not obligated to pay damages if his remedy does not work or if he or she causes further sickness. (This explains the double verb in the Torah verse "heal, you shall be healed" to emphasize that recognized doctors should try to heal and cannot be held responsible for lack of success if they treated in good faith.)

It is important to note that even conventional doctors who are recognized by the courts are not deemed to be omniscient and infallible in their medical expertise. Already in the 1300's, Rivash said that the Torah and its ideas trump all the knowledge of doctors, and not the other way around.¹⁶ The nineteenth century Chatam Sofer was much more practical. He writes¹⁷ that the most important aspect in evaluating the effectiveness of a doctor is experience and examination of the results. If a medication works and is effective in lessening symptoms or accomplishes healing, then that is evidence that the medicine and doctor are effective. He does not distinguish between conventional and alternative medicines in this regard. If it works, it is valid.

The rabbis also recognized that the science of medicine is constantly changing and is fluid both in knowledge and remedies. Thus, a doctor in any era can heal based only on the knowledge that is available in that time period. Just like the Torah says that we must consult the rabbis "in that generation" for Jewish law, so, too, we must consult and rely on only the reputable doctors we have in each generation. On this verse, the Talmud asks,¹⁸ "Can we ask other rabbis who are not from the generation?" It answers that the Torah is teaching us that we must rely on those leaders (and, hence, doctors) that we have, that G-d provided for us, realizing that they may be fallible. Therefore, though today's alternative medicine may indeed turn out to be the next generation's conventional medications, we can only use the valid knowledge that we have currently and the doctors recognized today as the "experts," even with all their fallibilities. As Rabbi Kook, Chief Rabbi of Israel who lived in the 20th century wrote, "Which human being is bold enough to claim that he understands how the physical and spiritual forces of a human being work, as well as all the forces in the world that affect the human body?"¹⁹

Because they recognized that doctors are not omniscient and perfect in their abilities to heal, the rabbis often trusted the instincts of a patient more than doctors, even

¹⁵ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 336:1

¹⁶ Responsa Rivash 447

¹⁷ Responsa Chatam Sofer, Section 2, Yoreh Deah 45

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 26:3, Rosh Hashana 25b

¹⁹ Olat Re-iyah 1:290

when these instincts and feelings were contraindicated by the physicians or when they disagreed with the therapy and prescriptions recommended by the doctors. Therefore, in the 1500's Rabbi David ben Zimra ruled that if a patient wanted to eat a certain food that the doctor said would hurt him or her, we listen to the patient, based on the verse in Proverbs that the heart of a person understands the soul/body best.²⁰ Similarly, Jewish law rules²¹ that if a sick person feels that he or she has to eat on Yom Kippur (to alleviate pain or symptoms), even if a hundred doctors say that eating is not necessary or even that this food will cause the patient further damage in the estimation of doctors, we allow the patient to eat on Yom Kippur and violate the Torah's prohibition. Thus, we clearly see that Judaism does not view even conventional doctors as all-knowing in treatments, and flawless in their medical practice. On the other hand, when it comes to possible life-threatening situations that would violate Shabbat, when two doctors disagree or even when the patient disagrees with the doctor, we always follow the more lenient view that tends towards saving life even if it violates the Shabbat.²² This again points to the uncertainty in the field of medicine (which still exists today), and it is recognized in Judaism that doctors often disagree on a specific course of treatment or medication, and that a doctor's belief in following a certain medical path cannot always be trusted. The passage further says that sometimes we follow the patient's wishes and violate Shabbat simply to make the patient feel better, a placebo effect (like putting out the light so that the patient can sleep if he or she requests it), since Judaism recognizes that the psychological state of the patient often influences his or her medical state.

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE AND PRACTICES THAT ARE FORBIDDEN IN JUDAISM

In the Torah, there were many "experts" who claimed that they could cure disease and sickness using ways and methods that did not involve standard medical practices. What all of these practices had in common was that these individuals believed they possessed a power to heal that came from someplace other than G-d. Therefore, all these "alternative therapies" (as outlined in the Torah) which are based on a belief in other powers, such as idols, are forbidden. Although we no longer have the same deep desire to worship idols today, Judaism still believes that anytime some other power than G-d is claimed or may be involved, that practice is forbidden. Thus, healing by using witchcraft is forbidden in the Torah, as is the healing by a wizard, relying on omens, astrology, (stick) divination, mediums or illusions to provide a cure.²³

The Talmud and later commentaries define precisely the nature of each of these practices for medical cures which are forbidden by the Torah but were very common in earlier eras. For example, the Talmud²⁴ argues about the exact nature of a *Me-onen*, which, believe it or not, was very popular then as a provider of cures that people believed in. Some used witchcraft, others used astrological calculations and still others created illusions that were complete fakes. But, all attributed their "curative powers" to other forces than G-d, and that is why all these methods are forbidden to be used by Jews.

²⁰ Responsa Radbaz 4:66, Proverbs 14:10

²¹ Maimonides, Hilchot Shevitat He-Asor 2:8, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 618:3 and Magen Avraham commentary

²² Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 328:10-11

²³ Exodus 25:17, Leviticus 20:27, Deuteronomy 18:9-12

²⁴ Sanhedrin 65b and Rashi commentary

Another Talmudic passage talks about the use of demons and sorcery to cure sickness.²⁵ Some “healers” claimed to help others by using “ventriloquism” to contact the dead, where parts of the body other than the mouth spoke, and these are also forbidden.²⁶ This included those “experts” who spoke from joints in their bodies, put a bone in their mouths to speak to the dead, soothsayers who used skulls, spent the night in a cemetery to call up the dead, etc. And, yet, when Rabbi Chanina and Rabbi Oshia used the Book of Creation (*Sefer Yetzira*) to actually create a calf (and eat it) each Shabbat, this was permitted. Why? Although they used “alternative methods,” they did not believe in or use forces other than G-d.²⁷

Some occult practices were indeed used by Rabbis and Jewish leaders who summoned other-worldly forces, which is a phenomenon we cannot fathom today. The Talmud recounts²⁸ that when King David dug pits, a force emerged from the nether world that would have submerged the planet had King David not sung the fifteen Psalms (Songs of Ascent) to prevent this from happening. That same passage speaks about writing G-d’s special (ineffable) Name on a shard of clay, which would cause that destructive force to subside. The Talmud accepts these forces, which we cannot fathom today, as real and impacting the world.

There seems to be some disagreement among later commentaries about whether the reason not to allow all of these occult practices in healing is that they call upon powers other than G-d, or simply because they are utter nonsense that has no effect at all in healing. Maimonides clearly says that all of these practices are mere foolishness that unlearned Jews sometimes believe in, but are forbidden nonetheless.²⁹ Sefer Hachinuch agrees with this approach, calling these practices falsehoods that can sway Jews away from true belief in G-d³⁰.

When it comes to Jewish law, Shulchan Aruch³¹ certainly decries and forbids these practices in general, but when it involves actual medical emergencies, he sometimes allows these practices for various legitimate and/or questionable reasons. Therefore, after he forbids all kinds of remedies using occult practices, three paragraphs later, he states that if a person was bitten by a snake, that person is permitted to use incantations to try to help the wound, even on Shabbat. Why? If the person will relax by thinking that this helps (the placebo effect), it is permitted even though it does not help in reality.³² But within one paragraph he writes two diametrically opposed statements.³³ First he says that anyone who pronounces incantations over a wound and then spits and reads a verse from the Torah loses his share in the World to Come for that forbidden act. Afterwards he says that if it is a case where a person’s life is in danger, everything of this nature is permitted. Thus, while forbidding the actions, he does give some credence to their

²⁵ Sanhedrin 67b

²⁶ Mishna, Sanhedrin 7:7

²⁷ Sanhedrin 65b

²⁸ Sukkah 53b

²⁹ Maimonides, Hilchot Ovdai Kochavim 11:16

³⁰ Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah 249

³¹ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 189:3

³² Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 189: 6

³³ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 189:8

medical value if he permits them when there is a possible loss of life. But then again, in the next paragraph, he writes that for a child who was hurt, it is forbidden to read Torah verses to make him healthier and also forbidden to place a Torah scroll over the child to heal him.³⁴ Thus, the ambivalence in the use of these “alternative medical practices” is evident even within Jewish law.

UNTESTED ALTERNATIVE MEDICINES THAT ARE PERMITTED IN JUDAISM

In the Torah we see that Moses used an unconventional cure to heal the people suffering from a plague. When Jews began dying in some kind of epidemic as a result of their sins, Moses and Aaron took incense and placed it on the Altar, which immediately stopped the plague in which 14,700 Jews died.³⁵ Therefore, we already see in the Torah that sometimes unexplainable but sanctioned cures alleviated a desperate medical condition, which we might today call “alternative medicine.”

The Mishna discusses the use of certain “alternative medicines” popular in Mishnaic times, and there is a fundamental argument between Rabbi Meir and the rest of the Sages about their use.³⁶ In order to prevent illness, many thought that carrying or wearing the egg of a certain type of locust, a fox’s tooth or a nail from the coffin of a convict would keep a person healthy. All of these do not fall under the forbidden laws of the occult mentioned above in the Torah, but are merely practices that were popular at the time of the Mishna. Rabbi Meir permitted people to have these for medical reasons, while the Sages forbade these practices as “the ways of Amorites” – i.e., forbidden practices or customs of non-Jews. The Talmud then makes a statement which is the basic guide to how Judaism views alternative medicines and their use. It says³⁷ that if these practices are effective in keeping people healthy or healing sickness, then they are not considered “ways of Amorites” and are permitted. However, if these strange practices are not effective, then they are considered “Amorite practices” that are forbidden. Therefore, we see that any alternative medical practices that yield verifiable results to improve health or minimize sickness are permitted in Judaism, as long as they do not violate any Jewish laws. The Talmud goes on to list³⁸ which actions at that time were permitted and which were forbidden as “Amorite practices.” To the twenty-first century eye, all of these look strange and ineffective. Yet apparently, some of these treatments did work to minimize pain and sickness and were therefore permitted by the rabbis, and they are permitted in Judaism today as well. These strange practices (that we might consider “nonsense” by today’s standards) also bothered Maimonides, the scientist who lived about a thousand years after the Mishna was written. He explains³⁹ that though these “medications” seem strange to us, they indeed proved effective at that time, and were therefore allowed and were even encouraged to be used. Perhaps this also explains why Shulchan Aruch, cited above, permitted a certain incantation that healed the person bitten by the snake in a life-threatening situation. If it worked, then it was permitted.

³⁴ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 189:9

³⁵ Numbers 17:14-14

³⁶ Mishna Shabbat 6:10

³⁷ Shabbat 67a

³⁸ Shabbat 67a

³⁹ Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed 3:37

Based on the above, today's alternative medicines would be permitted in Judaism, if all three of these conditions are present: (a) they heal pain or sickness, or prevent sickness in a verifiable, consistent manner (b) they do not cause any additional pain or damage to the body, and (c) they do not violate other Jewish laws.

AMULETS

Since earliest times, man has tried to protect himself from misfortune by the use of objects which he considered holy or otherwise potent. One of the ways of doing this was to keep the object close to his person, frequently wearing it as an article of clothing, or as an ornament. The use of inscription as a means to ward off evil spirits stems from a belief in the holiness and power of words. Jews also frequently used amulets and they are often mentioned in Talmudic literature. There were two kinds of amulets used by Jews – one made from roots and one with words inside.⁴⁰

Jews apparently used amulets throughout the ages to maintain their health and ward off evil, and this practice was sanctioned by the rabbis. The Tosefta distinguishes between two kinds of amulets – those “proven” to be effective and those of questionable effectiveness – and says that those proven effective (three times or more) could be used even on Shabbat.⁴¹ However, one had to be careful in wearing an amulet on Shabbat as an ornament lest it appear like jewelry, which was forbidden. This sentiment was also echoed both in the Babylonian Talmud⁴² and the Jerusalem Talmud.⁴³ The Talmud even inquires⁴⁴ whether amulets have holiness, and debates the issue, as the implication of holiness would determine whether they are permitted in the bathroom and whether one tries to save them from a fire.

Post-Talmudic authorities debated the efficacy of amulets. Rashba, who lived in the 13th century, allowed the manufacture and use of amulets as long as they were proven to work and they did not contradict any of the specific “Amorite ways” listed in the Tosefta.⁴⁵ Maimonides, who lived around the time of the Rashba, seems to be conflicted about this issue. In one place he strongly condemns the practice,⁴⁶ especially the adding of words and incantations to Mezuzot in order to further protect homes from evil. (This practice seemed to negate the belief in the efficacy of the biblically mandated Mezuzot to do so.) On the other hand, Maimonides follows the Talmudic passage⁴⁷ that says that once proven effective three times, an amulet is considered a “professional amulet” and may even be used on Shabbat to heal a patient whose sickness is not life threatening. Maimonides thus recognizes that amulets may be used even on Shabbat, providing their

⁴⁰ Shabbat 61a

⁴¹ Tosefta Shabbat 4:9

⁴² Shabbat 61a

⁴³ Jerusalem Talmud 36a

⁴⁴ Shabbat 61b

⁴⁵ Responsa Rashba, 1:167

⁴⁶ Maimonides, Hilchot Tefillin 5:4

⁴⁷ Shabbat 61a

effectiveness was previously proven.⁴⁸ The Shulchan Aruch also shows ambivalence concerning amulets⁴⁹ by on the one hand permitting the use of an amulet (only as a preventative for sickness, and not as medication for healing a sick person), but on the other hand stating that amulets with words or verses in them are forbidden.

In modern times, the Kabbalistic movement and some Sephardic communities have made the use of amulets very popular, up until today. However, many Ashkenazi rabbis took a dim view of amulets as mere “magic” that may or may not have any effectiveness. Like the use of alternative medicine in Judaism, amulets would certainly be permitted to either prevent or cure sickness under the same conditions: (a) the user does not believe that any other power than G-d is alleviating or preventing the medical condition (b) Jewish laws are not violated (we will discuss below when certain laws of Shabbat can or cannot be violated regarding amulets) and (c) they cause no harm to the person.

AYIN HARA – EVIL EYE

Any person who knows Yiddish or even just a few Yiddish expressions, is familiar with the expression “*K’neiyna Hara*” (or a similar pronunciation of that expression), which is used whenever speaking about something good or that one is proud of. These words actually are “*Kneged Ayin Hara*” – which are intended to be used against or to prevent the Evil Eye. Even people who do not believe in the occult or amulets use this expression regularly. While it is not strictly speaking an “alternative medicine,” fighting off the evil eye seems to be something very mainstream to Judaism, and it is regarded as keeping Jews healthy and joyous. What exactly is it? How does it work? And how do Jews prevent it from harming them?

This concept is much more prevalent in Judaism than one might think. There are two narratives in the Torah that involve the concept of *Ayin Hara*. When the ten sons of Jacob went down to Egypt to buy food during the famine, Rashi explains that Jacob commanded each brother to enter Egypt through a separate entrance. What was his purpose in saying this? So that the Evil Eye should not be cast upon them, which might occur were they to enter together.⁵⁰ This explanation is based on the Midrash which says that because they were especially strong and attractive, the brothers should not gather in one place lest the *Ayin Hara* be cast upon them.⁵¹ When Bilaam tried to curse the Jewish people and he gazed at them, Rashi says he tried to cast the Evil Eye upon them.⁵² The mystical book, the Zohar, explains⁵³ that Bilaam had this special power of being able to cast the Evil Eye upon people and cause them harm. What does this signify? How does the Evil Eye or *Ayin Hara* work?

⁴⁸ Maimonides, Hilchot Shabbat 19:14

⁴⁹ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 189:12

⁵⁰ Genesis 42:5 with Rashi commentary

⁵¹ Midrash, Bereishit Rabbah 91:6

⁵² Numbers 24:2 with Rashi commentary

⁵³ Zohar 1:68b

When the Mishna in Ethics of the Fathers explains that a person should have the quality of an *Ayin Tova*-Good Eye and not an *Ayin Hara*-Evil Eye,⁵⁴ this usually signifies that a person should be generous and not be stingy in how he treats and relates to others. Rabbeinu Yonah explains⁵⁵ that this element of stinginess is derived when someone is jealous of the good that others have. When the jealous person has this *Ayin Hara*-Evil Eye feeling against another person's success, this causes Heaven to take away the good from the person who feels jealous, but it also sometimes results in the removal of the bountiful gifts that the other person enjoys. But why and how does it work that jealousy can cause harm to a person who did nothing wrong?

Apparently, when people are judged on Rosh Hashana, which determines their worldly goods and other benefits for that year, they are judged with mercy. When someone "casts an Evil Eye" on someone else through jealousy, it causes Heaven to "take a second look" at this person and judge him or her again, but this time more objectively. If the person is not deserving of the gifts he or she enjoys, it is possible that Heaven will decide at that point to remove some or all of these intended gifts. That is why Jacob made sure that his handsome and strong sons should not stand together in one place. Perhaps Heaven would see this gathering and question whether Jacob deserves such a large and blessed family. Bilaam tried to cause G-d to judge the Jewish people once again in a stricter manner, but he failed. Today, Jews use the expression "*Kneiyna Hara*" whenever they are expressing pride in something or a special gift from G-d. That, in effect, signifies that Jews are asking G-d not to look at their situation and judge them again more harshly. Thus, Jews should not do anything that will draw attention to themselves and cause G-d to "take a second look" at them. So, for example, when people ask how many grandchildren or great-grandchildren one has, some people refuse to answer with a specific number, in order not to invite the *Ayin Hara* so that G-d will not re-judge them and consider taking away one of those children. The same is true when speaking about a person's wealth, or anything else that is good in a person's life. A Jew should simply not call attention to any benefits in his or her life.

Now we can understand the numerous examples of *Ayin Hara* described in the Talmud: For example, a person should not stand in the middle of a friend's field when the crops are in full growth because he may admire the bounty of his friend and that can bring the Evil Eye, says Rashi.⁵⁶ In another passage,⁵⁷ The Talmud says that when the Land of Israel was divided into portions for the different tribes and some Jews did not get any or enough land (for legitimate reasons), they should not complain because it would bring the *Ayin Hara* – i.e., it might cause G-d to take away land from others who did receive a more favorable portion. In another passage⁵⁸ it says that a Jew trading in business as a wholesaler will have difficulty increasing his sales because he deals with such large quantities that he calls attention to himself, and the Evil Eye is upon this person.

⁵⁴ Mishna Avot 2:11

⁵⁵ Rabbeinu Yonah commentary on Mishna Avot 2:11

⁵⁶ Bava Batra 2b with Rashi commentary

⁵⁷ Bava Batra 118a

⁵⁸ Pesachim 50b

This idea of *Ayin Hara*-Evil Eye is so ubiquitous in Judaism that in their daily morning prayer, one of the things that Sephardic Jews ask of G-d is to ensure that the Evil Eye does not touch them.⁵⁹ This idea also impacts Jewish law. Even though there is technically nothing forbidden in the practice, the Shulchan Aruch rules⁶⁰ that two brothers should not be called to the Torah one after the other or that a son should not directly follow his father for an Aliyah (honor of being called) to the Torah and vice versa because this will draw the Evil Eye. What does it signify? By drawing attention to a large and blessed family, it may draw the *Ayin Hara*. For the same reason, a parent should not name two children with the same name, as it may draw the *Ayin Hara* and cause G-d to re-judge the family.⁶¹ Similarly, two grooms celebrating their wedding in the synagogue on the same Shabbat should make only one special blessing for grooms (together), instead of two separate blessings.⁶²

What about today? We have seen that the Evil Eye in Judaism is much more than an “old wives’ tale,” and is part of mainstream Jewish law. But do we really have to worry each moment and in each of our actions about inviting the Evil Eye and G-d’s harsh judgment that will cause us great pain? Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef was asked⁶³ about two brothers marrying two sisters, which Rabbi Yehuda HaChasid said is forbidden because it draws attention to the families and to the Evil Eye. Rabbi Yosef answered that because many rabbis in the Talmud and even later married the sister of the brother’s wife and nothing happened to them, one need not worry about the Evil Eye in this specific case. He adds that today, the impact and worry about the *Ayin Hara*-Evil Eye is far less than in the past. If the *Ayin Hara* does bother you, however, you should be careful not to do anything that would invite it to call attention to you. But if you are not bothered by this, then you need not worry about the *Ayin Hara*-Evil Eye today. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein wrote something similar.⁶⁴ You should, in general, worry about the potential effects of the *Ayin Hara*-Evil Eye, but not too much. And if you are not bothered by it, it cannot have an effect upon you.

WHEN/IF ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE CAN BE USED EVEN IF VIOLATING JEWISH LAW

Until now, we have discussed the permissibility of using alternative medicines in Judaism when no Jewish law is violated in the process. However, if the only way to use a certain alternative medicine means that a Jew has to violate Halacha, would that alternative treatment still be permitted? Does its medicinal value override Jewish law because saving a patient’s life or healing a sickness is paramount and generally overrides other Jewish laws, or perhaps, since this treatment is essentially untested, it can be used only as long as other Jewish laws are not desecrated and no harm comes to the patient? As is often the case in Judaism, there is an argument among the rabbis about this issue.

⁵⁹ Sephardic Prayer book, Daily prater following the Morning Blessings

⁶⁰ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 141:6, with Mishna Berurah commentary

⁶¹ Pitchei Teshuva, Yoreh Deah 116

⁶² Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 62:3

⁶³ Responsa Yabia Omer, Section 4, Even Ha-Ezer 10

⁶⁴ Responsa Igrot Moshe, Even Ha-Ezer 3:26

The Mishna discusses a case where someone was bitten by a rabid dog (this is before the era of tetanus shots) and the only remedy was feeding him the liver of that dog, which is clearly not Kosher and a violation of Jewish law. Is it permitted or not permitted to feed the patient this non-Kosher food to heal that sick person? The Tanna Kama (first opinion in the Mishna) says that it is forbidden to do so, but Rabbi Matya permits it.⁶⁵ Rashi explains⁶⁶ that according to the first opinion, even though some doctors may use this as treatment, that dog's liver is not a *Refuah Gemura*, a proven and effective medication – i.e., it may work sometimes, but not always. Rabbi Matya argues and says this treatment is indeed a proven and a tested remedy for this particular disease. On this Mishna, Maharam ben Chaviv asks the obvious question:⁶⁷ since we know that one may violate even the laws of Shabbat, which is a very serious sin, in order to save lives, why would the first rabbi in the Mishna not allow this treatment where a life is possibly in danger? He answers that this treatment with a dog's liver has no effect at all and has no medical value whatsoever. Therefore, it is forbidden to use this as a medicine because it violates Jewish law and it will never save lives or benefit anyone.

Maimonides agrees with this assessment⁶⁸ and says Jewish law does not follow Rabbi Matya because this treatment does not help medically but only helps as an unproven and mystical treatment (or alternative medicine). One may only violate Jewish law for a proven medical treatment that has been tested and found effective. Thus, Jewish laws of *Kashrut* (a food's status as Kosher) and Shabbat may not be violated for this unproven, alternative medicine. Radbaz then asks⁶⁹ how is it that we may violate any Jewish law when even the remotest chance of saving a life is involved, but may not use this experimental or alternative medicine which may, in some fashion, help save the bitten (or sick) person? He answers that we have to differentiate between a doubt regarding the saving of a life and a doubt regarding the medicine's effectiveness. Indeed, it is permitted to use any proven medicine and violate Jewish law when there is even the remotest chance of saving a life, but a doubt regarding the efficacy of the medicine itself never allows a Jew to violate Torah law on the outside chance it might work this time. Tiferet Yisrael agrees with this assessment,⁷⁰ and in their codifications of Jewish law, both Rabbi Isserles and Magen Avraham clearly state that the medication must be proven to be effective in order for it to be used in violation of Jewish law.⁷¹

But there seems to be another side to the story and another opinion in Jewish law. Rashba stresses that because of the possible danger to life, even an untested amulet may be used to heal, and one may even write such an amulet on Shabbat since possible loss of life is involved.⁷² Thus, Rashba argues with Maimonides and with the above

⁶⁵ Mishna Yoma 8:6

⁶⁶ Rashi commentary to Mishna Yoma 8:6

⁶⁷ Tosafot Yom HaKippurim, Yoma 83a

⁶⁸ Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishna Yoma 8:6

⁶⁹ Responsa Radbaz 5:153

⁷⁰ Tiferet Yisrael on Yoma, Mishna 8:6

⁷¹ Rema, Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 155:3, Magen Avraham on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 328

⁷² Responsa Rashba 4:245

premise, and says that when the illness is that serious, even untested and unproven alternative medication may be used if it showed some effectiveness in the past, since when it comes to saving human life almost anything (including violating Shabbat) may be done to save it. Pri Megadim agrees⁷³ with Rashba and questions how Rema could have said that alternative medicines that are unproven cannot be used when a person is very sick. He concludes that Rema's prohibition must have been referring to a sick person who is not in any danger of loss of life. But for a truly sick person, Shabbat and other Jewish laws may indeed be violated with an experimental or mystical medication.

The later authorities and rabbis have basically echoed one of these two positions regarding actual cases that have been presented recently. On one side is Maimonides who says that unproven medicines and alternative treatments are forbidden when their use violates Shabbat since they have not been vetted medically and their effectiveness is questionable (so one may not violate Shabbat or any other Torah law in order to use them). On the other side are Rashba and Nachmanides who say that one may use any medical treatment, including alternative medicine, and even violate Shabbat and other Torah laws when a sick person's life may possibly be in danger. In the 1700's Rabbi Yosef David Azulai was asked about a person who wrote an amulet on Shabbat to help save someone's life.⁷⁴ Although he is sympathetic to the situation and does cite those rabbis who permit such an action, he rules like Maimonides that using unproven and mystical medications which violate Shabbat is not permitted, even when a sick person's life may be in danger. Rabbi Moshe Sofer takes the opposite view regarding a Kohen-Priest who is ill and would become ritually impure⁷⁵ (which is a Torah violation) if he takes an amulet to heal himself. Since possible loss of life hangs in the balance, he relies in this case of doubt on those who are more lenient, and allows the practice.

Rabbi Shlomo Kluger (early 1800's) was asked if a person can violate the Shabbat by writing a note (*Kvite!*) and traveling by vehicle to a great Tzadik-righteous man in the next city, who will pray on behalf of a sick person to recover from his sickness.⁷⁶ Since Rabbi Kluger sides with the opinion of Maimonides, he forbids the violation of Shabbat for this alternative option of prayer by a righteous man. He does, however, allow a non-Jew to do the writing and traveling on Shabbat so that this righteous man can pray for the deathly sick individual in time. Another rabbi who lived in the 1800's, Rabbi Nathanson,⁷⁷ similarly allows a non-Jew to send a telegram on Shabbat for the righteous Tzadik to pray on behalf of the sick person.

Rabbi Shmuel HaLevi Vosner, a contemporary authority, was asked about violating the laws of Passover by using homeopathic medicines containing Chametz on Passover,⁷⁸ which is essentially a variation of the same question we have been dealing with until now. He summarizes both sides of the question, and then says that until a

⁷³ Pri Megadim on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 328

⁷⁴ Responsa Birkei Yosef, Orach Chaim 301:6

⁷⁵ Responsa Chatam Sofer, Section 2, Yoreh Deah 339

⁷⁶ Responsa Uvacharta Bachaim 87

⁷⁷ Responsa Shoel Umaishiv (Tlita) 1:194

⁷⁸ Responsa Shevet HaLevi 5:55

specific medicine – conventional or alternative – is proven effective for a particular medical problem, it would be forbidden to violate Jewish law in order to use it. Finally, another contemporary posek, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, was asked simply if one is allowed to violate the Shabbat with alternative medicine in order to save the life of a sick person. As is his approach, Rabbi Yosef cites every opinion on the issue. In the end, he says that since there are strong opinions on each side of the argument, as demonstrated above, and we are left in doubt over which is correct, we side with the more lenient opinion when dealing with matters of life and death. Therefore, he permits the violation of Shabbat to administer the alternative medicine.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is “to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way.” Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and three grandchildren.