

JEWISH MEDICINE

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THE GENESIS PRIZE 2022

In January of 2022, I received an e-mail from Steve Rakitt who introduced himself as the president of the Genesis Prize Foundation. He explained that *no*, I wasn't being considered for the annual prize, but that his committee wished to discuss with me a book that I'd written back in 2006. In truth, I'd never heard of the Genesis Prize, but a quick Google search informed me that often it is referred to as "The Jewish Nobel Prize" — and that certainly got my attention!

I learned that since 2013 the purpose of this prize is "to foster Jewish identity, inspire Jewish pride and strengthen the bond between Israel and the Diaspora." It means to celebrate Jewish talent and achievement, honors individuals for their commitment to Jewish values and, hopefully, inspires other Jews to connect to their heritage. Previous Genesis Prize winners have included the likes of Michael Bloomberg, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Itzak Perlman, Michael Douglas, Natan Sharansky and Steven Spielberg and, reportedly, all of them donated the million dollar prize to good works and charity.

Mr. Rakitt told me that the 2022 prize was to be given to Albert Bourla, the Chairman and CEO of Pfizer. He is a pharmacist by training, and because Pfizer had developed an effective vaccine against Covid, honoring him made perfect sense — moreover, he was a Greek-born Jew, the son of Holocaust survivors, and he is a charitable person. But how did my book fit into this narrative?

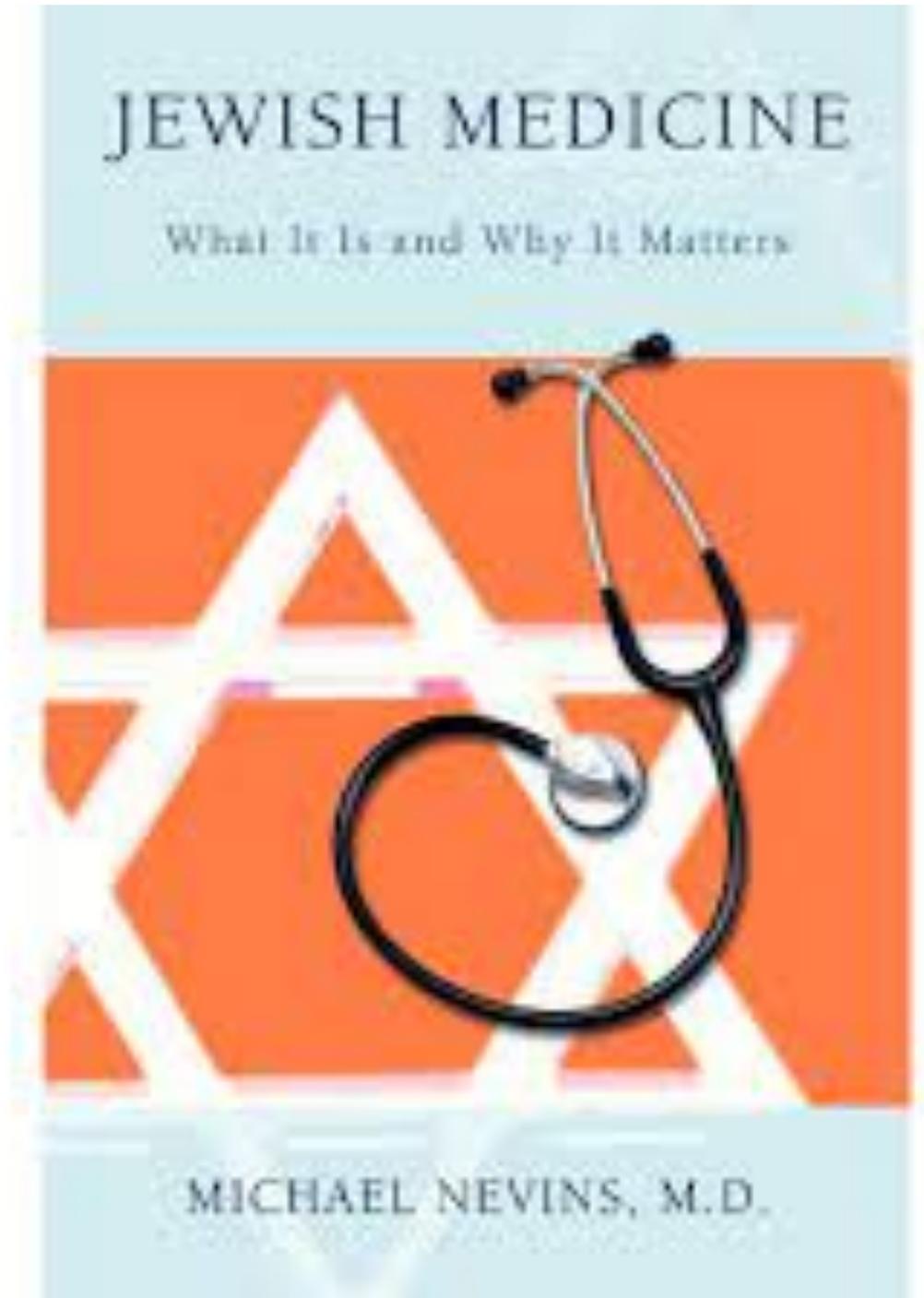
The title of my book that Steve Rakitt wished to discuss was *Jewish Medicine. What It Is and Why It Matters*. It hadn't attracted much attention when published in 2006 so I was surprised and flattered that the Genesis committee, not only had read it but found things in it that they wished to discuss. Mr. Rakitt patiently explained that each year during the gala awards ceremony which is held in Jerusalem, they project a short documentary film that relates to the honoree's field and, considering Albert Bourla's work, they wanted my input for this year's film which would be titled "Jews in Medicine." I wondered how more than two millennia of history and many millions of Jewish doctors could be summarized in a ten minute film and, sensing my dismay, Mr. Rakitt asked, "You think we're crazy don't you?"

I stammered and admitted that he was correct about that, but he seemed good-natured and said that the work already was underway and they only wanted to consult with me about a few things. So the next day we had a Zoom conference call and I made several suggestions. I thought I'd never hear from the Genesis committee again, but several months later I received an invitation to attend the gala event in Israel on June 29, 2022. Mainly out of curiosity, I accepted and arranged for my daughter to accompany me.

When the video was shown at the award ceremony, the large, well-dressed audience seemed enthusiastic but, although my name appeared in the credits, I was disappointed with the rather flashy Hollywood production that included corny Jewish doctor jokes, guaranteed to amuse. To my mind, the film essentially was a superficial sequence of photos of famous scientists with no time for contemplating the historical significance of their work. (You can watch it on You Tube and judge for yourself.)



In my opinion the producers of the video had missed the point of my book which was to distinguish between what I called “Jewish Medicine” as opposed to standard medical work. My concern had been whether there’s anything different about how Jewish physicians, past and present, practiced their trade and if so, how and why?



BLACK HOLE

I suspect that you've probably never heard the expression "Jewish Medicine" used before. Jewish Medicine? What's that? If you are Jewish, it's almost certain that there's a Jewish doctor in your family or among your friends — and even if not, you've certainly used a Jewish doctor some time or other. (No offense intended to dentists, podiatrists, Ph.Ds and the like, but when I'll refer here to "doctors," I'll be talking exclusively about physicians.) So you already know a great deal about today's subject. Right?

Well if that's true, or even if it's not, let me ask a simple question. With two exceptions — can you recall the name of a single Jewish doctor who worked *before 1900*? Relatives don't count. The two exceptions are Maimonides and Sigmund Freud — everybody's heard of them. Maimonides is a no-brainer because he lived in the 12th century, but Freud (b.1856-d.1939) is tricky because his professional career straddled the 1900 line — however, his fame came mostly during the 20th century. So repeating my challenge and with those two exceptions — can you name a single Jewish doctor who worked before 1900? I've asked this question to audiences many times and no one has ever answered correctly. Think about that. Jewish liturgy is obsessed with our past -- every year at the seder table we Jews discuss our collective history and vow never to forget. So how is it that hardly anyone today knows very much, if anything, about Jewish doctors from before the 20th century? It's like a black hole in our collective memory.

In order to fill that void, I'll be discussing here many individuals whom probably you've never heard about. In fact, if the Genesis Foundation had invited me to make a documentary film about Jews in Medicine, no doubt some of my favorites would have been included — although, admittedly, it would take far more than ten minutes. In my video I would distinguish between Jewish Doctors and Jewish Medicine and — here's a hint about what's to come — you don't necessarily have to be Jewish to practice my concept of "Jewish Medicine" which is generic — in effect, jewish medicine without the capitals.

JOINT VENTURE

When I first began reading about very early Jewish physicians, I came to recognize a consistent theme — that some of the best of them considered medical practice to be a moral obligation in which the doctor was actively guided by his Maker. Although the doctor may do the hands-on work, he is engaged in a joint venture with God. Central to Judaism is the idea that man was created in God's image and, therefore, life is sacred and man is obliged to cherish and preserve it. Since man is considered to be only a tenant in his body and not to have title, he doesn't have the right to abuse his health; in

other words, take good care of what you don't own. The familiar maxim that by saving one life you save the world and social obligations of repairing the world (*Tikun Olam*) encouraged some young people to become physicians and later to incorporate basic Jewish values in their work

One of the first Jewish physicians about whom anything is known was Asaph haRofe who lived sometime between the 3rd and 7th centuries CE probably in what today is Syria. He translated Greek medical literature into Hebrew and required his students to join him every day in reciting a covenant that closely resembled the much earlier Oath of Hippocrates. However, instead of beginning with physicians swearing to Apollo and other Gods and Goddesses, Asaph's students pledged allegiance to "the One God, the Lord of Israel and the whole world, the true healer of the sick." Medical ethics encoded in The Oath of Asaph included the sanctity and dignity of human life, opposition to superstition and irrational cures, rigid dietary restraints and sexual morality — moreover, "The Lord is with you as long as you are with Him."

Consider these lines that were written during the 12th century by the famous Spanish poet-physician Judah Halevi:

*"My medicines are of Thee whether good or evil, strong or weak.
It is Thou who shalt choose, not I....
Not upon my power of healing I rely.
Only for Thine healing do I watch."*

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

"Thou art the physician, not I. I am but as the clay in the potter's hand....I pray that I may discover the secrets of Thy wonderful deeds and that I may know the peculiar curative powers which Thou has placed in herbs and minerals...that through them I shall tell of Thy might to all generations to whom Thy greatness shall come."

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Maimonides, also known as the Rambam, believed that Torah permitted doctors to use their human intellect rather than strictly follow conventional medical norms. When Maimonides served as one of the Sultan's court physicians in Cairo, he was called "The Eagle of Physicians" but his Jewish detractors warned that his brand of rationalism was the way to moral ruin and after the Rambam's death in 1204, bitter controversy preoccupied the Mediterranean world.

Although today hardly anyone remembers their names, at certain times and places in history, Jewish doctors were ubiquitous. They were valued as skilled practitioners and during the Middle Ages dozens of popes and princes employed Jewish doctors. Naturally, this didn't please their gentile rivals and as one Franciscan monk complained, "The ecclesiastical prelates set great store by them, to such an extent that hardly one of them is to be found who does not harbor some devil of a Jew doctor." While in general Jews were reviled, Jewish doctors often were revered and sometimes feared. Martin Luther was especially outspoken:

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

Various explanations have been suggested for the phenomenon of their success. Early on some Jewish scholars had language skills that allowed them to translate and transmit classic Arabic and Greek medical texts. Perhaps it was hereditary intelligence, or innate curiosity, or maybe it reflected Jewish reverence for learning — in effect, transference of Talmudic reasoning skills to the scientific method. Jewish doctors had a reputation for being less concerned with theory than with practical results and, naturally, there was the crucial matter of economic opportunity because Jews were banned from other ways of making a living.

Although most of us probably wouldn't be proud about it today, there also may have been a bit of Black Magic involved. Moreover, some historians believe that the so-called "great art" of alchemy was introduced during the second century AD by a woman who was called "Maria the Jewess." Those were superstitious times

and Kabbalists claimed to know incantations related to health and were believed to be expert in avoiding the Evil Eye which added to their mystique. It's been estimated that some 500 years ago, half the physicians in Europe were Jewish; at about the same time, about half of the best known Jewish thinkers also happened to be physicians by trade — indeed many Jewish doctors also were rabbis or religious scholars.

JEW DOCTOR

There was a legend about the 16th century French King Francis I that illustrates my point — this was the same Francois Premier who brought Leonardo and the Mona Lisa to France. Not only was he a patron of the arts but, as described in a delightful short story by Balzac (“The Continenence of King Francis”) he was a first class lecher. It seems that the king also was a hypochondriac who suffered from a chronic ailment that his court doctors couldn't cure and considering his predilections, it may have been syphilis.

So Francis sent a courier to Spain with a message for the Holy Roman Emperor King Charles V, who happened to be his cousin and frequent battlefield rival. In the message Francis pleaded with cousin Charles to send his best “Jew Doctor.” And when this Jew Doctor arrived at the French court, in order to break the ice the King joked, “Aren't you tired of waiting for the Messiah to come?” But the Spanish doctor wasn't amused because he happened to be a *converso* — a New Christian — and he indignantly replied that he no longer was Jewish but now believed in “the true God.”

Well that *wasn't* what the king wanted to hear and, without another word, he dismissed the imposter and sent to Constantinople for a *real* Jew doctor. When the new man arrived, he prescribed his most potent medicine — no, not chicken soup (“Jewish penicillin”) — but donkey's milk! and, it was reported that King Francis was cured. The story seems to have been reasonably authentic because it was written less than a century after the event. I confess that I do have some doubts about the treatment.

A FACE IN THE CROWD

My friend and colleague Dr. Jeffrey Levine has long been fascinated by the life and works of the 16th century anatomist Andreas Vesalius. In particular, he's intrigued by minute visual details contained in Vesalius's famous atlas that is familiarly known as the *Fabrica* that scholars acknowledge was a crowning intellectual achievement that helped launch the Renaissance. This vast work was printed in 1543 when the 28 year old Vesalius was only two years out of Padua's medical school and already its professor of anatomy.



Dr. Levine suggested to me that an obscure bearded figure who appears in the background on the *Fabrica*'s lavishly illustrated title page may have been a Jewish doctor friend of Vesalius and, intrigued by this possibility, I decided to investigate. Can you find him above? Below Dr. Levine has provided color to highlight the "Jew Doctor", in the crowd, but who is the guy next to him? What's going on here? Is this a friendly exchange?



On the title page Vesalius was shown dissecting a female cadaver in an elaborate public theater while surrounded by a motley crowd of ninety gawkers. Vesalius was known to meticulously plan every detail so there was nothing haphazard about this scene. Indeed, it was typical of medieval art for coded sometimes forbidden messages to be inserted, so perhaps hidden in plain sight there may have been features hidden here that reflected conditions in 16th century Italy.

The bearded man wearing a cylindrical hat appears troubled either by what he is witnessing or, perhaps, by what his neighbor is saying to him. Scholars have suggested that he was Lazarus de Frigeis (alt. Lazarro Hebraeo Frigeis, Lazari Ebreo, Lazaro Freschi) a Jewish physician, who taught Vesalius the Hebrew words for certain bones. Vesalius described him as ‘a distinguished Jewish physician.’ In medieval paintings Jews often were depicted as animals but this individual appears as an equal among the others and wears no distinguishing badges to mark him as a Jew. During the 15th and 16th centuries in relatively tolerant Padua, some Jews developed social relationships with gentiles and although public friendship between Vesalius and Lazarus de Frigeis might have been risky, it wouldn’t necessarily have been remarkable.

At the very same time that these two friends were studying Avicenna together, Lazarus was in the process of becoming a New Christian, or *converso*. After his conversion, probably in 1550, he changed his name to Giovanni Battista de’ Freschi Olivi. During this same period the Venetian Inquisition was heating up and shortly after Giovanni converted, he was living outside the ghetto and was granted additional privileges that were afforded Christian physicians.

In his new identity Lazarus/Giovanni became a virulent Jew-hater and participated in a Venetian commission which on October 21, 1553 burned more than a thousand copies of the Talmud and other holy books. Giovanni’s contribution was to advise the commission about what blasphemous books, in addition to the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, should be heaped on the fire. The former Lazarus de Frigeis boasted, “I have persecuted those blasphemies and insults that are contained in the books of the Jews, and will go on so doing as long as I live...taking no account of danger, enmity, retaliation or injuries to my body.”

When a second edition of the *Fabrica* was published in 1555, the figure of the bearded man remained in place, albeit looking rather wild-eyed, but now in the accompanying text, when describing Lazarus de Frigeis Vesalius dropped the phrase “a distinguished Jewish physician” referring to him only as his “close friend.” Indeed, when Lazarus/Giovanni died, sometime before 1560, he was not buried amidst the Jewish community who considered him to be a turncoat – a hostile enemy of his people.

So now we can imagine the likely interchange between the bearded man and his neighbor on the *Fabrica*’s title page: “Jew. Who allowed you in here?” “Who me? I’m not Jewish!” Just like the exchange that I’ve previously described between King Francis and the Spanish “Jew Doctor.”

Nevertheless, during the Age of Enlightenment new opportunities were emerging for Jewish doctors as their identity became congruent with the universal morality of western science. Reason became not only was the determinant of truth, but also the foundation of good behavior. God’s hand no longer seemed necessary to guide the physician and if in earlier times, religion and medicine had been in harmony, a challenge of modernity became whether the two could even coexist.

ROPHIM (HEALERS)

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, some Jews were being allowed into European medical schools, at first mostly in Padua. That wasn’t necessarily good news for some religious Jews for whom the notion of having a doctor in the family was a mark of shame (a *shanda*) -- not pride. When the Lithuanian Rabbi Israel Salanter’s son left home to study medicine, his family sat *shiva*. After all, upon entering the gentile world, a young man might shave their beards or wear worldly clothes, or violate Shabbat or, God forbid, marry a *shiksa*.

This was particularly true in rural areas of the Pale of Settlement where unschooled healers (*rophim*) who relied on empiric observation, often were the laughing stock of intelligent classes who would exaggerate their ignorance — the following story concerned a cobbler who took sick and called for the local medicine man.

The healer diagnosed a severe case of typhoid and muttered to himself “There’s no hope.” Overhearing these words, the cobbler prayed feebly to be given one last enjoyment before dying. To his taste, nothing was sweeter or more delightful than sauerkraut. Could he have a last dish? The healer agreed, the cobbler had his fill of sauerkraut and miraculously recovered. On hearing this, the healer was overjoyed and wrote in his prescription book, “A tested cure for typhoid is sauerkraut.” Soon afterward, the same healer was called to the bed of another patient, this time a tailor. Again the diagnosis was severe typhoid. Naturally, sauerkraut was prescribed but the next day the tailor was dead. Unperturbed, the healer wrote in his book, “Sauerkraut effective only under the condition that the patient is a cobbler. It will not work in case he happens to be a tailor.

To be sure, few “doctors” of any religion attended medical schools, at least as we think of them, and in the typical shtetl, if there was a “doctor” at all, probably he wasn’t a trained physician. More likely he was what was called a *feldsher* — originally meaning someone who works in the field with shears. Starting in the 13th century, the German and Swiss armies developed a class of barber surgeons who worked in the front lines — like today’s military corpsmen and in addition to cutting hair and shaving whiskers, these barbers practiced blood-letting and applied leeches or heated glass cups still called *bonkas*. By the 19th century, in rural Russia feldshers outnumbered trained physicians by two to one — sometimes by five to one — and nearly a third of them were Jewish. So if a Jewish mother in the shtetl bragged about her son the doctor — most likely, he really was a feldsher!

I once had a Christian patient whose name was Joseph Felcher. He was born in Cracow, Poland and he told me that sometimes late at night his family was awakened by loud banging on the front door and some one was shouting “Feldsher, Feldsher.” No one in the family had any medical background but -- no matter – someone had a toothache or whatever, and had seen their family’s name written outside. My patient had an uncle of this same name who when he was drafted into the Russian army, naturally, was assigned to the medical corps. He was afraid to confess that he had no medical knowledge lest they send him to the front. He rose in the ranks and eventually headed a large army hospital and was personally given a medal by Joseph Stalin. Names matter!

A WANDERING JEWISH DOCTOR

For most European Jews, when the opportunity finally presented itself, the passion previously spent on learning Talmud and Torah transferred to secular study. The “people of the book” began reading scientific texts and this provided opportunity for upward — and *outward* — mobility. But some Jewish doctors were starting to have problems resolving differences between emerging medical ideas and their religious tradition.

One such was Tuviah Cohen (alt. Tuvya HaKohen Katz, Tovia Kohn, Tobias Katz) whose personal odyssey took him throughout much of Europe and the Middle East. He practiced for decades in Constantinople in the sultans’ court and ended up living in Jerusalem. Tuviah was a transitional figure between the classical medicine of Hippocrates and Galen and scientific developments of his time and in 1707 wrote a massive book *Maaseh Tuviah* (Tuviah’s Tales) that introduced exciting new ideas to Dr. Cohen’s Jewish colleagues. The seven volume book, which went through five editions and was written in Hebrew, contained an illustration, called The House of the Body, that was an allegorical design which compared the organs of the body to the divisions of a house (below). A portrait of the author appeared on the title page and around the border Tuviah explained, “I live with my people in Constantinople and may (God) who published my thoughts grant me the honor to see Jerusalem rebuilt.”

Tuviah wrote that “medicine is a very simple science if it is practiced by charlatans but a very difficult one when practiced by a schooled physician. Those who think any kind of practice makes a good physician are sadly mistaken.” Also, he provided a caveat for other Jewish students: “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.*”

Dr. Cohen had graduated from the University of Padua where during the 16th through 18th centuries several hundred Jews (and Protestants) from all over Europe were exposed to the liberal arts, humanism and the latest advances in medical science — the likes of Copernicus, Galileo and Harvey served on the faculty and clinical medicine was taught at the bedside. Not only did Padua accept Jewish students, but it protected them from violence and other illegal measures.

They were permitted to wear the black student's beret rather than the yellow one required of other Jews, but they had to pay double for tuition and books and were required to deliver sweetmeat to Christian students at graduation. When these Jewish students returned to their homes, they'd been transformed; indeed, the Paduan experience served as a bridge for hundreds of young Jews to the best of European civilization; some remained in touch with colleagues and their far-flung network helped diffuse progressive ideas in their insular European communities.



In 1715, at age 62, Tuviah Cohen retired from the Sultan's court and moved to Jerusalem in order to spend his remaining days in quiet contemplation studying "the crowned texts" (Torah). It was terrible timing. The roughly one thousand Ashkenazic Jews then living in the Jewish quarter were being heavily taxed by corrupt Ottoman sultans and in 1720 their synagogue was burned down with forty Torah scrolls destroyed. For fourteen years Tuviah lived frugally and did what he could to help both materially and medically; as he wrote in a letter, "I try to make my house a place of assembly for the sages....[but] all I had was stolen and taken from me." He'd come to Jerusalem wealthy but died in poverty.

Markus Hertz may have followed Tuviah Cohen's advice to first fill his belly with the Holy Books, but in mid-18th century Germany he became a central figure in the Berlin Enlightenment. Hertz was both doctor and friend of Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant and in 1780 he published a "physician's prayer" which frequently has been mistakenly attributed to Maimonides. The prayer is so beautiful that it's sometimes recited at medical school graduations instead of the Hippocratic Oath. It included this line, "Oh God, Thou has chosen me to watch over the life and death of Thy creatures; I am now about to apply myself to my profession. Support me in this great task so that it may benefit mankind, for without Thee not even the least thing will succeed."

But Markus Herz had a problem. As an advocate of emerging scientific knowledge, he was skeptical of traditional religious wisdom and, like Maimonides before him, he felt that he had to make up his own mind based on personal experience. It happened that during the 1780s there'd been several well publicized cases of people seemingly rising from the dead — indeed, accurate diagnosis of death could be problematic long before the invention of stethoscopes and cardiograms — so a law was proposed that no one could be buried for at least 72 hours after death, lest the corpse might wake up.

Delayed burial was a direct violation of Jewish tradition so what was an observant Jew, even a "reformed" Jew like Markus Herz, to do? In 1787 he published a pamphlet in which he favored what seemed to be the logic of secular law — better to wait and be sure. We now know that he was wrong, but because that was an example of modifying Jewish law based on current knowledge, many rabbis were outraged. Ironically, when Dr. Herz died in 1803, he was buried without delay within three hours — reportedly, he *didn't* awake but stayed put! There were many similar examples of Jewish doctors forced to choose sides between the past and present and, increasingly, most favored medical practice based on measurable results. However, to my mind, loss of Jewish specificity was unfortunate because as modern medicine has become increasingly depersonalized the universal model of clinical practice has created new problems.

ACCOUNTING FOR THE NUMBERS

Most people are aware of the remarkable preponderance of Jews among Nobel Prize winners in medicine, but this was strictly a 20th century phenomenon and before 1900 there were virtually no significant Jewish contributions to medical science. The first Jewish winner was microbiologist Paul Ehrlich in 1908 and during the next one hundred years there were 52 more, nearly one quarter of all laureates in medicine (and physiology) from a people who constitute far less than 1% of the world's population. Amazing! Of course we should be proud of all those Jewish Laureates but in the context of this essay, it's worth pondering that almost every one of them was not religiously observant; in fact, some converted or were apostates.

Consider Karl Landsteiner who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1930 for his discovery of human blood groups. After his father died when the boy was six, his mother joined the Roman Catholic Church and the young man converted. In 1937 Landsteiner was so outraged that his name had been included in a *Who's Who in American Jewry* that he threatened a lawsuit of \$100,000 on the grounds that his 19 year old son might be shocked to discover his Jewish ancestry and subjected to humiliation. No disrespect intended and kudos to all those brilliant scientists, but my focus here is more about what occurs at the bedside than at the laboratory bench.

Many books have been written about so-called Egyptian or Chinese or Indian medicine, but until my book *Jewish Medicine. What It Is and Why It Matters*, there were none specifically discussing Jewish Medicine. To be sure, three books were published with the very same title -- "Jews AND Medicine" — but the only one without the prepositional link "and" was my book that was published in 2006.

If you were to ask me now, is there, or was there ever, a unique characteristic that warranted the designation Jewish Medicine, I would give a classic Jewish answer: "Well, yes and no" — it depends. No doubt others will disagree with my conclusion, which is fine; I'm not militant on the subject and, in fact, I'm deliberately being provocative in order to make a point. Among many others who also sensed something distinctive, in 1894 the famous German scientist Rudolf Virchow attributed Jewish success to "a hereditary talent."

Two decades later, Sir William Osler said, “In the medical profession the Jews had a long and honorable record and among no people is all that is best in science and art more warmly appreciated.” In 1918 the social economist Thorsten Veblen suggested that the prominence of Jews in modern Europe was due to an intellectual restlessness and innate skepticism that was particularly well-suited for scientific inquiry. Historian Arturo Castiglioni summarized the evolution of Jewish thought as following a line from mystic and magic, to empiric, to scientific with an enduring feature being that ethical and hygienic concepts were accepted as having the authority of divine commands.

Albert Einstein defined Judaism as a culture with a shared historical past and common ethical values. For him the main values of Judaism were intellectual aspiration and the pursuit of social justice. Like Spinoza, he did not believe in a personal god, but felt that the divine reveals itself in the physical world. As Einstein once wrote —

Science can only be created by those who are thoroughly imbued with aspiration toward truth and understanding. This source of feeling...springs from the sphere of religion...science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind. (1940)

Hillel had said “If I am only for myself, who am I?” Martin Buber might have explained that a doctor’s relationship to his patient should be an example of I-thou, not I-it — personal more than professional. But justice, mercy, humility, social action are not exclusively Jewish values — other religions preach the same things and humanistic qualities have been embedded in secular codes of medical ethics ever since Hippocratic times. Johns Hopkins physician William Osler once admonished his colleagues to “care more particularly for the individual patient than for the special features of the disease.” Harvard’s Francis Peabody famously told his students that “the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.”

When the American Medical Association first met in Philadelphia in 1846, a local eye specialist Isaac Hays proposed six motions all of which passed unanimously. One resolved “it is expedient that the medical profession in the United States be governed by the same code of Medical Ethics.” All agreed that scientific medicine

was a moral enterprise more than a business, but although Hays was the prime mover, as a practicing Jew in gentile America he feared provoking anti-Semitism so he chose to downplay his role; although he chose to remain invisible Dr. Hays successfully promoted a Jewish ethical agenda.

In 1963 when Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was invited to address the annual meeting of the American Medical Association, he didn't mince words but didn't mention either God or Judaism to this varied audience. Heschel who once had described medicine as prayer in the form of deed — doing for others before oneself — had this to say:

The crisis in the doctor-patient relationship is part of an ominous, unhealthy, livid condition of human relations in our society, a spiritual malaise, a disease of which high-powered commercialism and intellectual vulgarity are only premonitory symptoms...To accept such a philosophy would be to perform euthanasia on the spirit of medicine itself...The mechanics of medicine must not be mistaken for the very essence of medicine which is an art, not alone a science.

Current doctors probably go about their daily tasks without giving any thought to spiritual matters or religious traditions that influence them. Occasionally some have tried including the virologist Jonas Salk. Several weeks before his unexpected death in 1995, Salk was honored at a testimonial dinner and noted in his concluding remarks that although the fact he was Jewish had nothing directly to do with his success, indirectly it meant *everything*, Salk didn't elaborate further, but another time he explained:

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

THE MEDICAL MENSCH

In my book I described what I called a “medical *mensch*.” Medical *menschen* are doctors who take the time to listen and look beyond the patient to the person. Of course there are other admirable models but Judaism provides an ethical framework that has stood the test of time. I don’t think about Jewish Medicine as a specific body of knowledge or expertise but, rather, a standard of behavior. You don’t have to be male to qualify and neither fame nor fortune matters.

Medical educators often strive to incorporate “humanism” or “professionalism” into the curriculum, but such abstractions mean different things to different people. Although they may endorse virtuous behavior, they don’t provide a useful prescription for how to do it. Therefore I coined this easily understood term that already has entered our common vernacular. Being a *mensch* is very much in the eye of the beholder, but when someone’s behavior is described as “*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, human in the best sense of the word. Any physician, Jewish or other, is enriched when they feel connected to something greater than themselves and all should aspire to be *menschen* — yes, including women.

Dr. Rachel Remen is a Jewish internist in California who has promoted the idea of value-based medicine. She suggests that doctors are most effective when they go about their daily work within a moral framework and contends that the root cause of medicine’s crisis today is that it has lost its meaning. Dr. Ramen writes, “We need something stronger than our science to hold on to, something more satisfactory and sustaining...We need to help students to find meaning as skillfully as we educate them to pursue medical expertise.”

Dr. Julius Preuss was a religiously observant internist as well as a prominent Biblical historian. When he died in 1913, Preuss stipulated in his will that nothing should be inscribed on his tombstone except for his name followed by three words: *rophe velo lo*” — physician and not for himself. This terse phrase encapsulated the idea that an individual’s worth is not derived from his or her own attributes but, rather, from their relationships with their patients, with their communities and with their God.

A MENSCH IN ETHIOPIA

For more than thirty years Dr. Rick Hodes has practiced in Ethiopia, one of the poorest countries in the world, where he heads the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's medical operation in the capital city, Addis Ababa. Rick had a conventional upbringing on Long Island, attended Middlebury College, then the University of Rochester's medical school and trained in internal medicine at Johns Hopkins. He always had a hankering to travel and in 1990, after winning a Fulbright, he wound up in Ethiopia at a time of civil war and famine.

It was the time of the covert rescue mission that was called Operation Solomon in which 14,400 natives were flown to Israel by El Al in giant cargo planes in 24 hours. Rick helped supervise the medical aspects of that exodus and then stayed on in Addis to work for the Joint. By now, more than 120,000 of these primitive people who trace their origins back to King Solomon's time have made *aliyah*, but the Joint continues to provide non-sectarian services to the poorest people in Addis and Rick still heads their operation.

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

Perhaps most remarkable is that Rick Hodes has boarded at least 19 orphan teenagers in his own home and — get this — he's adopted five of them as his sons in order to put them on his own health insurance plan so they could come to the United States for complex surgery. Under Rick's leadership the Joint opened a Spine Center where he has treated more than 500 new cases per year. Rick is the only spine specialist in this country of more than one million and has sent nearly one thousand of "the most distorted backs in the world" to Ghana for complex orthopedic surgery — many who couldn't walk before, now can.



Here's how Rick Hodes once described his mission:

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

While living in Africa Rick became religiously observant. He keeps kosher by being a vegetarian and every Friday evening his adopted children and visitors from all over gather in his cottage; they stand together in a circle, hold hands and sing Pete Seeger's song *If I had a Hammer* — the refrain goes, *I'd hammer out justice. I'd hammer out love between my brothers and my sisters, all over this land.* Next they sing *Shalom Aleichem* and then all sit down and enjoy a Kosher Shabbat meal.

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This year's award will go to "Jewish activists working to uphold Ukraine's independence and alleviate the suffering of the people of Ukraine." I certainly have no quarrel with that collective designation, but my own nomination for the honor was Rick Hodes. To my way of thinking he is the ultimate medical *mensch*. He has saved thousands of lives and turned thousands more lives around. Although few of us can follow his example, we all can aspire to be more compassionate — not only to talk the talk, but to walk the walk, and what could be more inspirational than that? He is an example of Judaism at its best. You may or may not agree with my expression medical *menschen* or my concept of Jewish Medicine, but I hope that at least I've provided some Kosher food for thought.

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