

BAGELS AND BANKES

Twenty-five years ago, I published a book called *The Jewish Doctor. A Narrative History*. Three more books about Jewish medical history followed and each contained vignettes about the lives and exploits of dozens of my predecessors. But in that first book, I couldn't resist the temptation to include an Epilogue — and this is what I wrote:

When I began writing this book, I was determined to have a catchy title and fancied "Bagels and Bankes." I confess that I loved the title, undignified as it was. It had alliteration and gastronomic appeal as well as a hint of mystery. Why not Bagels and Bankes? Because it was a gross misrepresentation. None of the essays in this collection discuss bagels and there is hardly any mention of the venerable medical technique of cupping, known as bankes (bahn-kus) in Yiddish. So Bagels and Bankes was jettisoned with regret.

But perhaps I was too quick to submit to the advice of my sober advisers who despised frivolity — history was supposed to be serious! After all, a cardiologist friend of mine who eats a bagel every day for lunch suffers from heart disease and understands the importance of a low-fat diet, so he eats his bagels dry. That is not to imply that bagels have unique medicinal value, but the fact is that throughout history physicians have admonished their patients to eat wisely — and so have rabbis and Jewish mothers.

Bankes, like bagels, were not exclusively a Jewish phenomenon. Cupping is an ancient remedy that dates back at least two millennia to the Egyptians and still is being used today, particularly in parts of Asia. It is based on ridding the body of whatever ails it and was used for a wide spectrum of complaints, including pain, inflammation, poor appetite, headache and cough. Cupping generally involved applying glass containers to the skin after heating the inside with a burning candle. Depletion of oxygen created a vacuum so that the cup not only adhered to the skin but, in theory, sucked the deep-seated offending material to the surface. The panacea was hardly "alternative medicine" since it was

employed by such early medical giants as Hippocrates and Celsus and later by Sydenham, Heberden, Boerhaave and Hunter.

Cupping was particularly prevalent in eastern Europe and during New York City's great influenza epidemic in 1918, one observer commented that among the Russian Jewish immigrants "it was hard to find a living human being whose chest had not been cupped either as a prevention or a cure for influenza or pneumonia." Many people were convinced of the efficacy of cupping, even if its physiologic effect was no more than that of a placebo or a counterirritant. Indeed, there was almost nothing for which it might not be beneficial except, as noted in a popular definition of futility, "It will do him as much good as bankes for a corpse."

Dr. Samuel Adelman, the gruff protagonist in Gerald Green's novel *The Last Angry Man*, knew all about *bankes*. Here Green describes a house call that the doctor made in 1918 during the Spanish Flu epidemic:

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 said 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. Grippe 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 people not to employ cupping—bankes, as his Jewish patients called it—knowing that they disobeyed his injunctions with impressive regularity.

East European Jewish folklore was full of superstition and belief in magic was part of the popular culture. Although rationalists denounced the use of magic and amulets, their admonitions had little influence and, in one form or another, superstitious practices persisted and continue to persist even to the present time. Of course, fear of the evil eye was not uniquely Jewish and the belief was

prevalent in Babylonian, Egyptian and Persian texts. The idea that some eyes have the power to harm at a glance was an accepted phenomenon in early midrashic literature. One rabbi stated that “ninety-nine persons die from the evil eye and only one dies of natural causes.” Avoiding the evil eye included avoiding any express of happiness or of praise. The answer to the salutation “How are you?” was not “Fine” but “Not bad” or some other less than enthusiastic affirmative. In 1910 a two-volume book appeared that listed more than eighty anti-evil eye practices. The author apologized that was only “the inadequate work of a beginner” and later published two more volumes.

The stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer contained a particularly loathsome pharmacopoeia of folk medicines that were prevalent in the shtetls of Poland. They included roasted garlic and salted peas to restore sexual potency; moldy preserves to dispel sadness; finger and toenails kneaded into a lump and thrown to a dog to cure epilepsy; a stew made of foreskin of newly circumcised boy; virgin blood of a bride, devil’s dung, fried frogs, placenta of a newborn child and stag’s testicles — all to induce pregnancy. Today we take perverse delight in recalling the noisome and naive folk-remedies of yesteryear. The more odious, the more potent; if offensive to the patient than even more so to the invader. But where did they get the ingredients?

The following account from the autobiography of Chaim Aronson (1825-1888) described what happened when as a child he contracted a high fever:

In those days there was no quinine available in the small towns, nor were there physicians; the only healers were the quacks, every one of whom was a charlatan. There were also the old women who knew every remedy in the world, including those of the miracle workers and the Tartars and magicians. They offered their advice and treatment to all the sick and I did not escape their attentions....The first remedy my father tried on me was one prescribed by the Rabbi: he had to write over all the doors and windows of the house and to chalk upon all the walls in large letters, “The boy Hayim is not at home.” The idea was that when the demon of malaria came to visit me, he would see written everywhere that the boy he was seeking was not home, and therefore would turn away and go back to

wherever he came from. Unfortunately, the demon of malaria did not read Yiddish, and so he paid me constant visits.

Many small town doctors, although poorly trained, were willing to learn on the job. The story goes that when a cobbler took sick, the local healer was called and diagnosed a severe case of typhoid. He muttered to himself, "There's no hope" and overhearing these words, the cobbler feebly prayed to be given one last enjoyment before dying. To his taste nothing was sweeter or more palatable than sauerkraut. Could he have a last dish? The healer agreed and miraculously the cobbler recovered. On hearing this, the healer was overjoyed and wrote in his prescription book, "A tested cure for advanced 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 prescription 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." Now that's empiric medicine! As for me, I'd prefer an "everything bagel" with a *shmeer*.

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