

TUVIAH

Medicine is a very simple science if it is practiced by charlatans. On the other hand, it is a very difficult one when practiced by a schooled physician....

Those who permit themselves to be treated by a physician who has not studied the entire theory of medicine can be likened to those who, when journeying on an ocean, entrust their fate to the winds; sometimes the winds drive the ship to its destination, but more often they cause it to sink. Those who think any kind of practice makes a good physician are sadly mistaken....

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....



What kind of man could have written such words in 1708? A remarkable man!

Tuviah Cohen (alt. Tuvia HaKohen Katz, Tovich Kohn, Tobias Katz) was a Jewish physician whose personal odyssey took him throughout much of Europe and the Middle East and ended in Jerusalem. He was a transitional figure between the classical medicine of Hippocrates and Galen and emerging scientific developments of his time and his encyclopedic book *Maaseh Tuviah* (Tuviah's Tales) introduced exciting new ideas to his Jewish colleagues.

Tuviah's physician grandfather had emigrated from Safed to Cracow. His father, a physician and rabbi, fled Poland in 1648 to escape pogroms led by the Cossack leader Bogdan Chmielnicki. The family settled in Metz (France) where Moses was appointed rabbi of the community. However, he died in 1659 when Tuviah was 7 years old and his mother remarried. The youngster was sent to Cracow where he received a conventional Jewish education. At age 25 Tuviah and a friend decided to go abroad to study medicine and after briefly working with a local doctor in Danzig, felt the need for more formal training. They appealed to the Grand Elector of Brandenburg for permission to study at the University of Frankfurt and, surprisingly, he consented despite being advised that "such people" were suspicious and might desecrate the Christian religion. Faculty members attempted to persuade the two students to convert until, tired of countless religious disputes, in 1681 the young men transferred to the University of Padua where the academic environment was relatively tolerant.

During the 16th through 18th centuries several hundred Jews (and Protestants) from all over Europe were exposed in Padua 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. The university not only did accepted Jewish students, but protected them from violence and other illegal measures. They were permitted to wear the black beret of their student colleagues rather than the yellow one required of other Jews, but they had to pay double for tuition and books and were required to deliver 170 pounds of sweetmeat to Christian students at graduation. When 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.

After completing his degree, Tuviah Cohen practiced medicine in Poland and eventually relocated to Adrianople and then Constantinople (Istanbul) which served as the capitals of the Ottoman Turkish Empire. As a renowned doctor, Tuviah served as the personal physician to five successive sultans and acquired a considerable fortune. In 1701, at age 48, he completed his magnum opus *Maaseh Tuviah*, a massive book written in Hebrew and first printed in Venice in 1708 — it went through five editions. A portrait of him appeared on the title page (see above) and around the border he explained, “I live with my people in Constantinople and may (God) who published my thoughts grant me the honor to see Jerusalem rebuilt.”

Tuviah’s purpose was two-fold: He sought to help prepare Jewish students for the European world of study, and to prove to the world at large that Jewish literature can positively contribute to the sciences. The book was intended as a general compendium of knowledge and, in addition to medical advice, it discussed theology, astronomy, pharmacy, botany, hygiene, venereal diseases and chemistry, but, also, there was the caveat for any aspiring Jewish medical student first to “fill his belly” with Torah. Tuviah wrote of “the flowering of a new medicine which dwells in the bosom of the physician of our time.....the method which modern physicians use with constancy and reflective analysis has led them to new discoveries...thus they have enlightened us so that they could establish in our time a practical method of medicine.” To be sure, Tuviah freely used mainstream 16th and 17th century remedies such as laxatives and emetics, cupping and bleeding and, although he eschewed superstition and magic, certain ailments were attributed to the work of demons. For better or worse, *Maaseh Tuviah* influenced the health of Jews during the 18th century.

At age 62 Tuviah Cohen retired from the Sultan’s court and moved once again, this time 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 taxed beyond their means by corrupt Ottoman sultans and in 1720 their synagogue was burned down with forty Torah scrolls destroyed. Tuviah’s *aliyah* had come in 1715 and for the next fourteen years he 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 poor.

Tuviah did practice medicine or at least gave medical advice according to current European standards. In 1729 a Franciscan monk who lived in Jerusalem wrote about how he once had been successfully treated for dysentery by an old Ashkenazic Jew

who was a graduate of Padua and spoke to him in Latin. He noted that the Jewish doctor had died several months later, December 24, 1729. Tuviah was buried on the Mount of Olives and it's unlikely that he ever achieved the tranquility he'd yearned for in the Holy Land.

Faithful to the past but challenged by the present, Tuviah Cohen attempted to reconcile his religious tradition with emerging medical science, but he met with only partial success — that was a challenge for the next generation of Jewish physicians to contend with. As for our own generation, the narrative of this 18th century Jewish doctor encourages all of us to integrate core religious values into our practice even as we encounter new scientific advances.

(Adapted from my book *JEWISH MEDICINE. What it is and why it matters*. M. NEVINS, MD)