

# G-d as Our Doctor

Who's your doctor? Until I began working, I did not have to think about who mine is. My doctor growing up was Dr. Bruce Herman, my father. Even when I was a student in Madison and in New York, I never changed doctors, instead getting a check-up from my father when I was home for breaks.

According to Parshat Beshellach, however, I already had a doctor: G-d. After praising G-d for the defeat of the Egyptians, the Israelites went into the desert still could not find water after three days, finally discovering a source of bitter water. They referred to the place as "Marah," or bitter, for they were bitter about the bitter-tasting water. They complained to Moses. Moses cried out to G-d, who instructed him to throw a piece of wood into the water making it sweet so that the Israelites could drink it. G-d then proclaimed to the Israelites, "If you listen to my voice and follow all of my commandments then the plagues

that I set upon the Egyptians I will not put upon you, for I am G-d your doctor (רפאך).”<sup>1</sup>

What is most peculiar about this section is why would G-d need to “heal” the water, transforming it from bitter to sweet? Ibn Ezra’s interpretation is that for every affliction, we do not need a human healer or doctor but rather should turn to G-d, who turned the bitter water into sweetness, something that no human doctor can do.<sup>2</sup> While I respect Ibn Ezra’s interpretation, as the child of a doctor I believe in the power of modern medicine, and that G-d helps those who help themselves. Rashi has a different perspective: Torah and *mitzvot* (commandments) save us spiritually the same way that a healer saves us physically. Just as a doctor tells us not to eat certain things that make us sick, so too does following *mitzvot* keep us healthy.<sup>3</sup> Malbim, a Hasidic commentator, goes further on this point, asserting that the Torah keeps us healthy

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 15:26

<sup>2</sup> ד"ה המחלה עליון ד"ה רפאך

<sup>3</sup> Rashi on Exodus 15:26 לפי פשוטו ד"ה לא אשים עליך.

through teaching us proper behavior. Through following the Torah's laws, we will live a balanced and healthy life.<sup>4</sup>

Rashi and Malbim's interpretations are fascinating to me because we often see health exclusively from a physical perspective. We go to the doctor to check our blood pressure, heart rate and cholesterol levels. We regularly check our BMI as well as the susceptibility that we have to certain conditions or diseases. Generally we do not turn to Torah for such questions, yet our commentators are indicating that following the Torah can be a measure of our health as a person. Our keeping Shabbat can be a way of our keeping stress under control, focusing on the moment rather than the next task on our to-do list. Similarly, keeping kashrut can be a means of thinking about what we are about to consume and whether it is in our best interest to consume it.

My teacher Aryeh Ben-David of the PARDES Institute in Jerusalem said that in addition to getting a physical checkup from a doctor we should get a "spiritual checkup" from G-d. I think this is a

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<sup>4</sup> Malbim on Exodus 15:26 ד"ה רפאך

great idea. By turning to the Torah for guidance in our daily action and behavior, we can live healthier, more meaningful lives. Just as we ask ourselves “Can I eat this?” or “Did I exercise enough today?” so too must we ask “Do I have a proper balance between work and home life? Do I create time for myself? Do I reflect on what I am doing, or do I just rush from activity to activity?” Through this mindset, G-d becomes our healer and our maintainer.

Eight days ago I returned from my introductory retreat with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. This is an eighteen month program in which I work on mindfulness, highlighted by four retreats in which we experience the mornings in complete silence (besides Tefillah) while engaging in meditation, yoga and Hasidic text study. We also learned on zmirot, chanting beautiful songs and trying to get lost in the music. During the entire week we were asked not to use our phones or get any work done, an extremely difficult task for someone like me; rather we were advised to be sensitive to whatever we were engaged in at that particular moment, an approach anxieties or tension with curiosity. I felt

tears well up in my eyes as I wrote in my journal that with consistent focus and attention moment-by-moment I can change my attitude and mentality for the better.

What amazes me most is how much the spiritual is connected to the physical. When we are fully engaged in the moment, we feel alive and healthy, and our body is strengthened. When we are distracted, torn this way and that, it can very easily lead to stress, weakening our bodies. On retreat, someone compared the brain to a computer and when too many windows are open, it slows down and crashes. The study of psychosomatic reactions and of the importance of holistic medicine, treating the causes in addition to the current symptoms, is not so new but it has gained focus in recent years.

This morning we want to thank our healthcare professionals who bring about for us sources for healing in so many ways. We are blessed to have in our congregation surgeons and internists, nurses and social

workers optometrists, obgyns, pediatricians, geriatricians, dentists, podiatrists, chiropractors and so many more. Each of you works hard day in and day out to do what is in the best interest of your patients, often working long hours to do so, and we thank you for this. We also celebrate that you're not in it alone: G-d is serving as a doctor within you, guiding you to make good decisions and to be there with full presence and spirit for your patients. Thank you for being who you are and for what you do to make a difference each and every day.