

“אני ה' רופאך”

GEZUNT AND BITACHON

The Rebbe's approach to physical health, and the efficiency (and limits) of medical doctors

There are those who have simple ways of living. Some people recognize only the physical, denying any higher power and putting all their energy and efforts into the physical aspect of things. When someone is sick they run to the best doctors; when someone dies, they say it was by chance; if you want to make a living, you've got to work hard and get lucky.

Others believe in a higher power and see everything in this world as a reflection of the above. When they need money, they pray; when someone is sick, they pray; they believe that going to doctors is heresy. When someone passes away, they have left for a better place.

Yiddishkeit doesn't afford us the luxury of simple philosophies. On the one hand, it is a foundation of our belief that everything comes directly from Hashem, who administers every single thing that happens in every area of creation. If you want to change something in your life, you have to daven and strengthen your *bitachon*. At the same time, Hashem wants us to channel everything in the physical world: to watch our health; to go to doctors—the best ones at that; and to go out and work for a living.

The Torah expects us to keep a delicate balance: That we be fully anchored in our belief, but proactive in the world; to see the spiritual in everything that happens, but take responsibility for our actions.

Nowhere is this more crucial than in medicine and healing, where a person's attitude and mindset have such an effect on their approach and wellbeing. Much of the Rebbe's guidance in medicine is about finding the right balance; to understand the place of modern medicine, to approach it with a Jewish attitude, and recognize who our true Healer is.

THE ATTITUDE

The fundamental Jewish attitude to health is that nothing is by chance; everything comes from Hashem. As the *possuk* tells us, אני ה' רופאך, I am Hashem your healer. When a person is sick, the ultimate address is Hashem, and the most powerful medicine is to strengthen one's connection to Hashem by davening to Him, strengthening one's *bitachon*, and observing Torah and mitzvos.

But that doesn't mean that one shouldn't go to doctors. It is part of His plan that we use medicine, as the *Beraisa* tells us (and it is cited by Rashi), רפא, ורפא: Torah granted permission for the doctor to heal (meaning: the Torah mandates that an injured person must be reimbursed for his medical bills, implying that medicine is an authentic method of healing according to Torah)¹. And, the Rebbe adds, this doesn't only mean that a doctor is *allowed* to practice medicine, but even more so, that Hashem gives him the *power* to do so.² Furthermore, when a person is sick, he is *commanded* to go to the doctor, as the *possuk* tells us: ונשמרתם מאד: guard yourself very carefully.³ The doctor also has a mitzvah, to help his patients as a matter of *pikuach nefesh*, saving lives.⁴

We go to doctors like everyone else, but our attitude couldn't be more different. We don't go to them because we believe that they have the power to affect our lives; we go to them because Hashem *told* us to do so. Hashem is the One who heals us, but He does it through His instruments. And the more *bitachon* we have, the more we see this in a revealed manner.

As the Rebbe writes to a person whose wife was afraid of going to the hospital: "Hashem created the world and He runs it... הוא צוה ויעמוד—nothing in the world happens without Hashem and everything that Hashem wants—happens. It's just that Hashem wants a natural *keli* to be made, meaning that things should happen in a natural way.

"When a Yid, man or woman, feels unwell and a doctor needs to be called, that doesn't mean that the doctor will do as he desires—rather Hashem chooses the doctor to be His shliach to fulfill this shlichus.

"When we have *bitachon* that Hashem runs the world—without any doubt—then we merit to see this with our physical eyes: That at every step of the way, Hashem is holding our hand and leading us for our own benefit, physically and spiritually."⁵

From this perspective, the doctor is both more powerful and less powerful: *Philosophically*, the doctor has no power at all. But *practically*, we must follow his instructions to the letter. (It should be noted; there are guidelines the Rebbe laid out on how to choose your doctor, how many doctors to ask, and what to do in the event of a disagreement among doctors themselves, etc., see below. But ultimately, we are bound to their instructions.)

"In areas regarding physical health," the Rebbe writes, "our holy and living Torah tells us that we must follow the words of the doctor... for he is only a *shliach*. Obviously, you can tell the doctor what your own opinion is, including the one that you wrote to me, but once he hears your opinion, you must follow his decision, whether you agree with it or not. A doctor is no more than a *shliach* who is working with the power and ability that Torah gave him; coming from the Torah, it is for the benefit of your body and soul. If you don't understand it, or if you disagree, there is nothing to be surprised about: Torah is the wisdom and the will of Hashem; it's not surprising that humans do not understand everything in Torah."

The importance of going to doctors when we're ill stems from the fact that we are *commanded* to keep ourselves healthy. As the Rambam says, "For the body to be healthy and complete is from the ways of [serving] Hashem." This is even more important according to Chassidus, which teaches us that the body is not a barrier to our *avodas Hashem* that must be beat down (as was the approach of Mussar), rather it is an important partner in our service of Hashem, and it must be taken care of. As the Maggid said, "A small hole in the body is a great hole in the *neschama*."⁶

The Rebbe writes in another letter: "It shouldn't matter how you fulfill Hashem's will—as long as you do so unconditionally. When Hashem tells you to listen to the doctor, that's what you have to do, and you should be content with the opportunity to listen to Hashem, so you must do it with joy."⁷

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A HALACHIC PERSPECTIVE ON GOING TO DOCTORS

Shulchan Aruch tells us the *halacha* is that “Torah granted permission for the doctor to heal, and it is a mitzvah. It is part of *pikuach nefesh*, and one who [is able to heal and] abstains from doing so is guilty of murder.”

However, there were great Rishonim who held that not always should a person go to a doctor. For example:

The **Ramban**⁸ holds that ideally, a person should depend on Hashem: If he gets sick it is because Hashem decided to punish him, and if he is healed, it is also by Hashem’s will. But when a person seeks out doctors, then Hashem leaves him to the forces of nature.

The **Ibn Ezra**⁹ holds that it depends on the type of illness: *External* illnesses should be treated by doctors; internal illnesses should be left up to Hashem. So when the *possuk* tells us that an injured person must be reimbursed for his medical bills, it’s only referring to external injury.

One of the proofs that has been cited against using doctors is from the fact that Chizkiyahu hid the “Book of Medications.”¹⁰ This book was authored by Shlomo Hamelech and held the secrets to healing every illness, but because eventually people started relying only on the book and not on Hashem, Chizkiyahu buried it.

However, the **Rambam**¹¹ writes strongly against the above approaches to medicine. “According to their warped opinion,” he says, “a person who

is hungry and eats bread, which will certainly heal his horrible illness of hunger, did he not depend on Hashem?! We would obviously dismiss them as fools! Just as we thank Hashem when we eat for providing us with sustenance, we also thank Him for providing us with medicines that heal us.” He goes on to explain that the “Book of Healing” was a book of sorcery or a book of poisons, and that’s why it was hidden.

In practice: The *halacha* follows the Rambam, as the Rebbe says in a letter, “It is the accepted *halacha* by Yidden to follow the Rambam—to use medicines and to put our trust in Hashem that He will send His healing through this person and this medicine...”¹²

DOCTORS HAVE PERMISSION FOR ONE THING

But we only trust doctors for the thing that Torah told us to trust them: to heal. Prognosis and predictions of a person’s chances are not in a doctor’s purview, as the Rebbe often pointed out to people.

Rebbetzin Rivkah, the wife of the Rebbe Maharash, had a serious illness in her kidneys when she was 18-years-old, and the doctor gave up on her getting better. In response, the Tzemach Tzedek, her father-in-law, said that a doctor has permission to heal—but he has no permission to *not* heal, or to give up on the patient.

The Rebbe would often quote this to people who had heard grim predictions from doctors. “The doctors are in charge of nothing else [other than healing]; when you hear something grim from a doctor, you shouldn’t give it any attention. You must take it as a *nisayon*, a test from Hashem—he is testing your and your husband’s *emunah* and *bitachon*. The sooner you strengthen your *emunah* and *bitachon* in Hashem, the sooner you will see your daughter getting better, with your physical eyes.”¹³

(In another letter, the Rebbe explained that this is common sense: “In our day and age, when there are new treatments coming out every day, and there are new medicines discovered, it is against basic logic to make such predictions.”¹⁴)

HE WILL OUTLIVE THE DOCTOR

Rabbi Yechiel Ziskind was a *bochur* in 770 when he was diagnosed with the dreaded disease of polio. It was 5715*, the same year that a vaccine was introduced, but it was too late for him. He caught a bad case of the disease, which started as a cold, but progressed from there.

He was taken to the Kingston Avenue Hospital, and was put into an iron lung (which compressed his paralyzed chest and enabled him to breathe), with only his head sticking out. He was very, very sick.

"There was a doctor there," he related, "who had a very arrogant way of talking. He told my brother and father, 'G-d knows if he'll make it through the next 12 hours.'"

"They went and told the Rebbe. The Rebbe gestured with his hand, and he became very emotional, and said, '*Er vet em iberleben*—he will outlive him [the doctor].'"

He made it through the next 12 hours, but he was still very ill. His friends, Kehos Weiss, Mottel Zajac, and Berel Baumgarten, would visit him every day. They would put tefillin on him and daven with him, because he was too sick to do anything. The doctor told them, "Leave him alone, he's a goner! Let him die in peace." They came to tell the Rebbe what the doctor had said. The Rebbe said the same thing: "He will outlive him."

Tragically, that's exactly what happened. That doctor himself caught polio a few days later and died.

Yechiel stayed in the iron lung through the summer and whenever the Rebbe distributed *kos shel bracha* he would always give some to his father to bring to him.

It took over two years, but eventually he recovered. "It took a while, a long time, but *b'chasdei Hashem*, I'm here today." Afterwards, he had to use a wheelchair for a while, and then he used crutches. One day, while he was still in his wheelchair, his family accompanied



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him to yeshiva. “While we were in the hallway, the Rebbe was heading to the shul for Maariv. When he spotted us, he immediately turned around and invited us into his office.

“During that *yechidus*, he told me, ‘In my opinion, you will become completely healthy.’ Then he asked me, ‘Reb Yechiel, what’s going on with a *shidduch*?’

“‘The Rebbe means now?’ I asked. ‘Not now,’ the Rebbe said, ‘because it’s already a quarter to one in the morning. It’s a bit late. But tomorrow you should start working on it.’

“‘But I have debts,’ I countered, explaining that I had just bought a car, and certainly I didn’t have the income to support a wife and family.

“To this the Rebbe responded, ‘Don’t worry. Hashem sustains two and a half billion people in the world; he’ll sustain a few more.’

“At this juncture, my father asked, ‘The Rebbe means in his current condition?’

“The Rebbe gave me an amazing answer. ‘Your condition is obvious. *Vilstu, iz gut. Vilstu nit...* She can decide if it’s for her or not. But I know of cases where the issues are hidden, and people don’t say... In your situation there’s nothing to reveal, it’s all very clear.’

“Then the Rebbe said to me, ‘*Es vet zain noch a trit in yam*—It will just be another step in your journey. Just as G-d helped you to survive, He will help you to get married, as well.’

“The next day, a woman called my aunt saying she saw me and she thought she had a match for me, a girl who had also recovered from polio. And that was my wife *aleha hashalom*.”⁴⁴

DON'T GET CAUGHT UP

So when we follow doctors, we must remember we are doing so because the Torah instructs us to do so, and we must always remember that doctors are but instruments in the hands of the true healer. “You must fulfill the directives of the doctor, but that’s only on a practical level; your trust should be in Hashem, who will heal you.”

“You must do what Torah commanded you—to fulfill the directives of the doctor. Your mind and heart should be invested in strengthening your *bitachon* in Hashem...”

“It’s a shame that you looked into medical books in the field that you believe you are sick with. In my opinion, you must do what Torah commanded you—to fulfill the directives of the doctor. Your mind and heart—meaning your thoughts—should be invested in strengthening your *bitachon* in Hashem, “who heals all and does wonders.” Don’t get involved in *chochmas harefuah*, that isn’t your job, especially if it affects your mood and depresses you... *Tracht gut vet zain gut*, think good and it will be good.”¹⁵

“You write the opinion of the doctors, and it is shocking that my words are being twisted... I said and wrote that they should *follow* the directives of the specialists, and I also said and wrote many times that they *shouldn’t* be worried about their opinions... and in these two areas *the opposite* is being done: They are not following the directives of the specialists, and on the other hand they are becoming distressed from the doctors’ opinion. What can I do? Their free choice cannot be taken away...”¹⁶

REACHING THE TRUE HEALER: SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

Trust Hashem

Being that the true healing comes from Hashem and His *brachos*, the most important thing we can do is strengthen our *bitachon* in Him, which causes us to see His hand in a revealed way.¹⁷

Sometimes this is the physical solution as well: There were many times when people told the Rebbe that they were nervous about various ailments and pains (especially regarding their heart), and he replied that it was (mostly) caused by their anxiety and

MAINOS

GET BUSY

In this note, the Rebbe responds to a woman who was worried about her complicated health situation:

כנראה עיקר הסיבה למצבה—הוא זה שמתבוננת במצבה בתמידות. וככל שתסיח דעתה יותר מזה—יוטב המצב ויתוסף בהצלחת עניני הרפואה שמתעסקת בהם. ולהקל בהיסח הדעת—ה"ז ע"י שתה"י עסוקה בענין אחר לגמרי—איזה שיהי' (משרה, לימודים, עזר לבחורות ביר"ש וכיו"ב).

ואם תסיח דעת לגמרי—במשך זמן קצר תתרפא. קבלה.

אזכיר עוה"פ עה"צ.

It seems that the principal cause of your situation—is that you ruminate about your situation **constantly**. The more you take your mind **off** of it—the better it will become and the medical avenues you are involved with will be more successful.

In order to make this easier—you should **keep busy** with something completely different—no matter what it is (a job, studies, assisting girls in *yiras shamyaim*, and the like.)

If you take your mind off of it **completely** — within a short time you will be healed.

[Instruction to the secretary to send] a receipt.

I will mention you again at the *tziyun*.

TRUST

התחזקות בבטחון אמיתי בהשם—נוסף על העיקר שזהו מיסודי אמונתנו—ה"ז ג"כ רפואה באופן ישר להנ"ל (וגם הרופאים מודים בזה). חת"ת. אזכיר עה"צ.

By strengthening your **sincere** trust in Hashem—in addition to the fact that this is one of the pillars of our faith [Yiddishkeit]—this would also serve **directly** as a remedy to the [health issue] mentioned above. (The doctors acknowledge this as well).

[Be diligent about the study of] Chitas.

I will mention you at the *tziyun*.

BE HAPPY! (IT HELPS)

In response to a woman who asked, what is the best way for her to recover from an illness—the Rebbe writes:

מענתה מפורש בתוה"ק ורפא ירפא—כעצת רופא(ים) בשטח זה. וכפשוט ועיקר בטחון בהשם הרופא כל בשר ומפליא לעשות.

ע"פ ידיעת - שמחת החולה מועילה לבריאותו

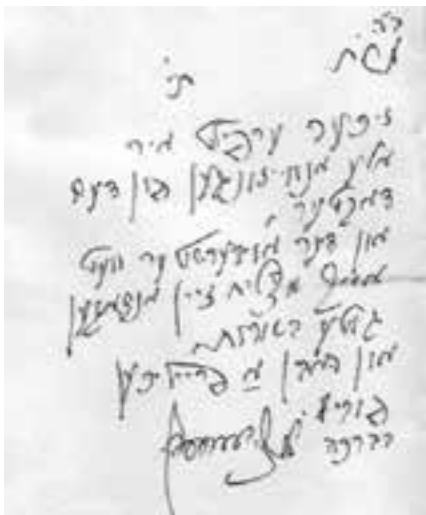
Her answer is clearly stated in our holy Torah—*v'rapo yerapei*—[follow] the advice of the doctor(s) in this field.

It is obvious, and this is the main thing: strengthen your trust in Hashem, who heals all flesh and does wondrous things.

To the best of my knowledge—when a patient is happy it helps them get healthier.

GOOD NEWS

Draft of a letter written in the Rebbe's holy handwriting to a woman who needed a bracha for health:



ב"ה
מרת... תי'

זיכער ערפילט איר אלע אנווייזונגען פון דעם
דאקטער, און דער אויבערשטער וועט אייך מצליח זיין
אנזאגען גוטע בשורות, און האבן אַ פרייליכען פורים.

בברכה
[חי"ק]

B"H. Mrs. . . tichye,

You are certainly following all the instructions of the doctor, and Hashem will help you succeed in bearing good news, and to have a happy Purim.

With blessing,

[The Rebbe's signature]

TEACH TZEDAKA

The Rebbe's handwritten response after being notified that one of anash was hospitalized with a heart attack:

מהיר

כדאי שיביאו לו לשם א צדקה פושקע ופעמיים בימות
החול (לפני שחרית ומנחה) יתרום לתוכה מטבע.
ומה טוב שיעורר שאר הנמצאים שם שיעשו כן גם
הם [זה שייך גם לאינם יהודים] וזכות כהנ"ל תעמוד לו
בכהנ"ל.

אזכיר עה"צ

Urgent

It would be worthwhile that a tzedaka-box should be brought there for him, and twice daily (before Shacharis and Mincha), he should contribute a coin to it.

Even better would be if he would inspire all the others there to do the same as well [this applies to non-Jews too]. The merit of all this [him and others giving tzedaka] will stand in his good stead for all of the abovementioned [health complications].

I will mention this at the tziyun.