

RESPONSE TO PAIN

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

All the sicknesses that I have visited upon Egypt I will not visit upon you, for I, God, heal you. (Shemos 15:26)

VISITING A DOCTOR in our time is as natural as it is to get sick. The first thing many people think about when they start to feel under the weather is about getting checked out by a physician, and perhaps a prescription to ease their "suffering." If they're into natural cures, they'll probably pay a visit to their "alternative professional."

The role of the medical practitioner is a lot different today than it once was. According to the Ramban in Parashas Behar, once-upon-a-time a person did not go to a doctor when he became ill. Instead he went to a prophet who told him why God was inflicting him and which teshuvah was necessary to become well again. If doctors existed at that time it was purely to advise people how to take care of their bodies as per the Torah directive to take care of one's self.

With the end of prophecy in the year 3448, or 313 BCE the role of the doctor increased, as it also did with respect to illness. In the beginning a person never became sick a day in his life, which could have been hundreds of years long. When a person's time to pass on came he simply sneezed and that was it. That's why people say "Bless you" after a sneeze, wishing the person that it should not be his last.

Similarly that is why people say "L'Chaim!" when drinking wine, and by extension, other spirits. When the Sanhedrin existed and it still meted out the death penalty the accused was given some wine to drink in order to make him less conscious of what was happening. The death penalty in Judaism was a form of atonement for the soul, which it underwent regardless of the consciousness of the person. Therefore when we drink we say "L'Chaim," as if to say, "This drink should be for life and not for death!"

In fact, until Avraham's time people did not physically age. They reached a certain point physically and that is the way they remained for the rest of their life until they died. However, when Avraham saw that people could not distinguish between him and Yitzchak, who looked very much like him, he asked God for people to look their age as well, and they did from that point onward (Bava Metzia 87a).

Still, people did not get ill. Consequently they did not appreciate life enough, so Ya'akov Avinu asked God to send illness to the world. From his time onward the Talmud states, people could become ill

several times during their course of their lifetimes.

Even that did not do the trick to make people spiritually sensitive. They knew that even if they became ill that they would always recover. Therefore, in Elisha's time, the Talmud explains, God allowed people to become ill and even die from their illness. It was a big boost for the medical profession, not to mention countless charlatans out to make a fast buck off people's misfortunes and fears, though "Obamacare" was still a long way off.

The truth is, nothing has really changed at all. We remind ourselves of this each time we make an "Asher Yatzar," the blessing after using the bathroom:

Blessed are You, Hashem our God, King of the universe, Who formed man with wisdom and created within him many openings and many hollows. It is obvious and known before Your Throne of Glory that if even one of them ruptures, or if even one of them becomes blocked, it would be impossible to survive and to stand before You (even for a short period). Blessed are You, Hashem, Who heals all flesh and acts wondrously.

If God made man back in the beginning and had nothing to do with his health since then, this blessing would be meaningless. Health would have become completely a function of genetics and circumstances, leaving God to watch His creations live or die, prosper or suffer, from a "distance."

Instead, when saying this blessing, especially with intention, we acknowledge that whether or not our openings open and close when they should, or rupture at some point, God forbid, is still completely a function of Divine will. Divine agents may work on His behalf but it is God Who dispatches them, as the following story illustrates:

A Jew named Zunin asked Rebi Akiva, "Both of us know that idols have no power. So how do we explain the fact that sometimes their worshippers come to them crippled from illness and walk away with their limbs healed?"

He replied with a parable: "There was once a very honest person in a town whom people trusted to the point that they would leave their precious belongings in his safekeeping even without witnesses. One man however refused to rely on the man's honesty and would insist upon witnesses being on hand when he left something in his safekeeping. However, on one occasion he left something with him but forgot to bring witnesses. The guardian's wife (insulted by the man's lack of trust in her husband) suggested to him that they deny that they ever received the deposit (since this time the deposit had been made without witnesses).

'Because this fool acted improperly,' said her husband, 'we should abandon our faithfulness?'

"Likewise," concluded Rebi Akiva, "when pains are sent from Heaven to afflict a person they are sworn to a strict schedule exactly when they must come and when they must depart, at

precisely which hour they must leave, as well as to which healer and medicine will be the agents of remedy. When the appointed time comes for them to leave and the sufferer visits the idol's temple these pains say 'It is only right that we should not leave.' But then they say 'Because this fool acted improperly we should abandon our faithfulness about which we took an oath?' " (Avodah Zarah 55a)

Thus, when a person becomes ill, how a person becomes ill, how long he is unwell, and who and what will cure him are all a function of Divine Providence. Even though it seems inevitable that a person will get sick because he was around others who were unwell, or was exposed to conditions that threatened his health, that too is part of his Divine Providence.

You even find that sometimes we catch something without even knowing how, and do not get sick when we most expect to. Some people get the flu and die, and other people get cancer and live. Some cures were "expected" while others caught everyone, especially the doctors, by surprise.

To be sure, illness is suffering. Suffering according to the Talmud is a function of Hashgachah Pratis:

Rava, some say, Rav Chisda, said: "If a person sees that sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct, as it says, 'Let us search and try our ways, and return to God' (Eichah 3:40). If he examines and finds nothing [objectionable], let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of the Torah, as it says, 'Happy is the man whom You criticize, O God, and teach out of Your law' (Tehillim 94:12). If he did attribute it [to this] and still did not find [this to be the cause], let him be sure that these are sufferings of love, as it says, 'For whom God loves He chastizes' (Mishlei 3:12)." (Brochos 5a)

In other words, it's all about tikun, or personal rectification. You might be able to point the finger at family members and say, "You made me sick! You brought this illness into the house!" Though this may be true to some degree, it could not have affected you if God did not desire it, and He would not have desired it if it did not help with personal rectification.

Or does it? The following seems to minimize the involvement of Heaven in the catching of a common illness:

Are cold and heat by the hand of Heaven? Is it not taught: Everything is by the hand of heaven except cold and heat, as it says, "Cold [and] heat are in the way of the perverse; he who preserves his soul will distance himself from them" (Mishlei 25:5)? (Kesuvos 30a)

Though the first part of the verse seems to say that when it comes to catching a cold or something similar, either we are to blame or it is just part-and-parcel of life. The second part of the verse, however, seems to imply just the opposite, that we do not become ill unless we first stray from the

proper path in life.

There is a way to answer this. It has to do with what the Chovos Levovos says regarding the issue of bitachon, or trust in God. He says, in Sha'ar Bitachon, that if a person places his trust in something other than God, then God will withdraw His Providence from the person, leaving him in the hands of that which he trusts. "You want to trust in money," God says for example, "then let money solve all of your problems."

This, of course, never turns out well for the person in the long run, and maybe not in the short run either. Only God can take care of all the needs of a person, and everything else, such as money, is merely an agent of His. To help a person out of a crisis, especially in a supernatural manner, they require God. Otherwise they will fail the person who trusted in them at some point in time.

Of course, if God were ever to completely withdraw His Providence from a person he would go poof! Instead God acts towards such a person in a way that makes it seem as if He has withdrawn His Providence from his life. This just gives the impression that what happens to him is completely "natural."

The same idea can be applied in this discussion as well. The verse above concluded by saying, "he who preserves his soul will distance himself from them," meaning that he will live a righteous life and in doing so, avoid illness. It is the "perverse," the first part of the verse says, who makes themselves vulnerable to "cold" and "heat," and all the ills of life.

How do they do this? By living lives of sin they "push" God out of their picture to the point that God acts towards them as if He no longer pays attention to their lives. He leaves them in the "hands" of nature, so-to-speak, and this means that when such people become exposed to bacteria and viruses they will become ill, if it is "natural" to happen.

A righteous person, or at least someone who tries to lead a spiritually correct life, can also be exposed to the same bacteria and viruses and, naturally-speaking, be vulnerable to illness. However, since God is directly involved in his life He can perform a miracle for him, supernaturally protecting him from natural afflictions. The common cold, for such spiritually attuned people, may not be so common at all.

Thus we say in the Shemonah Esrai three times a day:

Heal us, O Lord, and we will be healed; help us and we will be saved; for You are our praise. Grant complete cure and healing to all our wounds; for You, Almighty King, are a faithful and merciful healer. Blessed are You Lord, who heals the sick of His people Israel.

This is called "talking the talk." "Walking the walk," however, is being real with this truth to the point that if you point your finger at anyone when you become ill, it is at you. Others can want to expose us to germs and even danger, but whether or not they will affect us depends upon us, or more

specifically, the level of Divine Providence we are successful to merit in life?

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