

BYRON L. SHERWIN

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH GOD

HEALTH, HEALING, AND JEWISH TRADITION¹

According to Rabbi Sherwin the divine sanction for healing is "a franchise defined by the perimeters of a covenant." Echoing Ramsey's theme of covenant fidelity, but informed more by Hebrew voices such as Abraham Heschel's, Sherwin launches into an engaging discussion of the nature and characteristics of *three* covenants: between God and the physician, God and the patient, and the patient and the physician.

Medical ethics is about much more than simply drawing out the implications of specific issues. Rather, in Sherwin's reading of the Jewish tradition, medical ethics is grounded in a concept of *health* that is understood in a radically *holistic* way. And, according to Sherwin, medical ethics cannot be whole unless it addresses the health of the *soul*. As Sherwin puts it "the obligation to maintain physical health is penultimate to the obligation to maintain spiritual health." Sherwin thus points toward "a teleological understanding of the nature of health," its purpose being "to prepare the foundation for moral and spiritual health whereby the human being may realize the qualities essential to being human" (p. 121).

Sherwin's essay reminds us that the art of healing is a revocable trust. Even for those convinced that we now live in a post-metaphysical or post-theistic age, there is wisdom in the Hebrew tradition. In spite of our confidence and self-reliance, Sherwin reminds us that careless stewardship of medical technology will lead to its own demise.

Medicine . . . its study and acquisition are pre-eminently religious activities.

-Maimonides²

There is no wealth like sound health.

-Solomon the Gabirol³

The First Physician: God

According to historians, the first physician whom we can identify by name is Lulu, a Sumerian who lived almost thirty-seven hundred years ago (Kramer, 1963, p. 99).

However, according to Jewish theologians, the first physician whom we can identify by name is God, and the name of the first "licensed" healer was "the healer of God," i.e., the angel Raphael.

An ancient Jewish legend relates that God convened the first colloquium on human health and well-being in heaven, on the sixth day of creation. Discussion focused upon an unprecedented problem in bioengineering and in bioethics. At the plenary session, God, the conference's convener, sponsor, and chairperson, posed this problem to His junior colleagues, the angels: "Shall we create human beings in our image and in our likeness?" (Gn 1:26).

Though the proposed project was eminently do-able for God, and though a sizable grant was already in hand, the inquisitive angels wanted to know more about the project. "What will human beings do once they are created? What is the risk factor of creating them?" queried the angels.

After God had described humanity's potential destructiveness and its potential greatness, the angels replied, "What is man that You are mindful of him?" (Ps 8:5), which means, in the bureaucratic language of angels, "Drop the project because the potential risks outweigh the potential benefits."

Not yet accustomed to dissent, especially from the non-tenured junior colleagues, God pointed one of His divine fingers at them and literally "fired" them on the spot.

Having destroyed the attendees of the first plenary session, God then created a second set of angels, and posed the identical question to them. When they offered the identical response as the first group, God destroyed them, too.

A third set of angels was then created. These angels were led by the wise and tactful angel, Labbiel. When the question of creating human beings was posed to these angels, Labbiel responded, "Sovereign of the Universe, do what You wish with Your world. Do what pleases You with Your creation."

God then said to Labbiel, "You have saved your colleagues from destruction. You have healed what your earlier colleagues meant to destroy. Therefore, you will no longer be called 'Labbiel' but 'Raphael,' the 'healer of God.'"

God then appointed Raphael as the Angel of Healing. God gave into Raphael's safekeeping all of the celestial remedies for illness for him to use in the terrestrial world (Sanhedrin 38a and Beth ha-Midrash, Jellinek 1855, vol. 2, pp. 26-27). Thus, Raphael became the first "licensed" medical practitioner, although not the first physician. Rather, the first doctor to "play God" was God Himself.

Self-licensed, and self-insured for medical malpractice, God deigned to practice a number of medical specialties. He even performed an operation without a signed consent form from His patient. Scripture informs us that God practiced:

- anesthesiology--"the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man,"
- orthopedics--"He took one of the ribs,"
- surgery--He opened and "closed up the flesh,"
- plastic surgery--"the Lord God fashioned the rib" (Gn 2:21-22).

In the beginning, while there were still only few human beings who required medical care, God could tend to them all. But, after humankind began to proliferate, additional staff was required, and so, human beings began to practice medicine. But

how did this supernal knowledge and wisdom, vouchsafed to God and conveyed to Raphael, come to be under human auspices? Here, again, legend intercedes.

When Adam dwelt in the Garden of Eden, he experienced neither illness nor death. But once expelled from paradise and exposed to the precarious conditions of human existence that would be the destiny of his descendants, Adam became apprehensive, and he entreated God for help.

And so God dispatched the angel Raziel to Adam. In the angel's hand there was a sacred book. The angel opened the book and read it to Adam, and Adam understood its contents and he was pleased, for all wisdom was contained in this book. The book was conveyed by Adam to Enoch. But, during the sinful generations that followed, the book was lost.

After the Flood, a variety of illnesses befell Noah's children and grandchildren. So Noah offered sacrifices and entreated God, and God sent Raphael the Angel to Noah. Raphael revealed to Noah the wisdom contained in the Book of Raziel the Angel that had been lost, including knowledge of all of the remedies that might be found in nature. Noah recorded all that he was taught about healing in a book which became the source for all future medical books.

The wise men of various lands such as India, Egypt, and Greece copied from this book and translated its contents to their respective languages. They subsequently attempted to gain access to the Garden of Eden to secure medicinal materials but perished in the process, and with them, perished the medical knowledge they had obtained. For generations humankind was bereft of medical knowledge, until it was renewed by the Persian King Ahashverus, the Hebrew physician Asaph, and the Greek physicians Hippocrates and Galen ("Sefer Noah," Jellinik 1855, vol. 3, pp. 155-160.)⁴

According to a different version of this legend, Noah's son Shem was taken to heaven by an angel after the Flood. In heaven, all remedies for all illnesses were revealed to him. Shem recorded these in a book which he conveyed to Abraham. This book was transmitted from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob, etc., until it reached King Hezekiah, who hid the book, and the medical insights contained therein had to be re-discovered all over again.⁵

According to these aforementioned legends and traditions, the art of healing is a gift of grace from God to human beings, a divine trust conveyed into human stewardship. It is, however, a revocable trust, a gift too precious to be bestowed *carte blanche*. As Paul Ramsey (1970a, p. 138) has so aptly put it, "Men ought not to play God before they learn to be men, and after they have learned to be men, they will not play God."

The divine sanction for human beings to heal other human beings is a franchise defined by the perimeters of a covenant. According to Ramsey (1970a, p. 38) "Men and women are created in covenant, to covenant, and for covenant." The covenant between the physician and patient that Ramsey (1970b, p. xiii) identifies presupposes a covenant between the physician and God. The nature and characteristics of the covenants between God and the physician, between God and the patient, and

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