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*With
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Parshas Va'eschanan

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When Spirituality Gets Physical

A strong case can be made that no pasuk in the entire Torah has played a larger role in advancing the overall physical welfare of humanity than the pasuk of “*V'nishmartem me'od l'nafshosechem*” (Devarim 4:15), which tells us how we should be exceedingly careful with our health. The directive and mandate for us to cherish our bodies and to treat it with utmost respect. Not because the body is our edifice and we bow to it in servitude, but because the body clothes the soul, and without it, the soul would cease to exist on Earth. Our extreme devotion to Hashem and our service to Him propels our nation to protect the soul's outer casing to such an unbelievable extent that we have moved medical mountains in order to do so. Because of this otherwise insignificant-seeming pasuk, our little nation, relative to its size, has contributed more to the safeguarding and health of the human body than almost every other nation combined.

Because of this pasuk, our sages throughout the millennia have put tremendous emphasis on health and preserving it, and the world at large knew it. Over ten popes had Jewish doctors. The Rambam was the personal doctor to Sultan Saladin. Suleiman the Magnificent of the Ottoman Empire had a personal Jewish doctor, as did Elizabeth the First of England, Louis the 14th of France, Catherine the Great of Russia, and even the notorious and vicious anti-Semites Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain.

In the year 1500, half of the doctors in Europe were Jewish! In 1930, 50 percent of the doctors in Berlin were Jewish. The percentage of doctors that were Jewish at that time stood at 60 percent in Vienna, 63 percent in Budapest, 66 percent in Warsaw, 70 percent in L'viv, 74 percent in Vilna, and 83 percent in Lodz, which was Poland's second largest city. This was in spite of facing some of the harshest and most restrictive anti-Semitic laws in our nation's history. It didn't deter us from practicing in the medical field, for we have a soul to protect.

The Soul's Armor

The list of Jewish people with a fire in their souls, who sought out ways to ensure the soul's armor would live on, is a long one, and, relative to its size, almost supernaturally so. The amount that our little nation contributed is nothing short of a miracle.

Selman Waksman, a Jewish microbiologist from Russia, was considered the father of antibiotics, as he was the one who discovered how to properly use them. Basil Hirschowitz invented the fiber optic endoscope. Paul Zoll pioneered the pacemaker and defibrillator. Some other Jews who made revolutionary medical contributions to society were Marshall Nirenberg, who cracked the genetic code, Rosalind Franklin, who discovered the structure of DNA, Rosalyn Yalow, who developed the process for safe blood transfusions, Jonas Salk, who developed the cure for polio, Paul Erlich, who invented chemotherapy, and Michael Gottlieb, who identified and developed the effective treatment of AIDS, among others.

The list goes on and on. The deadly typhus disease was eradicated in great measure by the work of Ludwik Fleck. Arnon, Michael Sela, and Devorah Teitelbaum invented Copaxone, a drug used to treat multiple sclerosis. Moussa Youdima from Iran discovered the medicine for treating Parkinson's. Ernst Chain of Germany discovered the pharmaceutical use of penicillin. Bacteriologist Waldemar Haffkine of Russia found the cure to cholera. Microbiologist Irving Millman and geneticist Baruch Blumberg discovered the cure to hepatitis. Electro-optical engineer Gavriel Iddan invented the very first pill camera. Thoracic surgeon Henry Heimlich invented what is now called the Heimlich maneuver, saving hundreds of thousands of people yearly from choking. Charles Kelman discovered cataract surgery. A cardiovascular surgeon by the name of Albert Sarr invented the very first artificial heart valves. Biotechnologist Tal Dvir invented the world's first 3D printed heart, made entirely from actual human cells. Abel Wolman pioneered the concept of clean chlorinated drinking water, saving millions of lives that would have otherwise been lost due to contaminated water.

Jews were responsible for major medical organizations and institutions. One of the first nursing organizations in Russia was started by Jews. Lillian Wald started the nurse organization of America. Henrietta Szold founded the world-famous Hadassah network. Tremendous contributions to the world of psychiatric and psychological health were made by Jews as well. Some famous ones are: Alfred Adler, Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, Viktor Frankle, and Abraham Maslow.

Massive hospital chains were built all over the world bearing the name of the Jews that inspired them, attesting to the world's respect for their medical knowledge and efforts. A few examples are Maimonides Medical Center, Montefiore Medical Center, and Mount Sinai Hospital.

Our burning desire for health isn't limited only to help our fellow people, but spread to the world at large. Bernard Kushner from France, whose own parents were killed in the Holocaust, started what has become one of the world's largest medical volunteer organizations, *Doctors without Borders*. The Jewish cardiac surgeon Amram Cohen started an organization called *Save a Child's Heart*, which offers free heart surgeries to children in over 60 countries. During the Syrian civil war, Jews set up several hospitals to treat wounded Syrian troops, despite the fact that Syria is not a friend of Israel by any standards. In March of 2022, Jews from Israel were the very first to set up a hospital on Ukrainian soil, during the Russian invasion. Jewish immunologist Drew Weissman, and Albert Bourla, chairman and CEO of Pfizer, led the team that discovered the mRNA platform, which led the way to the first effective Covid vaccine. The chief medical officer at Pfizer, as well, is a Jew by the name of Mikael Dolsten. The chief medical officer of Moderna is Tal Zaks. The chief medical officer of Johnson and Johnson is Joanne Waldstreicher. The current chief medical scientist of Russia's Gemalaya institute is a Jew by the name of Anatoly Altstein, and the director is Alexander Gintsburg. The list goes on.

A Jew, religious or not, is well aware of the precious cargo his body is carrying. The small piece of heaven that is hidden underneath. That spark of the divine that the body is there to protect. We will do whatever it takes to ensure that the soul will live on. If it means discovering the most remarkable medical breakthroughs in history, we are ready to take it on. Our souls are simply too precious not to.