

## JUDAISM, HEALTH AND HEALING

**Understanding Judaism:** Judaism is a monotheistic religion which falls between the class of Christianity and Islam. There are three common religious traits of the Jewish religion:--

- God is unique and he revealed himself to Moses in the Torah at Mount Sinai
- To keep the Torah as the privilege of the Jews
- God rewards those who obey his laws and punishes those who do evil.

The Jewish religion was founded more than 3500 years ago in the Middle East. According to the information circulated by The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, there were approximately 13.1 million Jewish people in the globe in 2007. Majority of the Jews are now residing in the USA and Israel. <sup>1</sup>The religion was founded by Moses, though many Jews trace their history back to Abraham. In return of all the good that God has done for mankind, the Jews in turn try to bring holiness in each and every aspect of their life. The spiritual leaders of the Jews are called Rabbis. Jews worship the Synagogues. There are five main denominations of Judaism:--

- **Orthodox Judaism:** The Orthodox Jews are of the belief that God gave Moses the whole of Torah at Mount Sinai. The Torah contains 613 commandments that act as binding upon the Jews.
- **Conservative Judaism:** The Conservative Jews believe that the idea of the Torah comes from God but were conveyed by human beings, thereby contains a human element. They accept the binding nature of the halakhah (Jewish Law).
- **Reform Judaism:** Reform Judaism maintains that the Torah was written by various human sources and not by God. It was later combined as a religious text. The Reform Jews don't believe in the binding nature of the halakhah (the Jewish laws).
- **Reconstructionist Judaism :** The Reconstructionist Jews maintain that Judaism is a progressing religious civilization. This denomination of Judaism is more liberal than the Reform Judaism as they do not believe in any personified deity and also disbelieve the fact that God chose the people of the Jews.
- **Humanistic Judaism:** It was founded in 1963 in Detroit, Michigan by Rabbi Sherwin T Wine. He tried to establish a free life for the Jews who would have the freedom from the supernatural authority in achieving self-respect and self esteem. It tries to revive the secular roots of Judaism.

**Defining Judaism:** The Jewish history can be divided into five spheres—The Tribal Era (2000-1000 BC) where Jewish ancestors were nomadic shepherds and farmers; The Royal Era (1000-586 BC) where Increasing urbanization and revolt started to take place; The Priestly Era (520-100 BC) where priestly class and priestly authority had its rise; The Rabbinic Era (100 BC-1800) where Jewish traditions revolved around prayer and rituals; The Modern Era (1790-Present) where secularized notions have started to creep into the religion. Jewish people

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/ata glance/glance.shtml>

consider that human beings do not have possession of their own bodies. They deem that each human being is created in part by God and they do not have the right to do what they want with their bodies.

**Origin of Jewish Tradition:** The Jewish tradition traces its roots back to Abraham. Under God's command, Abraham migrated to the region of Canaan. For a certain period of time, the Hebrews lived in servitude in Egypt, and then returned to Canaan. After a period of monarchy, the Jewish people were banished for roughly two generations. A relatively small number of Jews returned to the land of Israel. Thus, it describes how God chose the Jews to be an example in front of the world. The Jews established a strong community in Babylonia that continued to exist for 1500 years under the rule of the Persians and the Muslims. The most important figures of Israel culture include the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophet Moses, who received God's law at Mt. Sinai. Judaism is a tradition based in the religious, ethical, and social laws as they are penned down in the Torah — the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.



**Jewish Spiritual Practices:** Spirituality is the foundation of Judaism. Spirituality to Judaism is recognized as the importance of the care of the soul and its interaction with the care of the human body. It is the source of compassion, values, healing, creativity as well as abundance. One of the traits of Hasidic practice is the practice of daily spirituality. "Know Him in all your ways" (Proverbs 3:6)—this is a call to remember God through various mechanisms like prayers, blessings, repetition of a holy sentence, and constant admiration in the middle of our daily activities. There are many traditional as well as non-traditional activities which are involved with Jewish spiritual practices. The major practices are as follows—

- Tefillah (prayer)
- Talmud Torah (learning of a wide range of traditional texts, with a special emphasis on Chasidic and other mystically-oriented texts)
- Mindfulness meditation
- Yoga (embodied practice)
- ikkun middot (developing desirable personal and communal traits)<sup>2</sup>

The Jewish Spiritual Practices are comprised of six major elements—

- Matarah (Goal)
- Kavanah (Intention)
- Da'at (Awareness)
- Middot (personal traits)
- Ma'aseh (deed)
- Masoret (Tradition)

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<sup>2</sup> Source:-- <http://www.jewishspirituality.org/our-spiritual-practices/>

**Concept of Body/Soul in Judaism:** The tradition of Judaism has long observed that there are two main components of health—the body and the spirit. Traditionally, a person falling sick used to receive the prayers for complete healing in terms of one's healing in body and mind. To cure the body implies to clear away all the pathology that has struck the person and to heal the spirit implies creating a path to sense wholeness, mystery, depth and so on. The Jews believe that pathology is not only physiological but also psychological. Therefore, healing of the body must also be accompanied by the healing of the Spirit or soul of the human being. It is Judaism that teaches its followers that though body and soul are separate entities but they are indispensable to each other. One must protect it from all odds as it's considered to be holy in nature.

**Understanding Healing:** Healing is a stalk of deeds for the restoration of physical form from a troubled, pathological or damaged organism. Healing is many a time compared with the thought of in-depth, vivid and spirituality. Spiritual healing shows the way to the protection of health, highlights on meditation, specific movements of the body so that the health of the person is put back to its normal state. In the Jewish liturgy two words are used regarding healthcare i.e. Refuat Ha-Guf (cure) and Refuat Ha-Nefesh (healing). The former is connected to the body, while the latter links to the human being as spirit. In Judaism, it is a sanctified commitment to lighten pain, and the illness which brings the state of the mortal beings to that condition.

**Healing in Judaism:** Judaism's holistic approach to healing is marked in the time-honored centuries old *MiSheberach* prayer for healing which is believed to be said when someone fell ill. The followers of Judaism believe in the process of "healing of body" (*r'fuat ha-guf*) and a "healing of spirit" (*r'fuat ha-nefesh*). Jewish healing is followed by traditional therapeutic, social, psychological and approving care. Even if physical care cannot be achieved but being inclined to one's spirit can generate pathways to realise wholeness (*shleimut*) and peace (*shalom*). The prayer for healing among the Jews in times of illness is—

I cry aloud to God  
I cry to God to give ear to me  
In my time of distress I turn to the Almighty,  
with my hand uplifted;  
my eyes flow all night without respite;  
I will not be comforted.  
I call God to mind, I moan,  
I complain, my spirit falls. (Psalm 77)<sup>3</sup>

**Concept of Magical Healing:** Checking and treating illness and disease is a worldwide human concern. In the Bible, God is identified as the foundation for disease and healing (Exodus 15:26), and the most general reason for God distributing disease is the

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<sup>3</sup> Source: [www.jewishhealing.org/downloads/PrayerHealing.doc](http://www.jewishhealing.org/downloads/PrayerHealing.doc)

commitment of any sin (Deut. 28:27). According to the Jews, God declared, "I wound and I heal (Deuteronomy 32:40)."<sup>4</sup> An ocean of healing practices is *de facto* magic barred by the Torah. Just as Jews alleged that illness can have supernatural origins, it can similarly be treated via magical and other supernatural ways. Many used to follow the process of magical healing and followed the following things such as amulets, spells, exorcisms, and potions. All these were a regular part of the healer's method of treatments. Rabbinic literature conserves a gigantic list of theurgic and magical methods of healing illnesses. Along with conservative folk medications involving diet, curative foods (Gittin 67b; Eruvin 29b; Gittin 69a-70a; Avodah Zarah 28a-b; Ketubot 50a; Yoma 83b-84a), exercise, and healthful practices, the Sages used to stipulate the narration of Scriptural verses (such as, the Shema or Psalm 29) and prayer called *refuot* (healings). Angels as well as demons, could be appealed to effect a recuperation (Shabbat 67b; Sanhedrin 101a). Amulets and talismans were habitually used both as curative measures and as remedies (Shabbat 67a). Items instilled with *kedushah*, spiritual power, such as leftover wine from holiday Kiddush, or olive oil sanctified for use in a Hanukkah menorah, were also believed to have additional medicinal power.

**Jewish Healing Practices:** Judaism provides a lot of strength to the people while he/she is suffering from any kind of diseases. Patients can look for meaning, guidance, comfort, and solace in Judaism. The Jewish "healing repertoire" amalgamates prayer, song, study, storytelling, social justice action, meditation, ritual, and many other methods. If a Jew changes his name then that is considered to be a sin in Judaism—

**"A change of name acts as an atonement for sin."<sup>5</sup>**

**--Zohar, Genesis 133b**

Prayer is a prime means of being healed. The prayer may be chanted at any time that may be suitable to the chanter. Prayers can be recited in the hospital, at home or anywhere when someone is sick. Akin to meditation, it can be consoling and soothing, thereby allowing the people to have an access to regions of their inner selves. An elementary feature of Jewish spiritual healing is *bikur cholim* (visiting the sick), which acts in response to two of the utmost burdens of present-day life i.e. isolation and lack of community.

**Jewish Healing and its Relevance in Modern Life:** The contemporary world have seen the growth in the sphere of the rise in healing traditions among the Jews. This renewed interest in the path of healing made more and more people to make their lives more meaningful by resorting to the traditional healing methods. Yet, the traditional dogmatic traditions have in this contemporary world been overcome by many individuals. Rather they are looking for spirituality that is more meaningful and practical in nature. It enhances their life and also acts as a source of renunciation for many followers. The custom of Kabbalah has become the most noteworthy. Kabbalistic healing is ingrained in the tradition of

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<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://biblehub.com/deuteronomy/32-39.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://jerusalemilife.com/torahkids/jwquotes.txt>

the Sage. It's a living organic art and science that is many a times applied to the shifting times. The beginning of Kabbalah is delimited in the charisma of every tradition, but the deeds of the Kabbalists of Safed in the 1500's brought the quintessence of it into external form and sensible spiritual regulation. Its relevance in the modern world remains as it deals with the world of epitome and deep rooted metaphor rather than just the outer expression.

**Judaism: Health and Illness:** Human life is treasured above all in Jewish philosophy and practice. "The expertise of the health care professional is extremely important in caring for a person who is ill. They are seen as instruments of God, who is the ultimate giver and taker of life" (ibid). Jewish people do not consent to euthanasia, suicide, or abortion<sup>6</sup> and such actions which are forbidden by Jewish law. Jews deem that people are not allowed to annihilate something that they do not own. Avoidance is seen as the highest form of healing. Drugs and surgery are considered as failure in the prevention of diseases from creeping into one's physical health. As God is omnipotent, omniscient, and all-merciful in the Judaic tradition, it is alleged that people who are sick are so because of God's pre-planned devise (Solomon, 1999, p. 170). In the Jewish tradition, the practice of medicine is a responsibility for those who have the proficiency and are able to execute them. If a person is not a physician, then visiting and praying for the welfare of the sick must be his/her nucleus. Wellbeing of the physical health must be the prime concern of all the Jews present in the world. Good deeds and charity are based on a sense of responsibility, involvement, and kindness which is believed to bring about wellbeing in one's physical health.

**Gender—Health and Healing in Judaism:** Gender is a socially created concept. In Judaism God is portrayed as neither male nor female. In traditional Judaism, women are for the most part seen as separate but equal. Women's obligations and responsibilities are different from men's, but no less important in Judaism. There are many cases where the women fall a prey to victimization of various social evils. There are various healing measures which by counting the issue of domestic violence in community worship, the community acknowledges its duty to fight that hostility. The personal ritual gives the victim internal potency to create a new life for herself. A battered woman can look for healing by affirming to the beginning of her new life by reciting Shehechiyanu<sup>7</sup>:

**Blessed are You, Holy One, Source of life, who has kept us alive,  
sustained us, and brought us to this day. Amen.**

The second step would be to affix a unique prayer to a personal ritual that the woman already performs, such as lighting *Shabbat* candles. The woman puts on strength and heals by reciting the Prayer below—

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<sup>6</sup> In some cases, the Jews goes in for abortion of the child as it can bring positive result for the mother's health. In a few situations, the mental well-being of the mother is also taken into consideration. The holiness of the life is valued above all in Judaism.

<sup>7</sup> Source: <http://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/healing-ritual-abused-jewish-women>



*I am a woman of valor,  
My arms are new with strength.  
My hands will plant vineyards;  
With dignity will I tend them,  
With laughter and with wisdom will I make them grow;  
And I will seek goodness all the days of my life.  
(Based on Proverbs 31)<sup>8</sup>*

**Prayer as Healing in Judaism:** Since time immemorial, the Jews have resorted to prayers whenever they suffered from any time of deluge. The prayers acts as a source of healing for the individuals to come out of the agony they are suffering from at the present moment. Prayer provides us with the time for reflection. Similar to meditation, chanting prayers can be calming and soothing. It allows individuals to have an access to regions of the person's inner selves. It can help individuals to get in contact with their potency and confidence on their faith. Prayer can also endow one with liberation and respite from nervous thoughts that worsen both physical and mental agony. The mental recreation of prayer can bring the individuals solace when people take the standpoint that their lives are in due course in God's hands. People find calmness in knowing that the words of the psalms and blessings have been made vocal by millions of Jews both in the past and in the present, who like them, hanker for healing.

**Concept of Bikur Cholim:** One of the prime characteristics of spiritual healing among the Jews is the concept of *bikur cholim*. It refers to the visiting of the sick. The concept of bikur cholim provides a solace to two major contemporary burden of social life i.e. isolation and lack of community. During the time of illness Bikur Cholim provides the people with comfort of human association and interdependence, a sense of community. This association with closed ones gives a patient the strength to heal faster. The mitzvah of *bikur cholim* helps accomplish the commitment to "love our neighbor as our-self," and it is obligatory on the part of every Jew (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah: Laws of Mourning, ch. 14). <sup>9</sup>"A visitor's attentive presence breaks the isolation and sense of abandonment, the existential aloneness often felt by one who is sick, reaffirming the person's essential humanness and wholeness. In addition, the visitor provides a link to community, reaffirming a sense of connection and purpose" (cited: Flam, 1994). Torah teaches that one who practices *bikur cholim* replicates God, whose presence visited Abraham after his circumcision (Genesis Rabbah, 8:13). Therefore, *Bikur cholim* demonstrates the healing power of relationship.

**The concept of Teshuvah:** There is a source of inner healing among the Jews which can be achieved by following Teshuvah<sup>10</sup> (i.e. repentance) and self growth. This self-growth and

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<sup>8</sup> Source: <http://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/healing-ritual-abused-jewish-women>

<sup>9</sup> Source: <http://synagoguestudies.org/spiritual-healing-bikur-cholim>

<sup>10</sup> The usual word for repentance is *teshuvah*, meaning "turning"--that is, from sin to God.

*teshuvah* are integral parts of the religious experience for Jewish people of faith. It is the medium by which people can reach beyond their mistakes, misdeeds, and remoteness from God to stand again in God's presence (Peli, 1984). One of the prime facets of the *teshuvah* process is the capability for self reflection or *heshbon ha-nefesh*. For the strong and healthy, *teshuvah*, *heshbon ha-nefesh* and continual self-growth are imperatives and strong values in Judaism.

**Healing in the Torah:** Torah is the holy book of the Jews in Judaism. It contains numerous scriptures which provide a person with the measures to heal from all the pathos of life. It is considered as an expert book of medicine. Rabbi Isaac of Homil who is one of the supreme thinkers in Chabad, draws an analogous between the 6 stages by which the Torah heals the soul and the 6 progressively more powerful types of medicine practiced in the medical world to heal the mortals. Out of the six levels, the first involves the advice of the experts as the experienced practitioner knows the appropriate medicine to recommend in order to treat the definite ailments of the body. The second level involves the power of charms. The third level involves the chanting of the holy names. The fourth level includes the types of healing measures that is referred to by the Sages "If one's head aches he should delve into Torah... if one's whole body aches he should delve into Torah"<sup>11</sup>. " the fifth level includes to take one's soul to "take over" and "replace" the body by endorsing all of its physical functions. The sixth level involves with the miracles that takes place in the process of healing of a human being. It makes one belief in the "spark of God".



**Conclusion:** Therefore, healing is one of the prime criteria that is mentioned in detail in Judaism. Health and Illness is one of the vital topics on which Judaism has shedded its holy light. It has come up with various measures in order to heal an individual out of one's physical ailments or mental distress. It not only catered to the needs of the men in the society but also to the women who suffer from various social evils like wife battering, domestic violence, physical abuse and so on. The holy book of the Jews i.e. Torah also provides numerous ways by which a person can be healed.

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<sup>11</sup> Source: [www.inner.org/6levels/sixlevels](http://www.inner.org/6levels/sixlevels)

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