

Rabbinic Stone Healing (Tetzaveh)

*“The art of medicine consists of amusing the patient while nature cures the disease.” -
Voltaire*

Western medicine is typically disparaging of any treatments that cannot be confirmed by a peer reviewed double blind study with a well defined control group, often heavily financed by pharmaceutical companies. Eastern medicine, on the other hand, forays frequently into the realm of superstition, idol worship, and outright chicanery. Each system reflects not only accumulated experience, but also the intellectual habits and assumptions of the society in which it developed.

Jewish sages throughout the ages tended to adopt the medical practices of their time and place, while attempting to distinguish between genuine remedies and empty superstition. Practices associated with idolatry were rejected, while those that appeared to produce consistent effects were sometimes accepted, even if their underlying causes were not fully understood. Their interest lay in wisdom itself, wherever it could be found, provided it could be reconciled with a worldview grounded in the order and unity of creation.

Ibn Ezra, known for his generally rational and naturalistic approach, makes mention of the powers of stones, which to Western ears may sound like nonsense. However, in his comments on Exodus 28:9, he elaborates that there is a stone which, if worn on a finger, causes a person to see his dreams. He adds that this should not be surprising, since each stone possesses its own unique properties. He notes that there is a stone that attracts metal, one that stills blood, one that recoils from vinegar, and one that always breaks into triangles. These examples are striking because at least some clearly correspond to observable phenomena. The stone that attracts metal is a magnet, and the stone that breaks into triangles resembles crystals whose internal structure determines their fracture.

In the ancient world, where the distinctions between physics, chemistry, and medicine were not yet formalized, it was reasonable to suspect that materials with unusual physical properties might also affect the human body. Certain minerals were in fact used to assist in clotting wounds, and others were used in compounds intended to influence bodily functions. What was described in the language of powers may have reflected careful observation expressed in the conceptual vocabulary available at the time.

Perhaps there is some truth after all to the healing properties attributed to stones, not as violations of the natural order, but as indications that the natural world contains layers of structure and influence that are not always immediately apparent.

May we access healing from multiple sources.

Shabbat Shalom and Purim Sameach,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Israel