The Jewish Attraction to the Medical Profession in Physicians' Own Words: A Mesorah of Medicine

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The longstanding attraction of Jews to the medical profession has provided sustenance to many a comedian. Even one of the most profound questions about human existence, "When does life begin in the Jewish tradition?" has been answered with, "When your son is accepted to medical school." The proverbial "my son,[1] the doctor" is virtually ubiquitous in Jewish social culture. Indeed, Sherwin Nuland's essay on the saga of Jews and medicine bore this very title.[2] Every historian and scholar of Jewish medical history has addressed the unique relationship of the Jews and medicine.[3] They have pointed to the traditional Jewish obligation and

1 Today, we would revise to my "child" the doctor, as many Jewish women are physicians. Jewish women have occupied health-related fields, such as midwifery and nursing, as well as medicine, for centuries. Regarding the history of Jewish women physicians, see Caris-Petra Heidel, ed., *Die Frau im Judentum: Judische Frauen in der Medizin*, *Medizin und Judentum*, Bd. 12 (Mabuse-Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 2014).

2 *New Republic* (September 5, 2005).

3 For discussions on this topic and for general works on the Jews and Medicine, see Harry Friedenwald, *The Jews and Medicine* 3 v. (Johns Hopkins Press: Baltimore, 1944); Nathan Koren, *Jewish Physicians: A Biographical Index* (Israel Universities Press: Jerusalem, 1973); Natalia Berger, *Jews and Medicine: Religion, Culture, Science* (Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia, 1995); David B. Ruderman, "The Impact of Science on Jewish Culture and Society in Venice (with Special Reference to Jewish Graduates of Padua's Medical School)" in his *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1995), 519-553; John Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2001; Frank Heynick, *Jews and Medicine: An Epic Saga* (Ktav, 2002);

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penchant for study; to the bans on Jews to practice most professions (with the exception of money lending and medicine); as well as to opportunities for social acceptance,[4] mobility,[5] and community advocacy.

A thorough analysis of this multi-faceted attraction of Jews to the medical profession throughout the ages remains a desideratum. Here I contribute to the conversation by exploring an untapped resource—the personal testimony of the physicians themselves.[6] We provide a rare glimpse into the minds of Jewish physicians throughout the ages. Through their own words and inferred from their writings, we learn the motives and decision-making process that drew them to the world of medicine as a career path. This brief survey includes primarily physicians of the past, and our examples[7] derive from diverse historical periods and geographical backgrounds.

Along the way, we share additional insights and advice from our doctors and their mentors about the challenges of medical training faced by the observant Jew, in particular, with regard to juggling medical training and practice with Torah study[8] and observance.[9]

Ronald Eisenberg, *Jews in Medicine: Contributions to Health and Healing Throughout the Ages* (Urim Publications, 2019); Lennart Lehmhaus, *Defining Jewish* Medicine, Volume 8 of *Episteme in Bewegung. Beiträge zur einer transdisziplinären Wissensgeschichte* (Freie Universität Berlin, 2021).

4 "There are no realistic Jewish mothers who are unaware that medicine is one of the few professions where their sons can compete on equal terms with non-Jews." See Lord Goodman, et al., *Not an Englishman: Conversations with Lord Goodman* (Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993), 58.

5 "It is the parents who are inclined to advise their sons to become doctors out of a desire for their security. Most Jews… have their bags packed, metaphorically speaking, and a medical degree is a highly portable qualification." See Lord Goodman, et al., *Not an Englishman: Conversations with Lord Goodman* (Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993), 57.

6 I also include those in their orbit. While some of the "testimony" will be direct, some will be inferential.

7 The wide availability of searchable databases is of no use in identifying relevant sources for this essay. The examples presented here are those I have come across over the years. There are surely additional examples, and I welcome the contributions and additions of others.

8 On the history of combined medical and Torah curricula, see E. Reichman, "The Yeshiva Medical School: The Evolution of Educational Programs Combining Jewish Studies and Medical Training," *Tradition* 51:3 (Summer 2019), 41-56.

9 For further discussion on the unique challenges of medical training for the Jewish student see E. Reichman, "From Maimonides the Physician to the Physician at Maimonides Medical Center: The Training of the Jewish Medical Student

What appears below as an inventory of random Jewish physicians and their retinue throughout the ages is in fact a rarely seen window into the most hallowed non-rabbinic profession in Jewish history. We enter the very recesses of the minds of doctors throughout time to learn what compelled them to become "my son the doctor."

(Why) My Son (Became) the Doctor
The Profession of Medicine—Practical Considerations

Rambam (1138-1204)

Though known and studied primarily for his contributions to Jewish law, Rambam is considered one of the greatest physicians in Jewish history. Despite his extensive writings, including medical, legal, and epistolary, we have precious little about his personal decisions regarding his practice of medicine. He was clearly an advocate of secular knowledge, particularly in the fields of science and medicine, as a vehicle to fulfilling the obligation of attaining the knowledge of God.[10] This does not necessarily translate into the positive value of becoming a practicing physician. Though Rambam himself did indeed become a practicing physician, perhaps this was only as a means of providing financial support upon the death of his brother, who had previously sustained the family. We can only conjecture if Rambam would have chosen this path otherwise.

We do, however, have evidence of Rambam recommending the profession of medicine to others. In a letter to his disciple Joseph ibn Aknin (the recipient of the *Moreh Nevukhim*), Rambam recommends that Ibn Aknin pursue his medical career instead of receiving compensation for a rabbinic position as Exilarch:[11]

> My advice to you is to pay full attention to your … practice of medicine and at the same time continue the study of Torah voluntarily (without compensation).

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throughout the Ages," *Verapo Yerape*: *The Journal of Torah and Medicine of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine* 3(2011), 1-25.

10 See, for example, R. Yoseph Kafah, "Secular Studies in the Rambam," in Ezra Rosenfeld, ed., *Crossroads: Halacha and Modern World* (Zomet, 1987), 109-116. I thank Dr. Elisha Kahen for bringing this source to my attention.

11 Leon Stitskin, "Religion and Philosophy Lead to the Same Truth: Letter of Maimonides to his Disciple Joseph Ben Judah Ibn Aknin," *Tradition* 13:3 (Winter 1973), 154-160. I thank Dr. Elisha Kahen for bringing this source to my attention.

This advice is couched in a general aversion to earning a living through Torah endeavors, as he adds:

> It is far better for you to earn a single drachma as a weaver, tailor, or carpenter than to be dependent on the license of the Exilarch…[12]

While Rambam suggests that Ibn Aknin pursue medicine, it may possibly be because the latter had already acquired this specific skill. Perhaps other professions could equally accomplish this objective.

The necessity to earn a living outside of Torah is a theme reflected in our next source and repeated throughout history, as we shall see below, but others are more explicit about the preferential choice of medicine as the non-Torah career.

Do'eg ha-Edomi (12th century)[13]

While Jews have trained to become physicians throughout our entire history, by the Middle Ages medical training had become more formalized in Western Europe. Universities were established, though Jews were generally barred from entry, and dedicated curricula for study, including both ancient and recent texts, were developed for medical students.[14] In addition, official criteria and testing were developed for medical licensure.[15]

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12 Rambam shares specific concerns about the negative aspects of the Exilarch position: "I fear, however, that you will be constantly involved in disputes… Moreover, if you assume the practice of teaching, your business affairs will be neglected, and you dare not accept any financial reward from them."

13 On Doeg the Edomite, see, for example, Gad Freudenthal, "The Brighter Side of Medieval Christian-Jewish Polemical Encounters: Transfer of Medical Knowledge in the Midi (Twelfth–Fourteenth Centuries)," *Medieval Encounters* 24 (2018), 29-61.

14 Cecil Roth, "The Medieval University and the Jew," *Menorah Journal* 19:2 (November-December, 1930), 128-141.

15 See, for example, Cecil Roth, "Qualifications of Jewish Physicians in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 28 (1953), 838; J. Shatzmiller, "On Becoming a Jewish Doctor in the High Middle Ages," *Sefarad* 43 (1983); Luis García-Ballester, et al., "Medical Licensing and Learning in Fourteenth-Century Valencia," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series, 79:6 (1989), pp. i-viii+1-128; Joseph Shatzmiller, *Jews, Medicine, and Medieval Society* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1994); Etienne Lepicard, "Medical Licensing and Practice in Medieval Spain: A Model of Interfaith Relationship?" in Samuel Kottek and Luis Garcia-Ballester, eds., *Medicine and Medical Ethics in Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 1996), 50-60; John Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2001).

While Jewish students rarely attended universities,[16] and more often pursued less formal methods of medical education, they nonetheless utilized largely the same medical corpus as their Christian or non-Jewish co-practitioners. This facilitated their application for medical licensure. As these texts were often in Latin, or other languages unfamiliar to the Jewish student, they remained inaccessible for study.

In the late 12th century, the anonymous author, known by the pseudonym Do'eg ha-Edomi, attempted to remedy this deficiency and translated a series of Latin medical works into Hebrew, intended for the training of Jewish medical students.[17] In his introduction, he cites a Talmudic passage from the tractate of *Kiddushin*, "A man should teach his son Torah, [but also] he should teach him a craft." This dictum was the primary justification for his translation endeavor.[18] According to Jewish law, it is incumbent upon every father to teach his son a craft. Medicine is surely no worse, and perhaps even better, than others.

Jacob Provenzali (15th century)

Financial stability is certainly an accepted motivation to pursue medicine. Jacob Provenzali was a rabbi and scholar living in France and Italy in the fifteenth century who was also engaged in maritime trade. He was a student of the rabbi-physician Judah Messer Leon and wrote him a letter expressing his opinion on the value of secular studies, particularly medicine.[19] While he admits that the ideal life pursuit is to teach Torah to as many students as possible, he laments that following this path in his generation would invariably lead to starvation for one and his family.

> I have therefore praised the field of medicine for there is no profession in the world today that sustains its practitioner with honor like it… and I have said that it is wise to practice [medicine] as have great rabbis and sages in prior generations. I am inclined to say that it is preferable for a Torah scholar (*talmid ḥakham*) to become a physician rather than a carpenter or tailor. I do not say however that it is not more beneficial or desirable for one to become a rabbi, to educate many students, and to provide Torah guidance to the world rather

16 Cecil Roth, "The Medieval University and the Jew," *Menorah Journal* 19:2 (November-December, 1930), 128-141.

17 On translation of Hebrew medical texts, see the works of Gad Freudenthal, Gerrit Bos, Ron Barkai, Lola Ferre, Maud Kozodoy, Suesmann Muntner, Harry Friedenwald, and Tzvi Langermann.

18 See Ron Barkai, *A History of Jewish Gynecological Texts in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 21.

19 Eliezer Ashkenazi, *Divrei Ḥakhamim* (Metz: Mayer Samuel, 1849), 63-75, esp. 73-74.

> than be a physician or metalsmith. However, the Torah is belittled in the eyes of this generation, and the students capable of being elevated to the rabbinate have no interest in bestowing honor on any rabbi, even if he be as great as Rabbi Akiva, nor upon the Talmud. It has penetrated their hearts that it is preferable to listen to the non-Jewish scholars…

Provenzali adds that one should choose the field of medicine, for through this, not only will he be able to support his family comfortably, but he will also create a peaceful home environment (*shalom bayit*) as a byproduct.

Leon Joseph of Carcassonne (1384-1402)

Another practical reason for a Jew to pursue medicine is reflected in the writings of Leon Joseph of Carcassonne, who trained to become a physician in Southern France in the Middle Ages. These were challenging times for a Jew desiring to become a physician due to both institutionalized and anecdotal discriminatory practices. For example, Carcassonne could not even obtain the requisite textbooks for medical school, as there was a ban on those who sold these works to non-Christians. After ten years, he was finally able to obtain them, but, even then, only at double the price.[20]

While Do'eg ha-Edomi highlighted the professional/financial dimension of the medical field, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance there were unique practical advantages for Jews to become physicians, at a time when Jews in general suffered widespread discrimination and were barred from most professions. Leon Joseph of Carcassonne reports one of his motives for learning medicine:

> When I lived among the Christians, I was of an inferior condition in their eyes, for there is none of our nation who is honored in their eyes except him who is a physician and who cures them of their ills; in such a case, he sits at the table of kings and remains standing before them, whether he be of humble birth or of high rank, owing to his knowledge of medical science.[21]

While this sentiment is not found in classic rabbinic literature, it is reminiscent of the words of Ben Sira, "The physician's knowledge elevates

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20 Cecil Roth, "Qualifications," *op. cit.*, 835.

21 Cited in Maud Kozodoy, "The Jewish Physician in Medieval Iberia: New Directions," December 2010. https://www.academia.edu/3630003/The_Jewish_Physician_in_Medieval_Iberia_New_Directions (accessed November 20, 2018).

his status, and before the munificent (kings) he will stand."[22] This logic most certainly played a role in the decision of a Jewish child to pursue medicine in the pre-modern era,[23] and many Jewish physicians rose to financial and political power serving as physicians to kings, princes, and popes.[24]

The Uniquely "Jewish" Attraction to Medicine

Aside from the obvious financial benefits, there are more philosophical reasons, intrinsic to Judaism and the Torah, that account for the prolonged and sustained gravitational pull of medicine for the Jew; something unique about the practice of medicine that specifically endears it to the Torah-observant Jew. Rabbinic literature throughout the centuries is replete with positive statements about medicine.[25] Indeed, Provenzali adds that one who pursues medicine "will also be honored amongst the people and endear and elevate the name of God through his work."[26] This added

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22 *Wisdom of Ben Sira* 38:3 (author's translation). For different translations, see Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: A New Translation with Notes* (Doubleday: Garden City, NY, 1987), and Louis H. Feldman, *et al*., eds., *Outside the Bible: Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), 2307. For more on Ben Sira and medicine, see Pieter W. van der Horst, "Early Jewish Knowledge of Greek Medicine," in Michael L. Satlow, ed., *Strength to Strength: Essays in Appreciation of Shaye J. D. Cohen* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2018), 104.

23 This sentiment is found equally in the modern era as well. See John Cooper, *Pride and Prejudice: Jewish Doctors and Lawyers in England, 1890- 1990* (Littman Library: Oxford, 2003), 44-45. There he writes that during the 1930s the English Jewish parents recalled the past pogroms in their countries of origin and sought professions for their children that were both secure and portable.

24 For examples, see Zimmels, *Magicians,* 17; E. Mendelssohn, *The Popes' Jewish Doctors 492-1655 C.E.* (Lauderhill, Florida: self-publication, 1991); Friedenwald, *op. cit.*; Heynick, *op. cit.* Attaining these high positions did not come without risk. For example, in 1490, a Venetian Jewish physician named Master Leo was duly executed after failing to cure the eldest son of Czar Ivan III. See Michael Nevins, "The Perils of Court Life," in his *The Jewish Doctor: A Narrative History* (Jason Aronson: Northvale, NJ, 1996), 31-36.

25 For sources in Ḥazal relating to medicine, see Zimmels, *Magicians*; Daniel Eidensohn, *Daas Torah: A Jewish Sourcebook* (Jerusalem: Emunah Press, 2005), 515-531, notes 811-818; Avraham Steinberg, *Ha-Refuah Ki-Halakhah* (Jerusalem, 5777), section eight on the physician and the practice of medicine in rabbinic literature.

26 Eliezer Ashkenazi, *Divrei Ḥakhamim* (Metz: Mayer Samuel, 1849), 63-75, esp. 73. See below for more on this letter.

"religious" benefit comprises one aspect of the practice of medicine that is unique to the Jewish physician, and which is expressed by the physicians below.

Natan ben Yoel ibn Falaquera (1224-1290)

In the 13th century, the Spanish physician and author of the popular Hebrew medical work *Tzori ha-Guf*, Natan ben Yoel ibn Falaquera, wrote in his *Sefer ha-Mevakesh*,

> "I too have heard that the sages enjoin one to learn a wholesome occupation which can serve as protection against the vagaries of fate… Wise men have stated that the practice of medicine is superior to all other occupations, for it is both a profession and science, and is closest to the science of nature."[27]

Here he elevates the medical profession beyond its financial advantages, giving it a religious value.

Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo (1591-1655)

Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo, a graduate of the famed University of Padua Medical School, and one of the greatest physicians in Jewish medical history, was also a renowned Torah scholar. He is known for his relationship with some of the most prominent scholars of his age, including Galileo and Spinoza.[28] He echoes and expands upon the sentiments expressed above:[29]

> A wise man will seek out for his son to obtain knowledge that is associated with a respectable and honest profession that will earn him money as he grows. For one will not find in the annals of history any city whose salvation was achieved through the wisdom of Torah

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27 Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera, *The Book of the Seeker* (*Sefer ha-Mevakesh*), M. H. Levine, trans. and ed. (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1976), 39.

28 Jacob Adler, "Joseph Solomon Delmedigo: Student of Galileo, Teacher of Spinoza," *Intellectual History Review* 23:1 (March, 2013), 141-157; Stefano Gulizia, "The Paduan Rebbi: A Note on Galileo's Household and Mediterranean Science in the Seventeenth Century," *Philosophical Readings* VII:3 (2105), 43-52.

29 On Delmedigo, see Isaac Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomoh Delmedigo (Yashar of Candia): His Life, Work and Times* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974); David B. Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Tzvi Langermann, "An Alchemical Treatise Attributed to Joseph Solomon Delmedigo," *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 13:1(2013), 77-94.

> scholars. One would be better served with craftsmen and builders. This is even truer for the Jewish people, as we do not possess fields, or vineyards, or property. Thus, my advice is that in all the lands except for Poland (where clergy are treated well), one should choose a profession outside the world of Torah, and the field of medicine is superior to all others. Other professions are simply a waste of time and money, and ultimately yield no benefit. In medicine, one can draw on the books of medicine in the Jewish tradition…[30]

We have evidence of Delmedigo's financial dealings in the "respectable and honest profession" that he himself chose. Records remain of his contracts with the Jewish community of Frankfurt where he served as the community physician.[31] Delmedigo brings the discipline of medicine under the umbrella of the Jewish tradition.

David Nieto (1654-1728)

After his graduation from the famed University of Padua, David Nieto first practiced as a physician and preacher in Livorno. He later went on to serve as the Ḥakham of the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community in London. Nieto, a prolific author, was one of the most accomplished Jews of his time and was equally distinguished as philosopher, physician, poet, mathematician, astronomer, and theologian. While he makes no explicit mention of his reason for choosing to practice medicine, we can infer from his classic work, *ha-Kuzari ha-Sheni*, modeled after the *Kuzari* by Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, and written in part to defend the Oral Torah against the Karaites, as to his approach to medical and scientific knowledge, as well as the practice of medicine in the Jewish/rabbinic tradition.[32]

> It was not necessary for the rabbis to become surgeons, mathematicians, or physicians. Rather, it was sufficient for them to have full knowledge of these fields inasmuch as it was required for the understanding of Torah. Nevertheless, a number of sages did obtain practical medical expertise…

Nieto's own practice of medicine thus followed in the path of an age-old rabbinic tradition. This is in line with the thoughts of Delmedigo, a fellow Padua University alumnus.

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30 *Meshiv Nefesh*, 42.

31 See Jacob Marcus, *Communal Sick-Care in the German Ghetto* (Hebrew Union College: Cincinnati, 1978), 27-29.

32 Fourth Argument, n. 32.

Benjamin Wolf Gintzburger[33] (18th century)

Gintzburger was the first Jewish student to attend the University of Gottingen in Germany. Early in his medical education, in 1737, Gintzburger penned a halakhic query to Rabbi Yaakov Emden, one of the greatest rabbinic figures of the generation, about the halakhic permissibility of performing anatomical dissection on a dog on Shabbat.[34] Gintzburger's lengthy question, with literary and poetic flourish, reflects both his mastery of the Hebrew language as well as his breadth of Torah learning. It also gives just a hint of how he ended up in the field of medicine. As an introduction to his question, he writes:

> I pitched my tent at the shepherds' quarters listening to the whistles of the herds engaging in the study of philosophy (*milekḥet higayon*), and I gathered all the essential and indispensable wisdom. And the mixed multitude that was within me lusted intensely (*vi-ha-asafsuf asher bikirbi hitavu ta'avah*) to pursue the field of medicine.

In his allusion to the Biblical story of the Jews craving meat in the desert,[35] Gintzburger seems to view his desire to study medicine in a negative light, and as a concession to inappropriate desires. Perhaps he thought that Rabbi Emden would view medicine in that way.

Emden provides a lengthy and detailed, point-by-point response rejecting the young student's legal analysis, but also comments, albeit unsolicited,[36] about the propriety of Gintzburger's secular and medical education. His opinion of the study of medicine is not negative at all. While Emden is very opposed to the study of philosophy, he writes that "however, the wisdom of science/nature (*teva*) is different." This discipline is certainly permitted to study, if not encouraged, as it gives one a greater appreciation of God and the workings of His world. Emden lauds one aspect of nature in specific, the field of medicine, as being particularly valuable, as its practice is mentioned in the Torah. The reward for such

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33 For biographical information on Gintzburger, see N. M. Gelber, "History of Jewish Physicians in Poland in the Eighteenth Century," (Hebrew) in Y. Tirosh, ed., *Shai Le-Yeshayahu: Sefer Yovel Le-Rav Yehoshua Wolfsberg* (*Ha-Mercaz le-Tarbut shel ha-Poel ha-Mizrachi*; Tel Aviv, 5716), 347-371, esp. 356; Francis Schiller, *Koroth* 9 (Special Issue, 1988) [Proceedings of the Third Symposium on Medicine in the Bible and Talmud], 255-261; J. Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews: A History* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2001), 190-197.

34 *She'ilat Ya'avetz*, 41.

35 *Bemidbar* 11:4.

36 38a, column 1, "even that which you did not ask or request of me, I nonetheless offer my thoughts."

study is great and one should exert effort to pursue it. Indeed, he adds, Rambam and Ramban, as well as many other great Torah sages over the ages, studied medicine.[37]

In addition to a theoretical discussion about the value of medicine, Emden offers practical advice on how to maintain one's religiosity during training. He strongly discourages training in distant isolated areas, lacking in a Jewish infrastructure, as Gintzburger had done, even rebuking his beloved student: "Who permitted you to abandon the holy Jewish community and dwell in exile in a place without Torah, as an *agunah* (a "chained" women legally unable to remarry)? … My son, who allowed you to enroll in their institutions and adopt their behaviors?" His advice continues:

> If you must learn in such an environment, do not tarry in their homes and certainly do not enter into a permanent living situation with non-Jewish students. While many before you have done so, do not learn from their mistaken ways. Do not learn their customs and practices. Hazal established numerous decrees to limit interaction with the non-Jewish community. I share these concerns with a man like you, as I know you will heed my advice and limit the danger to the extent possible. Do not abandon the Torah of your ancestors (*al titosh Torat Imekha*) as your success is inextricably bound to your Torah observance. Observe the minor prohibitions as scrupulously as the severe, for now, as you dwell in a place of spiritual danger, you are more susceptible to sin and are in need of extra protection. Beware of your anatomy professors and the like who are as bears lying in ambush or lions waiting in the wings to facilitate your religious decline.[38] Therefore, my son if you must engage in anatomical dissection, matters foreign to you, be strong (*hazak ve-ematz*) and do not

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37 In a parenthesis in this section, Emden asks Gintzburger for his assistance in searching the library of his university for information about the science of alchemy and its origins, especially whether the Jews were involved in the development of alchemy. On this request and Emden's medical knowledge, see Maoz Kahana, "An Esoteric Path to Modernity: Jacob Emden's Alchemical Quest," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* (2013), 1-23.

38 Prior to attending and graduating from the University of Padua, Tuviya Ha-Rofeh briefly attended the University of Frankfurt on Oder. Friedrich Wilhelm, the Grand Elector of Brandenburg, granted special permission for his admission with the hope that he would see the light and convert to Christianity. See Kenneth Collins, "Tuviya Cohen and his Medical Studies," in Kenneth Collins and Samuel Kottek, eds., *Ma'aseh Tuviya (Venice, 1708): Tuviya Cohen on Medicine and Science* (Jerusalem: Muriel and Philip Berman Medical Library of the Hebrew

> discard your Torah teachings. Fear and honor God and through this you will achieve your ultimate objective with honor and glory.[39]

Gintzburger graduated in August 1743 and wrote his dissertation on the topic of Biblical and Talmudic medicine.[40] This is one of the earliest treatises on the topic and a remarkable choice of subject for the first Jewish student at a German university in the eighteenth century. The text of his dissertation reflects the high esteem in which he held the field of medicine, as well as the historical relationship of medicine and the Jewish people. Perhaps this perspective evolved after receiving Rabbi Emden's letter.

> No one, indeed, will deny ancient Hebrew medicine its fame, not only on account of divine testimony dating back to the most remote times, but also due to its special support. The same miraculous hand that has guided the chosen people also keeps the laws of healing nature in their utmost stability… Thus, it is evident that the divine hand, to be venerated everywhere, confirms, sustains and assists the power of medicine… When I thus praise the masters of Hebrew medicine, to mention these here is necessarily only a beginning. They have enriched the art born of human endeavor and furthered it by their ability and industry.[41]

Gintzburger viewed himself as continuing a Jewish tradition of the practice of medicine.

University of Jerusalem, 2021), 79-127. Nimrod Zinger notes that the universities under Protestant auspices, in particular those affiliated with the Pietistic Movement, were more inclined to admit Jews, as they were interested in the possibility of converting them. He mentions as examples Yitzḥak Isaac Wallich and his close relationship with Professor Hoffman at Halle, and that the student Avraham Hyman was admitted to Geissen with the intervention of the head of faculty, who was a Pietist. See his *Ba'al Shem vi-ha-Rofeh* (Haifa University, 2017), 263. Olaf Gerhard Tychsen also likely attempted to proselytize the Jewish medical students in Butzow and Rostock. See E. Reichman, "What Became of Tychsen? The Non-Jewish 'Rabbi' and His 'Congregation' of Jewish Medical Students," *Seforim Blog* (https://seforimblog.com), November 1, 2020.

39 Author's translation and paraphrase.

40 *Disputation Inauguralis Medica qua Medicinam ex Talmudicis* (Gottingen, 1743). The dissertation has been translated into English by F. Schiller, "Benjamin Wolff Gintzburger's Dissertation on Talmudic Medicine," *Koroth* 9:7-8 (Fall 1988), 579-600.

41 Schiller, "Gintzburger's Dissertation," *op. cit.*, 581-582.

Aaron Solomon Gumpertz (1723-1769)

Aaron Solomon Gumpertz[42] graduated from the University of Frankfurt in 1751. He was a German scholar, physician, teacher, and friend of Moses Mendelssohn. He writes in the introduction to his work *Megaleh Sod*[43] of his decision to choose medicine as a profession:

> And I searched here and there, exploring the different professions, both the easy and the challenging, which is the just and clear path for one who wishes to glorify Him, which is enrobed in kindness and righteousness, and I did not find but the profession of medicine, that we have learned through tradition was practiced by great Torah scholars like Ramban, Rambam, Ralbag, Ri mi-Candia [Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo], and many, many others in addition, throughout the generations. They were glorified and honored through its pursuit, for its practice is valuable and honored, service akin to the service of God… unlike the professions of carpentry and building. With one unified voice they say, blessed is he who chooses it [medicine] and inclines his heart to the heavens… and his reward will be great.[44]

Gumpertz further describes how he was drawn specifically to the study of human anatomy and how attending and participating in anatomical dissections was a religious experience for him.

Menachem Mendel Sergei (circa 1860-1918)

One of the more articulate and explicit expressions of the religious dimension involved in the choice of medicine as a profession is voiced by Menachem Mendel Sergei (circa 1860-1918).[45] Sergei was born in Lithuania in the late nineteenth century, and his father, Yoel Shalom Sergei, was a Rosh Yeshivah and prominent Torah scholar. He attended medical school in Germany and went on to establish a successful medical practice. He was also a Torah scholar of note, corresponding with the great Torah

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42 On Gumpertz, see Max Freudenthal, "Ahron Emmerich-Gumpertz, der Lehrer Moses Mendelssohns," in David Kaufmann and Max Freudenthal, *Die Familie Gomperz* (Frankfurt a. M., 1907) 164-200; Gad Freudenthal, "New Light on the Physician Aaron Salomon Gumpertz: Medicine, Science and Early Haskalah in Berlin," *Zutot* (2003), 66-77.

43 (E. Salat Books: Lemberg, 1910.) This work is a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra to the five *Megillot*.

44 P. 6.

45 On Sergei and for what follows, see Edward Reichman, "Dr. Menachem Mendel Aryeh Leib Sergei: A Torah U-Madda Titan of the Early Twentieth Century," *Ḥakirah* 27 (Fall 2019), 19-43.

sages of his day, including Rabbi Ḥayyim Ozer Grodzinski and Rabbi Ḥizkiyah Medina (author of *Sdei Ḥemed*). His work *Meshiv Nefesh* (Vilna, 1906) includes an expansive essay on the topic of *halakhah l-Mosheh Mi-Sinai* (Torah laws transmitted to Moses orally and not written explicitly in the Torah), focusing on the positions of Rashi and Rambam, as well as a thorough analysis of the practice of *metzitzah bi-peh* from both medical and halakhic perspectives.

Like his father before him, he shunned the notion of making Torah his source of livelihood:

> I therefore decided to seek another profession from which I could gain sustenance, yet would be linked together with the Torah, and I chose the field of medicine. First, the holy Torah permits its study… and since the Torah gives license to heal it is clear that one is permitted to study medicine, for if one does not study thoroughly how could he practice? Furthermore, the saving of a life (*pikuaḥ nefesh*) supersedes all the *mitzvot* of the Torah…
>
> Our Sages praised the wisdom of medicine to the extent that they considered its pursuit as equivalent to the study of Torah. Behold we see that one involved in the practice of medicine is as one involved in the learning of Torah, as we find many times Amoraim with expertise in medicine, and they were saved from death as a result. And another proof to this notion that engaging in the practice of medicine to preserve the lives of many is equivalent to learning Torah is found in the *Shulḥan Arukh*… one should not practice medicine unless he has attained great expertise, for if not, it is as if he has shed blood… [46]

Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski (1930-2021) [47]

Scion of prominent Hasidic dynasties, Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski was a rabbi, prolific author in the area of self-help, and a renowned psychiatrist with a specialty in substance abuse. By virtue of family history and connections, Twerski had a special relationship with the Steipler Gaon, Rabbi Yaakov Kanievsky. In his youth, when contemplating becoming a physi-

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46 *Meshiv Nefesh* (Vilna, 1908), introduction.

47 E. Reichman and M. Butler, "The Medical Training and Yet Another (Previously Unknown) Legacy of Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski, *zt"l*," Seforim Blog (https://seforimblog.com), February 2, 2021.

cian, Twerski wrote a number of letters to the Steipler expressing concerns about the propriety of attending medical school as an Orthodox Jew.[48]

The first letter was written at the end of the summer of 1955 by a twenty-four-year-old Abraham J. Twerski, and in this letter the Steipler Gaon addresses in a general fashion the value of making one's livelihood through a non-rabbinic profession. As to the specific profession, he adds that medicine may be a preferred choice, as it is a mitzvah to learn, and additionally, excluded from the ban on secular knowledge of the Rashba. However, this is based on the proviso that the education is provided by proper teachers and in an environment conducive to Torah observance. As this is clearly not the case in a modern university, he offers some general guidelines, culled from the *sefarim ha-kedoshim*, if not to guarantee, at least to enhance the chances of success: 1) *kove'a itim*—learn in-depth at least two hours daily; 2) recite all *tefillot* with a minyan; 3) regular *mikvah* immersion; 4) meticulous Shabbat observance; and 5) a daily *mussar seder*.

The second question Twerski posed, the following year, was more specific to his situation. He inquired whether it was preferable for him to be a rabbi in a largely non-observant community (he was serving as an assistant rabbi to his father in Milwaukee at that time), which would involve immersion in an irreligious environment with potential negative impact on the Jewish education of his children; or should he choose a medical career, which would allow him to remain in an environment of Torah observance.

Suffice it to say, the Steipler Gaon's tone in this letter is less supportive of a career in medicine than his earlier correspondence with the young Abraham Twerski. His written response is unequivocal: "the rabbinate is much preferred" (*adifah yoter viyoter*). He lists no less than five reasons not to become a physician, relating to the challenges in maintaining Torah observance and modesty, as well as the time commitment, which would preclude Torah study. He adds on a personal note that given his estimation of the exceptional talents of the young Rabbi Twerski, the latter would likely become a highly successful and sought-after physician. As such, he would find no rest from those constantly "knocking on his door"

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48 Upon the passing of the Steipler Gaon in 1985, a volume of his collected letters entitled *Karyana de-Igarta* was published, and included two letters (letters #66 and #86) that the Steipler Gaon had sent some thirty years earlier to a young Abraham J. Twerski in Milwaukee, who was then seeking his advice regarding his career choice. Twerski's name is omitted in the printed edition of the letters.

and seeking his consultation. He was particularly concerned about what would happen to his Torah learning and observance in such a case.[49]

Notwithstanding the serious concerns expressed by the Steipler Gaon, and perhaps now better informed of the potential pitfalls, Abraham J. Twerski proceeded to pursue his medical education, as he later wrote:

> When I planned to go to medical school, I consulted the Steipler gaon. In a letter published in Karaina D'igresse, the Steipler wrote that rather than being a Rav in America, it is better to make a living of *melakha kalla u-nekiah*, a decent job, and that when Rashba forbad studying secular subjects before age twenty-five,[50] he exempted the

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49 This concern and fear of the Steipler was realized in the life of one of the most prominent physicians in Jewish history. Abraham Portaleone, a scion of a family of physicians to royalty for many generations, shares his personal story and challenges as an appendix to his magnum opus, *Shiltei ha-Giborim*. Portaleone records his exceptional Torah education in his youth with tutoring and mentoring from some of the greatest Torah scholars in Italy at the time. After this solid Jewish education, he attended the University of Pavia for medical school. He then recounts his subsequent medical practice:

> I did not delve into the study of Torah as is incumbent upon me. Instead of learning Torah day and night, I composed a Latin medical work on the advice of princes; wrote responsa to non-Jewish physicians across the land; wrote another work of cures including material not found elsewhere; and upon the request of the Ducas of Mantua, Guillermo Gonzago, I wrote a work on the therapeutic value of Gold.
>
> The sin of my disregard for Torah learning became my downfall. And as a result of my insulting the Torah, in *Tammuz* 5363 I lost the function of the limbs of my body and could no longer move my left side.

After experiencing a stroke in June 1605, Portaleone engaged in prayer, repentance, and religious self-reflection about his life and medical practice. This led to the composition of this encyclopedic work on every aspect of the Temple service, which he left as a Torah legacy to his children. First issued in 1612 (Vicenzo Gonzaga: Mantua, 1612), it has recently been reissued in an expansive, copiously footnoted edition with introductory essays and biography. See Y. Katan and D. Gerber (eds.), *Shiltei Ha-Giborim* (Makhon Yerushalayim, 5770). Portaleone's confession is a valuable perspective for all physicians, as many of us have surely succumbed, in varying degrees, to the pressures of medical practice throughout the centuries.

50 For an overview of the controversy, see David Berger, "Judaism and General Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Times," in *Cultures in Collision and Conversation: Essays in the Intellectual History of the Jews* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 21-116, esp. 70-78. See also Joseph Shatzmiller, "Between Abba Mari and Rashba: The Negotiations That Preceded the Ban of Barcelona (1303-1305)," *Studies in the History of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel*, vol. 3 (1973): 121-137 (Hebrew); David Horwitz, "The Role of Philosophy and Kabbalah in the Works

study of medicine. I went to medical school with the Steipler's blessing and continued an ongoing relationship with him for years.[51]

While the Steipler Gaon's assessment of the success of Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski's medical career was prophetic, his concerns about Torah observance and learning, at least for Dr. Twerski, would turn out to be unfounded. Upon his graduation from medical school several years later, *Time Magazine* (June 15, 1959) published a brief article about him entitled "Rabbi in White." It is worth reprinting in its entirety:

> Abraham Joshua Twerski, 28, graduated from medical school this week. It was no mean feat, for Twerski is a Jewish rabbi like his father, two uncles, father-in-law, two older brothers and (when they finish their studies) two younger twin brothers. And to keep the Torah as an Orthodox Jew for six years of studies in Milwaukee's Roman Catholic Marquette University was something like running a sack race, an egg race, and an army obstacle course at the same time.
>
> First there was the problem of keeping his religion from growing rusty: he rose each day at 5:30am, put in an hour's study of the Talmud before early service at Milwaukee's Beth Jehuda Synagogue, where he is assistant rabbi. Medical school classes began at 8am, and here real complications set in. His full black beard was a sanitary problem in surgery, requiring special snood-like surgical masks. His *tallith katan*, a small prayer shawl worn by many Orthodox Jews under their shirts, had to be made of cotton instead of wool—which might set off a static spark and ignite the anesthetic in an operating room.
>
> Lectures on Saturday. Religious holidays sometimes required months of advance planning. The nine-day Feast of Tabernacles, for instance, with four days when work is forbidden, fell during a series of lectures before a make-or-break exam in pathology. Abe, as students and professors call him, met the situation by studying by himself all the preceding summer, put himself so far ahead of his class that he could afford to miss the lectures. "I hated like heck to miss them," he explains, "but I creamed that exam."

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of Rashba" (unpublished MA thesis, Yeshiva University, 1986); David Horwitz, "Rashba's Attitude Towards Science and Its Limits," *Torah u-Madda Journal*, vol. 3 (1991-1992): 52-81; and Marc Saperstein, "The Conflict over the Ban on Philosophical Study, 1305: A Political Perspective," in *Leadership and Conflict: Tensions in Medieval and Early Modern Jewish History and Culture* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2014), 94-112. I thank Menachem Butler for these references.

51 Their fathers both grew up as friends in Hornsteipel, "and spent their boyhood years together and were on first name terms," reminisced Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski many years later in a biographical memoir of his Hasidic ancestors.

> When lectures came on Saturdays—during which Orthodox Jews are forbidden to work, ride in a vehicle or talk on the phone—Abe would have a friend put a sheet of carbon paper under his lecture notes and hope he remembered to use a ballpoint pen. Sabbath restrictions begin on Friday night, just before sundown, and on occasion Fridays only a lucky break in the traffic has saved him from having to abandon his 1952 De Soto and walk the rest of the way home. On Saturdays, Abe was not on duty, but sometimes, to follow up on one of the cases he had been observing, he would leave his car in the garage and walk five miles to the hospital and back.
>
> Abe brought his own kosher food to school every day and ate it in the student lounge, where he also said his midday prayers in a corner, surrounded by chattering fellow students. Hospital duty during the 24-hour fast without food and water at Tishah Be'ab (commemorating the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D.) Dr. Twerski describes as "murder," and the last six years have left him hollow-eyed and slightly sallow.[12] But he is eagerly looking forward to the next stage: a year of internship in Milwaukee's Mount Sinai Hospital, followed by a three-year residency in psychiatry.
>
> "Psychiatric training was the motivation for my going into medicine," he says. "I felt I could be a better adviser to my people and more help to them with their problems."

Rav Asher Weiss (contemporary)

As one of the world's leading rabbinic authorities and the rabbi of Shaare Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem, Rabbi Asher Weiss, *shlit"a*, is a spiritual mentor to physicians and health-care providers across the globe. On February 6, 2021, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, Rav Asher Weiss delivered a video lecture for Touro College[52] addressed to health-care workers, and in particular medical students. His introductory comments echo the same sentiment as his predecessors regarding the choice of medicine as a career:

> If you can dedicate your life to learn Torah and to teach Torah, that is number one priority. But if that is not within your reach and your ability, I definitely would recommend choosing medicine.[53] Rab-

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52 Rav Asher Weiss, *Guidance for Medical and Health Care Providers Divrei halacha, Divrei Hadracha and Divrei Chizuk* (February 6, 2021) (https://www.landertorah.com/shiur/11345/guidance-for-medical-and-health-providers-divrei-halacha-divrei-hadracha-and-divrei-chizuk)

53 The Lubavitcher Rebbe, *zt"l*, voiced a similar sentiment. From a letter of the Rebbe, dated the 11th of Tammuz, 5744 (unknown recipient):

> bonim and doctors have something in common. They are the shepherds of *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu*'s flock. They dedicate their lives to helping others, to heal their body and soul.

Rav Weiss subsequently reiterated his position:[54]

> If you are not teaching Torah, the second-best job you could ever have is being a doctor.

These personal accounts give us an insight into the unique relationship of Judaism and medicine, which influenced the decision of young Jewish students to enter the field of medicine.

"When" to Study Medicine

While above we discuss "why" Jews attended medical school, in this concluding section we provide recommendations from historical figures regarding "when" Jews should attend medical school. When should one pursue medical (or secular) training in relation to Jewish (Torah) studies?

In the late fifteenth century Jacob ben David Provenzali, mentioned above, penned a lengthy letter in response to Rabbi David ben Judah Messer Leon's query on the nature and role of secular wisdom in the Jewish tradition.[55] The question was why the rabbis had such disdain for the study of philosophy, while they held medicine, a discipline inextricably linked to philosophy, in such high esteem. Jacob Provenzali was a student of David's father, Judah, one of the more prominent personalities of the period, who was a physician, rabbi, and professor of medicine.[56]

As Provenzali notes, the widespread ban against the study of philosophy propagated by Rashba and others specifically excluded the natural

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> . . . Of all professions, that of a medical doctor calls for the greatest sense of responsibility and meticulousness, and requires the utmost peace of mind to cope with the everyday challenges of the profession.
>
> The Torah holds it in great esteem, considering the human doctor to be the direct agent of the "Healer of all flesh and Performer of wonders" to bring cure and relief both physically and spiritually, as the physical and spiritual go hand-in-hand. . . .

Source: https://www.chabad.org2306915. I thank Rabbi Mordechai Dinerman for this source.

54 "The Role of a Jewish Physician in End-of-Life Care" (March 30, 2022) (https://youtu.be/zApnof2xHZ4).

55 Eliezer Ashkenazi, *Divrei Ḥakhamim* (Metz: Mayer Samuel, 1849), 63-75.

56 On Messer Leon and his work, see Isaac Rabinowitz, *The Book of the Honeycomb's Flow by Judah Messer Leon: A Critical Edition and Translation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Daniel Carpi, "Rabbi Yehudah Messer Leon and his Work as a Physician" (Hebrew), *Michael* 1(1972), 276-301.

sciences and medicine. Medicine was not considered a toxic endeavor that would inflict potential theological harm. The minimum age at which one could study philosophy was set at twenty-five (though even then not ideal), on the assumption that one's foundation of Torah learning would be strong enough by then to be impervious to outside influences. Medicine, however, having not been subsumed under the ban, was also exempt from these age limits. Indeed, the average Jewish medical student started medical training in his late teens or early twenties.

While medicine was not considered a theologically problematic pursuit, there was nonetheless an analogous concern that if one embarked on a course of secular study outside of Torah, one's Jewish educational foundation would suffer. This was addressed by Rabbi Yaakov Emden above and is reflected in the sources below.

One of Jacob Provenzali's descendants was David Provenzali (16th century), whose educational proposal to unite secular and Jewish studies is well known to Jewish historians.[57] He acknowledges his son Abraham's role as a partner in the endeavor, commenting parenthetically on the nature of his son's Jewish education, acquired prior to his medical training.[58]

> Associated with me in this enterprise will be my oldest son [Abraham Provenzali]—may his Rock and Redeemer guard him—who is a doctor of philosophy and medicine. He has attained distinction in these sciences after having already obtained a basic Jewish education.[59]

Tuvia Cohen (17th-18th centuries), graduate of the University of Padua and author of the classic work *Ma'aseh Tuvia*, however, argues that this order of education should be a pre-requirement for all Jewish medical students.

> It should not enter the mind of any man in all the lands of Italy, Germany, and France to study the art of medicine without first mastering ("filling his belly") the written Torah, the oral Torah, and all its related wisdom…

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57 See, for example, David Ruderman and Giuseppe Miletto, "The Teaching Program of David ben Abraham and His Son Abraham Provenzali in Its Historical-Cultural Context," in David Ruderman and Giuseppe Veltri, eds., *Cultural Intermediaries: Jewish Intellectuals in Early Modern Italy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 127-148; Reichman, "Yeshiva Medical School," *op. cit.*

58 Abraham Provenzali was a teacher and mentor of Abraham Portaleone, graduating from the University of Pavia Medical School just three months before him. See the introduction to Portaleone's *Shiltei ha-Giborim* (Mantua, 1612).

59 Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook 315–1791* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1938), 438–446.

Dr. Menachem Mendel Sergei (see above), renowned physician and Torah scholar, came to the same conclusion independently. After recounting the lives and contributions of many people in previous generations who successfully combined their learning of Torah and medicine, Sergei concludes the introduction to his work *Meshiv Nefesh* by lamenting the precipitous decline in numbers of this true *Torah U-Madda* (my words) type personality in his generation. He attributes this fact to a major deficiency in the methodology of Jewish education. In previous generations, young children studied Torah intensely for years and only after a solid foundation in Torah studies did they venture into the world of secular knowledge. This guaranteed that their Torah learning would forever remain primary. His contention was that in his day, already at a young age, before their Torah foundation was solidified, young children were being exposed to secular studies. As a result, the foundation of Torah knowledge was not properly formed. With this system of education, the children never attain the primacy of Torah study required to become a true *Torah U-Madda* Jew.

The consensus of the aforementioned authors is unequivocal. A solid foundation in Jewish studies is essential prior to embarking on a medical career.

Conclusion

What is revealed from these personal accounts is something perhaps not unexpected, and even instinctively perceived, but remarkable nonetheless in its explicit expression through the words of our physicians. To be sure, the decision to enter the field of medicine for a Jew throughout history has been multifactorial, including financial, social, and political reasons, but at its very core lies an inextricable link between Torah and medicine, not only in its theoretical study, but in its practice as well—a *mesorah* if you will. This *mesorah* has been faithfully and consistently transmitted, though selectively applied, throughout our entire history. The profession of medicine is not without its challenges to Torah study and potential pitfalls for religious observance, but even the tools required to address these elements have been part of the "*mesorah* of medicine." Though one could argue that in varying degrees, especially with respect to the challenges, the nature of medicine has changed, the "*mesorah* of medicine" today remains as strong as ever. ☙