

The Mystical Medicinal Power of the Jewish Book

By: ZACHARY L. GRAYSON

The Jews have aptly been described as the People of the Book. For more than two millennia, we have studied and pored over the holy texts, gaining from them our spiritual sustenance. The text has served as a substitute for the Temple in Jerusalem since its destruction in 70 C.E. and has sustained us through the darkness of exile. It is the nexus between our people and the Almighty.¹

This nexus is central to Jewish mysticism. According to tradition, the world was created through the use of text. The Almighty looked at the text of the Torah, using it as a blueprint, to create the world.² Creation occurred through ten Divine utterances of letters and words and all creation is comprised of letters in the same fashion as the secular world understands that everything is comprised of atoms. Each of these “atomic” letters serve as a distinct structure or a receptacle within which Divine vitality resides. It is the specific combination of these letters that result in creation, by combining the particular Godliness which exists in particular letters to create something new.³ Understanding this, we can begin to gain

¹ See, generally, “The Torah Scroll and God’s Presence” in M.L. Grossman (ed.), *Built by Wisdom, Established by Understanding: Essays on Biblical and Near Eastern Literature in Honor of Adele Berlin* (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2013), pp. 323–340.

² *Zohar, Parshat Toledot*, 1:134a (Daniel C. Matt [trans.], *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 2, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 257. *The Midrash, Bereishit* (Kleinman Edition), vol. 1 (New York: ArtScroll Mesorah Publications, 2014), pp. 3–4.

³ “By means of the twenty-two letters, by giving them a form and shape, by mixing them and combining them in different ways, God made the soul of all that which has been created and all of that which will be,” *The Book of Formation [Sefer Yetzirah]*.

Zachary L. Grayson is a lawyer, bibliophile, and collector of Hebrew books and manuscripts. He has represented the international governing board of the Chabad Movement, was US counsel in the Dead Sea Scroll copyright case, was trial counsel in the litigation surrounding control of 770, Chabad’s iconic synagogue, and has been involved in other high-profile litigation involving Jewish organizations and issues.

insight into the radical role that texts play in Judaism, not merely as a means of transmitting knowledge and tradition but as a means of accessing and facilitating the awesome power of the Creator. The use of texts, rituals, or incantations to invoke the power of the Divine is called theurgy.

This article focuses on the theurgy involving the use of holy Jewish books to heal.⁴ The medicinal Kabbalah of the book—the mystical aspect and power of the Jewish book to heal—has been recorded through the ages. This use involves not only the text as the nexus with the Almighty but also the text as the nexus with the soul of the text’s author. Not everything that follows is necessarily Kabbalistic, though most is. I offer it to the reader for his or her enjoyment, edification, and, perhaps, even success in employing these time-proven techniques.

The Source of the Power of Books to Heal

Before turning to the use of particular books to heal, it is worth spending a moment or two on the concept of sickness and healing in Judaism. Over the centuries our sages have debated whether a Jew is permitted to turn to a physician for medical attention—especially in the case of internal disease. The rejectionist school of thought is best represented by R. Moses ben Naḥman Girondi (Naḥmanides), the 13th-century sage and grandson of Maimonides, known by his acronym, Ramban. Ramban, a renowned physician himself, rejected contemporary medicine as a second-rate approach and ideally inappropriate for healing Jews, focusing instead upon spiritual cures:

What place do doctors have in the house of those who carry out the will of G-d, after He promised that “He will bless their bread and their water, and remove illness from their midst?” The only function of the medical profession should be to give nutritional advice—what to eat and drink and what to avoid.... [A] person who became sick because of his sin could have been healed through the will of G-d alone. However, since they resorted to medicines, G-d abandoned them to the vicissitudes of nature. ... As for the rabbinic comment on the verse, “He shall cause him to be thoroughly healed” (Exodus

⁴ While the focus of this paper is upon the use of Jewish texts, it should be noted that there are a few recorded instances in Christian lore of miraculous cures resulting from touching a specific volume or text. See, e.g., Claudia Rapp, “Holy Texts, Holy Men, and Holy Scribes: Aspects of Scriptural Holiness in Late Antiquity” in *The Early Christian Book*, William Klingshirn and Linda Safran, eds. (Wash., D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), pp. 194-222, 221-222.

21:19)—“from here we learn that the physician has been given sanction to heal” (T.B. *Berakhot* 60a)—they did not say that license has been given to the sick to resort to medicine! ... But when a person’s ways find favor in G-d’s eyes, he has no business with doctors.⁵

This opinion, not without its critics, remained the opinion of many of our sages through the 19th century.⁶ The reasoning is based upon the be-

⁵ Ramban, *Commentary on the Torah*, Leviticus 26:1.

⁶ The little-discussed issue of opposition to doctors in Judaism is a complex one and beyond the scope of this article. Some decisors, like the 12th-century R. Avraham Ibn Ezra, limited medical treatment to external wounds: “But all illnesses that are within the body are in the hand of God to heal” (Ibn Ezra on Exodus 21:19). R. Yonatan Eybeshetz (1696–1764) explained Ibn Ezra’s distinction based upon doctors’ inability to see within the body (*Tiferet Yisrael*, #188, printed with *Kereti u-Peleti* [Warsaw: Ch. Kelter, 1878]), and later decisors have done away with the distinction in light of modern diagnostic tools. (See, generally, M. Weinberger, “Call for Medical Help According to Halacha,” in *Emek Halacha-Assia*, M. Halperin, ed. (Jerusalem: Schlesinger Institute, 1985).

The opposition to the use of doctors in the 18th–19th centuries was not limited to ḥassidim but included the leader of the anti-ḥassidic camp, R. Eliyahu of Vilna, known as the Vilna Gaon:

It is told that he once went to visit his sick brother. Two doctors were present. The Gaon turned to his brother and asked, “Why do you need doctors? Surely God heals the sick?” One of the doctors interjected, “Did God create doctors and medicines for nothing?” “And why did God create pigs?” retorted the Gaon. “Not for consumption by Jews! So too with doctors: maybe the gentiles go to them, but for the Jews, God is the Healer of the sick and Creator of remedies.” (*Ha-Tzaddik R. Zundel mi-Salant* [Jerusalem, 1927], p. 115.)

R. Naḥman of Breslov was particularly outspoken in his opposition to Jews using doctors:

The Rebbe often spoke to us about physicians and medicine, denouncing them in the strongest terms. He advised anyone who cares about his life and that of his family to avoid them, even in the case of serious illness: One should “cast his burden on G-d” (Psalms 55:23) and depend on Him alone (cf. Isaiah 50:10). One should not resort to medicines and doctors even in a place where there are outstanding physicians, for they are closer to death than to life (*Shabbat* 129b).

Though it should be noted that R. Naḥman himself sought treatment from physicians and supported vaccination efforts.

R. Yisrael Meir Kagan of Radin (the *Hafetz Ḥayyim*, 1839–1933) also avoided doctors. His son writes, “If one of us was sick, my father’s advice was to distribute bread to the poor, while he would go up to the attic and pray” (*Letters of the Hafetz Chaim*, part 3, p. 12). Others, including R. Chaim Kanievsky and Ḥassidic

lief that, for Jews, all illness and disease has a metaphysical root. The Talmud teaches that the body is composed of 613 parts—248 organs or limbs and 365 tendons or sinews. These correspond to the 248 positive commandments and the 365 negative commandments.⁷ Each physical malady is directly related to a defect in the person's performance of the corresponding commandment in this life or a previous one.⁸ Indeed, many of

masters such as R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, opined that Ramban's position related to the ancient times of spiritual heights and was inapplicable to "modern" times. This is in line with the ruling of the 13th- century R. Shlomo ben Aderet (Rashba), who ruled that only those who have reached a high level of spiritual perfection may forgo medical treatment (Rabbi Moshe Meiselman, *Torah Chazal and Science* [Israel Bookshop, 2013], p. 215.) This distinction was not universally accepted. Rabbi Avraham Bernstein of Sochatchov (1839–1910), wrote of Ramban's viewpoint: "The correct interpretation of the words of Ramban would seem to be that any person who does not resort to medical treatment but trusts in G-d is called a righteous person in this matter, and every person is entitled and indeed commanded to do this. Since we clearly see that doctors are prone to cause harm, one may put one's trust in G-d in order not to expose oneself to mortal danger in practice" (*Arnei Nezer* on *Hoshen Mishpat* #193).

⁷ T.B. *Makkot*, 23B.

⁸ This is set forth clearly in Kabbalistic teachings:

It is understood by discerning people that a person's body is not the actual person. The body is simply the "flesh" of the person, as is written: "You have clothed me with skin and flesh, and covered me with bones and tendons" (Job 10:11) ... the actual person is the (soul); the body is merely a garment the soul wears...

The same way that a tailor will make a physical garment in the shape of a body, G-d similarly made the body, which is the garment of the soul, in the shape of a soul, with 248 limbs and 365 tendons ... (corresponding to) 248 spiritual limbs and 365 spiritual tendons... (so that) the 365 spiritual tendons of the soul "wear" the 365 physical tendons of the body ... the food for the soul comes from fulfilling the Torah, which includes 613 commandments corresponding to the 613 spiritual parts. The Torah is called "bread," as is written, "Come eat my bread" (Proverbs 9:5). Each of the 248 spiritual limbs gets its nourishment from a particular mitzvah that corresponds to that limb. When a person fails to perform that particular commandment, the corresponding limb will lack its proper nourishment... (R. Chaim Vital, *Sba'arei Kedushah*, part I, *sha'ar* 1.)

A similar belief is that the limbs and organs of the physical body have a direct correlation to the supernal *sefirot* and physical ailments are a manifestation of a disturbance related to these *sefirot* or estrangement from the Eternal. By correcting that metaphysical deficiency, its physical manifestation would be similarly corrected. *Yesod ve-Shores ha-Avodah* by R. Alexander Ziskind of Grodno. This is in keeping with the philosophy of the Ari ha-Kadosh that it is not the *person's* defect which must be cured spiritually but the ramifications of the defect that

the great Kabbalists in the 16th century such as R. Isaac Luria (the *Ari HaKadosh*); the 17th-century founder of the Ḥassidic movement and physician, R. Israel ben Eliezer (the Baal Shem Tov or “Besht”); the 19th-century ḥassidic miracle workers; down to today’s ḥassidic Rebbes and masters of Kabbalah are said to have the power to discern the metaphysical defect which gives rise to the physical ailment and to effectuate physical cures by metaphysical repairs.⁹ Resort to a physician was viewed as a sign of spiritual weakness—a rejection of the belief in the metaphysical cause of disease.¹⁰ At a minimum, even under traditional Jewish belief, a Jew must recognize that the physician is not the healer but merely a vehicle through which the Almighty operates. The true cure comes through spiritual correction.¹¹

It is in this vein that Hebrew books were and are used to cure physical maladies.¹²

affects the cosmos. (Assaf Tamari, “Medicalizing Magic and Ethics: Rereading Lurianic Practice,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 112, Number 3, Summer 2022, pp. 434-467, 462-463.)

⁹ Shlomo Guzman-Carmeli and Nissan Rubin, “Tikkun (Divine Repair) and Healing in a Kabbalistic Yeshiva: Using Sacred Texts as Healing Devices,” *Contemporary Jewry* (2014) 34:217-241.

¹⁰ It should be noted that even among many of those who believe that the healing comes through the Almighty, one should nevertheless not avoid going to doctors as it is important to create a “natural” vehicle through which the Almighty operates rather than relying upon purely miraculous cures. Nothing captures this school of thought better than the well-known joke:

A man is sitting on his porch as flood waters rise. A woman floats by in a boat, asking if the man needs help. “No, thank you,” says the man, “I am trusting in the Lord.” The waters rise higher, sending the man upstairs. A raft full of people floats by his second story window. “Get in,” they say. “There is plenty of room.” “No thanks,” says the man, “I am trusting in the Lord.” The flood waters keep rising, pushing the man up to the roof. A helicopter swoops in, lowering its ladder for the man. “Thanks anyway,” shouts the man, “I am trusting in the Lord.” Finally, the man is swept away in the torrent and drowns. At the gates of Heaven, the man asks G-d, “Why didn’t you save me?” “What do you mean?” replies G-d. “I sent two boats and a helicopter.”

¹¹ *Birkbei Yosef, Yoreh De’ah*, 336, *siman* 100, 20 by R. Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (1724–1806), commonly known as Ḥida; R. Dov Berish Gottlieb (1740–1796), *Sefer Yad ha-Ketanah, sha’ar* 9, ch. 1, *siman* 100, 5; as cited in R. David Falk, *Sefer ha-Boteah*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 2010), ch. 3, p. 248.

¹² There is an ongoing debate concerning whether the spiritual cure is limited to those of great spiritual stature and applies only to these few or to the earlier generations who were said to have had greater holiness. Rabbi Shneur Zalman

The Curative Power of the Book in Theory

The means by which the book effectuates a cure, in its simplest formulation, is that the book is used as a vehicle for drawing down Heavenly forces to combat the evil or the spiritual deficit manifesting itself as physical or psychological illness. Exactly how this happens has been the subject of much debate and discussion and may differ from situation to situation.

The first area of demarcation is the distinction between the book as artifact and the use of the text—the content of the book. In a sense, the physical object, in this case the book, is a kind of talisman that contains in its physicality a degree of holiness. It can obtain its holiness in various ways discussed below, such as having belonged to or having been touched by a saint.¹³ On the other end of the spectrum, it is the use of study or prayer in general which, in Judaism, generates spiritual reward and invokes Heavenly mercy, having nothing to do with the book itself. In between these antipodes is a broad range that is the primary focus of this article. As will be seen, the line between these often dissolves in practice or explanation.¹⁴

So how do you use books to draw down heavenly cure and which books should be used?

As a general proposition, you use the book to get the Almighty's attention. An author who is saintly is recognized to stand in a special relationship with the Almighty based on his deeds and has the Almighty's "ear" or is deserving of the Almighty's mercy. Use of a book which he authored causes a couple of things to happen. By using his book, you revivify the author. It is a well-known Talmudic axiom that studying the book of a deceased author causes his lips to move in the grave.¹⁵ By quoting a deceased sage, you actually draw down the sage's soul as if he were

of Liadi, the founder of the Chabad movement, accepts the position of Ramban but explains that it is not applicable during Exilic times. Chaim Zuskind, "*Ha-Refuah ve-ha-Rofei be-Hassidut*" (Hebrew), *Heikhal ha-Besht*, vol. 31 (Nissan) (New York, 5771), pp. 63-89, 88-89.

¹³ I use the English term saint as a translation of the Hebrew term, *צדיק*, a righteous person.

¹⁴ Thus, for example, the holy Rebbe of Apta and Medzhibizh, R. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, author of *Ohev Yisrael*, wrote in his approbation to *Kedushat Levi* that both the merit of the author and the sanctity of the text are the source of its protective powers.

¹⁵ "Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, 'Whenever the words of a [deceased] Torah scholar are quoted in this world, his lips move in the grave'" (T.B. *Yevamot* 97a).

standing before you.¹⁶ The words of learning said by a sage are literally part of his soul and by repeating them, you cleave to his soul and commune with it.¹⁷ According to the *Zohar*, this results in a joining of the souls together.¹⁸ Thus, the healing comes through the power brought by the author's soul. When the author's soul joins with yours, you share in his Heavenly merit and the shared merit may be sufficient to correct the spiritual defect underlying the malady. Here, it is especially efficacious if the author obtained a particular merit related to your specific malady. Thus, R. Elijah Guttmacher wrote that studying the works of R. Akiva Eiger (1761–1837) will protect you from afflictions because R. Eiger studied through his afflictions.¹⁹ Another explanation given is that, according to the *Zohar*, the Heavenly Presence (*Shekhinah*) rests upon saints just as it rested within the Temple and they are considered to be the Almighty's chariot and by connecting to a saint through the study of his words, you are connecting to the Almighty.²⁰

The mystical cleaving of souls is but one explanation. Other sources identify the mechanism as a means of inducing the author to advocate for mercy on your behalf On High. Here, the author either repays your act of vivifying him by advocating on your behalf or he is merely awoken by your use of his book and works on your behalf. The use of the Talmud to effectuate a cure has yet another explanation. The Talmud is often referred to as the Gemara, גמרא.²¹ R. Chaim ben Bezalel, the brother of the

¹⁶ T.J. *Kiddushin*, 19B.

¹⁷ Frommer, R. Aryeh Tzvi, *Eretz Zvi* [The land of the deer] (Tel Aviv, 1985), pp. 241–42.

¹⁸ The cleaving of the souls, referred to as *ibur* (soul impregnation), is “the idea that a certain spiritual component, belonging to someone else's soul, can penetrate a person and ‘impregnate’ their own soul.” *Ibur* plays a critical role in the theology and practical Kabbalah of the Ari ha-Kadosh. (Tamari, “Medicalizing Magic and Ethics,” pp. 434–467, 456.)

¹⁹ R. Akiva Eiger, *Hagabot Rabbeinu Akiva Eiger al Hoshen Mishpat v-Even ha-Ezer* [Glosses of R. Akiva Eiger on *Hoshen Mishpat* and *Even ha-Ezer*] (Teheran: Dombroski, 1869), approbation of R. Elijah Guttmacher. (R. Eiger was the rabbi of Posen in 1831 during a cholera epidemic. Without regard to his personal safety, he went into the stricken sections of the city to care for the sick, for which he was awarded a medal by King Frederick III of Prussia.)

²⁰ Yitzhak Meir Morgenstern, *Yam ha-Hokhmah* [The sea of knowledge] (Jerusalem: Morgenstern, 2012/5772), p. 723.

²¹ Some draw a distinction between the Talmud and the Gemara, using the term Gemara to refer the explication of the Mishnah and Talmud to include the combination of the Mishnah and the Gemara together. See Yehuda Shurpin, “Why Was the Talmud called Gemara,”

famed Maharal, R. Yehudah Loew, points out that the word גמרא is an acronym for the archangels, Gabriel גבריאל, Michael מיכאל, Raphael רפאל and Uriel אוריאל. By studying the Talmud, you draw down the protection of these four archangels who then surround you: Michael on your right, Gavriel on your left, Uriel in front, and Raphael behind you.²²

Certain authors made a specific promise to intercede On High for anyone



purchasing or publishing their book. For example, in the will of R. Alexander Ziskind of Grodno, author of *Yesod ve-Shores ha-Avodah* [The foundation and root of the service], he promises to advocate in the Heavenly Court on behalf of all who learn his book, even if they do not accept upon themselves anything in the book. Similarly, R. Avraham Bernstein (1838–1910), founder of the Sochatchover Hassidic dynasty and author of *Avnei Neizer* [Stones of the crown], said before his passing that if one learns from his books, he will

be a protector and helper after his death exactly like when he was alive.²³ Most recently, in the introduction to the *Sefer mei-Asher Shemeinab Lahmo* by the *tzaddik* ha-Rav Hoberman of Ra'anana, he writes that he will act as an advocate for those who learn from his *sefarim*.

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4617587/jewish/Why-Was-the-Talmud-Called-Gemara.htm

²² R. Chaim ben Betzalel (Loew) of Friedberg, *Sefer ha-Hayyim* [Book of life] (Warsaw, 1876), part 1, “*Sefer Zekhiyot*” [Book of merits], ch. 2, p. 4. See also, Yaakov Reuven Weiner, *Sefer be-Kitvei ha-Kodesh* (Jerusalem, 2021), p. 603, n. 778.

²³ Frommer, *Eretz Zvi*, p. 242.

The best example, though, is R. Aryeh Leib (MaHaRaL) Tzintz (also known as Reb Leibish Harif of Plotzk) who said that he would be an advocate in the Heavenly Court for whoever helps to publish his books:



As the Rebbe lay on his deathbed, “Please bring me the wooden tablet which is standing there,” he whispered. With his last bit of strength, he wrote on this, “I will be an advocate for whoever exerts himself to print my books.” When his disciples saw these words, they were stunned. When the Rebbe saw their consternation, he reassured them by saying, “A merchant does not put up a sign to advertise his wares unless he has merchandise to sell!” A few minutes later, his soul departed to

a better world.²⁴

To this day, R. Tzintz’s books are privately published by those in need of Heavenly assistance.

One could ask, what is in it for the deceased saint? The simple answer would seem that being a saint, he or she gains pleasure from helping others. A crass explanation may be that it is a remarkable marketing tool for those who made such claims about their own works. I would posit an intermediate position—the soul of the saint shares in the spiritual reward of others studying his words. It is this intermediate position which is accepted by the Kabbalists who view the Talmudic maxim that when reading the words of the deceased you cause his lips to move in his grave in the literal sense. Reward and punishment can only be achieved in the physical world. The soul has no means of receiving award through its actions above.²⁵ Thus, as the sage’s physical lips move in the grave, he or she is connected to the physical world and, through the physical act, is able to receive reward On High.

Sometimes, it is not only the author but also the subject matter of the book that effectuates the cure. Specific books have specific aspects of holiness which in turn address specific defects. Often relying on the principle

²⁴ R. Shmuel Zanvil Klapfish wrote in his approbation to *Sefer Pnei Aryeh*, vol. 2, (Warsaw, 1880) that R. Aryeh Leib Tzintz promised that whoever publishes his works will be protected and the “Destroyer” will not enter his house. See also the approbation of R. Hayyim Davidson in *Meshivat Nefesh* (Warsaw, 1900) (*B-Sha’arei Sefer*, p. 256, as recorded in R. Yaakov Shlomo Teplinsky, *Imrei Sefer* [Sayings on books] [Jerusalem, 2003], p. 378.)

²⁵ Weiner, *Sefer be-Kitvei ha-Kodesh*, p. 707.

of *middah k'negged middah* (measure for measure), books which have an ostensible relevance to the malady or defect are used. *Middah k'negged middah*, is a Jewish form of karma. It is a belief that the Almighty rewards and punishes in relation to the specific merit or sin committed. If you want to save yourself from poverty, you should support the poor. If you use a specific limb to perform a bad deed, you may be punished with a malady in that particular limb. R. Avraham Yeshayah Karelitz, popularly known as the *Hazon Ish*, recommended studying the laws involving the particular organ or limb that was injured if one wanted to effectuate a cure in the patient.²⁶ Thus, if it is your arm that is affected, you should study the laws related to matters dealing with the arm, such as the laws of *tefillin*.²⁷ Specifically citing the principle of *middah k'negged middah*, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh and final Rebbe of the Chabad dynasty, prescribed specific books containing phrases relating to the affected organ such as books containing the phrase “come see” for addressing maladies related to the eye.²⁸ In the same vein, books written by authors who either suffered specific ailments or had specific merits are sometimes prescribed as a cure to people suffering from the same ailment.

Yet an additional explanation is given for the general power of books to heal. The final of the 613 Commandments contained in the written Torah is for each Jew to write a *Sefer Torah*, a Scroll of the Law, containing the first five books of the Bible.²⁹ Many decisors have ruled that in mod-

²⁶ In the merit of the study, the person might be healed. *Sefer Ma'aseh Ish*, vol. 1, p. 211, as quoted in R. Meizlish, *Shemirah u-Segulah le-Khol ha-Bayit* [Protection and remedy for the entire house] (Jerusalem: R. Yaakov Yitzhak Meizlish, 2001).

²⁷ On a more esoteric level, see Elliot Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 249-50: “Fulfillment of the commandments facilitates the transformation of the carnal body into the textual body of the Torah, a state of psychosomatic equilibrium wherein the body becomes the perfect vehicle to execute the will of the soul and the soul becomes the perfect guide in directing the will of the body... As the incorporeal assumes the bodily contours of the scripturalized text, the body of one who observes the commandments is transformed into the ritualized body composed of the same letters.”

²⁸ R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Iggerot Kodesh* [Holy letters], vol. 7 (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 1997), p. 280.

²⁹ The source for this Commandment is in Deuteronomy 31:19-23:
Therefore, write down this [Song], and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, in order that this [Song] may be My witness against the people of Israel. When I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey that I promised on Oath to their fathers, and they eat their fill and

ern times, this obligation is fulfilled, or even better fulfilled, by the purchase and use of printed books. Some decisors have gone so far as to rule that the Commandment to write a Torah Scroll can no longer be fulfilled by writing a Torah scroll but *only* by the purchase of books. The healing then comes from the fulfillment of the Commandment to write a *Sefer Torah*, one of the very few Commandments about which it is explicitly stated that your reward will come in This World as well as the World to Come.³⁰ Our sages have taught that in fulfilling the commandment to write a *Sefer Torah*, it is as if you are standing at Mount Sinai at the time of the original revelation of the Law and, just as those present at the giving of the Law were all healed of their physical maladies, so too will you be healed of yours.³¹ If you accept that the Commandment to write a *Sefer Torah* is fulfilled through the writing or purchase of a Hebrew text, the healing power of the book is easily understood.³²

For these and other reasons, our sages have often turned to cures of the spiritual to effectuate cures of the physical. Understanding this allows us to better comprehend how holy books can effectuate a cure. Even among those who turn to physicians today, use of books as amulets or to help with a cure remains common among a certain portion of our people.

grow fat and turn to other gods and serve them, spurning Me and breaking My covenant and the many evils and troubles befall them—then this [Song] shall confront them as a witness, since it will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring.... That day, Moses wrote down this [Song] and taught it to the Israelites. (*Tanakh: The New JPS Translation*, 1985).

The Talmud records that “this Song” refers to the entire Pentateuch. Talmud Bavli, Schottenstein Edition, *Sanhedrin*, vol. I (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2002), p. 21b. *Sefer ha-Hinuch*, ch. 613. Maimonides, *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 18.

³⁰ This explanation is cited by Meizlish at pp. 63-64. (Meizlish 2001) *Shemirah u-Segulah le-Khol Ha-Bayit*, containing *Seder Ketoret*, *Brit Menuhah*, *Arba Me’ot Shekel Kesef*, *Tiferet Yisrael*, *Yesod Yitzhak*, *Or ha-Ganuz*, and *ve-Zot l-Yehudah*. R. Yeshayahu Yosef Pinto, in his *Divrei Yeshayahu, Tov Ayin* (Ashdod: Feldheim, 2011), p. 188 writes that writing a *Sefer Torah* protects one from the Evil Eye.

³¹ R. Pinchas Zavichi, *Kitzur Sefer ha-Neḥmadim mi-Paz* (Jerusalem: 2007), p. 83, citing R. Hayyim Palagi (1788–1869).

³² While this explains the power of books in general, it does not address why a specific book is chosen.

The Curative Power of the Book in Practice

Each book has its own power. In this sense, a library of old was similar to today's pharmacy. Certain books had general curative powers such as *Raziel ha-Malakh* [The book of the Angel Raziel].³³ One of the ancient fragments in the book claims that the owner of the book will be protected from fire and other natural and supernatural ills. When the book was first printed in 1701, the printer republished this claim in the book's frontispiece resulting in the book enjoying considerable distribution and success as an amulet to this day.



Books of the Kabbalah in general are considered talismans, whose mere possession grant special protective powers.³⁴ Today, many of these books used as amulets can be purchased in miniature or even on microfiche, such as the entire *Zohar* laminated on a credit-card-size piece of plastic to be kept with you for Divine protection.

³³ The origins of *Raziel Haba-Malakh* are clouded in obscurity. According to one tradition, the Angel Raziel presented it to Adam after his expulsion from Eden to protect him from the wilds of nature. The angels, jealous of the possession by a mortal of Heavenly knowledge, stole the book and threw it into the ocean. G-d ordered another angel to retrieve the book and return it to Adam. The book was stolen again and ended up at the bottom of the ocean for centuries. It was later retrieved by the angel Raphael, who gave it to Noah to protect him during the flood. Some traditions have the original written on sapphire, others have Noah writing it on sapphire. Transmission is then recorded as having been made through the generations to King Solomon. Modern scholars ascribe the book as we know it to the 13th century or later and place it within that strand of Jewish mysticism practiced by those known as the *Hassidei Ashkenaz* developed in Germany around R. Judah the Pious (R. *Yehudah He-Hassid*) of Regensburg.

³⁴ The Steipler Rebbe, R. Ya'akov Yisrael Kanievsky, for example, said to keep books of Kabbalah in your house even if you do not understand them. The holy Rebbe of Apt and Medzhibizh Rav Avraham Yehoshua Heshel, author of *Ohev Yisrael*, wrote in his approbation: "Surely the merit of the holy *gaon* the author [of *Kedushat Levi*] and the sanctity of his *sefarim* will shield and guard any place where they are found like the light of peace." His student the holy R. Aharon of Zhitomir, author of *Toldot Aharon*, similarly wrote in his approbation: "Surely the merit of my teacher and master the author [of *Kedushat Levi*] and his holy *sefarim* will guard and shield any place that they are found."

Other books with general healing powers are *Menorat HaMaor* [The lampstand that lights] by R. Yitzhak Abuhav and *Noda B-Yehudah* [Known in Judah] by R. Yehezkel Landau. According to R. Yosef Shmuel of Cracow, author of *Mesorat HaShas* [Tradition of the Talmud], a sick person may be healed if ten people get together to study *Menorat ha-Maor* on his behalf.³⁵ According to R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, learning one section deeply from *Noda B-Yehudah* will help cure illness.³⁶ Whenever one of R. Tzvi Hirsch of Ziditchov's followers was sick, he used to send them copies of his sermons or teachings to help heal them. According to his son-in-law, R. Joseph Rappaport of Skola, if one sermon or teaching was



enough to heal, then possession of the entire book will surely protect them.³⁷ Reb Gershon Hanoch of Radzin taught that a sick person should light olive oil on the eve of the Sabbath and learn Tractate *Ediyot* [Testimonies] from the Mishnah. Similarly, *Heikhal ha-Brachah* [Hall of blessing] by R. Yitzchak Isaac Yehudah Yehiel Safrin of Komarno, known as the Komarno Rebbe (1806–1874) is known for its general curative powers (“Anyone who has it in their house will be saved from all bad things, sicknesses, and from lacking their needs and the house will be filled with

blessings of the Almighty and all good, success, wealth, and life, for him and children without pause.”) The book *Kan Meforesbet* by the 19th-century R. Tzvi Guttmacher was prescribed by his father, R. Eliyahu Guttmacher (1796–1874) as a general cure. It was reported that whoever studied this book and then recited a specific prayer had no need for doctors.³⁸ In response to a question about the prescription of arcane sections of the law,

³⁵ From his approbation to the commentary *Nefesh Yehudah* on *Menorat ha-Maor*. The Spinka Rebbe said that the Rimanov Rebbe believed *Menorat ha-Maor* was a *segulah* for any sick person to study. (*Segulot Yisrael*, p. 125b, recorded in Teplinsky, p. 243.)

³⁶ *Turkha Yavin*, vol. 1, p. 245, recorded in Teplinsky, p. 274-75.

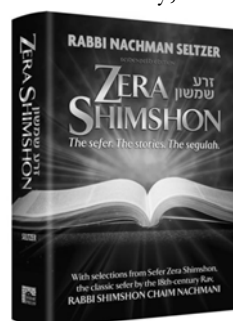
³⁷ Introduction to R. Tzvi Hirsh Eichenstein, *Sefer Tzvi le-Tzadik* (Jerusalem: 1964), p. 40.

³⁸ In the introduction to *Kan ha-Meforesbet*, R. Eliyahu Guttmacher writes, “Whoever studies Mishnah *Kinim* together with the commentary of Tosefot Yom Tov and the commentary of his [R. Eliyahu’s son], R. Tzvi Guttmacher, *Kan ha-Meforesbet* and then prays a specific prayer will receive salvation. It may be necessary to do this for three straight days. R. Tzvi Guttmacher, *Nahalat Tzvi* (Lvov [Lemberg], 1873), p. 1a. It is reported that in R. Eliyahu Guttmacher, *Sefer Sukkot*

one blogger recently observed that *Sefer Ḥassidim* ascribes particular merit to studying arcane areas of the law that are not generally studied.³⁹ R. Joel ben Samuel Sirkis (1561–1640) (also known as the Baḥ, an acronym of his magnum opus, *Bayit Ḥadash*) wrote that whoever prays from the *Siddur Shaar Shamayim, Sh’LaH* [The prayer book Gates of Heaven, compiled by R. Isaiah Horovitz (c. 1565–1630)] will receive a response to his supplications.⁴⁰

Often specific books were prescribed for specific maladies.

For infertility, the book *Zera Shimshon* [The seed of Samson] is prescribed.



In his introduction to the book, the 18-century author, R. Shimshon Ḥayyim b. R. Naḥman Mikhael Naḥmani, writes that since his only son died and he was left without any children, he called his book *Seed of Shimshon*. He promises readers: “And your eyes shall see your children and grandchildren like olive plants around your table...” Reb Naḥman of Breslov says the following in *Sefer ha-Middos* [Book of attributes]: “If one wants to have male children, he should learn a lot of Gemara in depth, and minimize

learning aggadah, because learning aggadah is beneficial for having daughters.” The Lelover Rebbe, R. Eliezer Mendel Biderman of Lelov, said that studying the book *Me’or Einayim* [Light of the eyes] by R. Menahem

Shalom, p. 107, his father writes that he heard of people who did this and did not need doctors.

³⁹ <http://judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/23419/learning-hilchos-chalev-and-seder-kodshim-as-segulah-for-refuah>:

I am not sure about it being a *segulah* for *refu’ah*, but *Sefer Ḥassidim* (in *siman* 588*, also in *siman* 1) says that one who learns a Torah subject that is a “*Met Mitzvah*,” i.e., that others do not study (he gives *Seder Kodashim* as an example), is greatly rewarded. Maybe R. Ḥayyim was suggesting learning those subjects to increase your friend’s merit (for them being today’s “*Met Mitzvah*”), which could pay back in answering prayers for *refu’ah*, Tamir Evan Jan 16 at 16:23. The rationale being that the souls of authors of seldom-used texts may be even more appreciative than those whose texts are frequently cited.

*Section 588 in the editions based on the Berlin edition and section 261 in those based on the Bologna edition.

⁴⁰ Horovitz, R. Isaiah (Antonius Press: Amsterdam, 1717), approbation of R. Joel Sirkis.

Naḥum Twersky, the first Chernobyler Rebbe, is efficacious for protecting against blindness.⁴¹ The 19th-century Belzer Rebbe, R. Yissakhar Dov Rokeaḥ, once prescribed study in a book written by R. Joseph Colon ben Solomon Trabotto (1420–1480) as a cure for internal bleeding.⁴²

R. Chaim Halberstam of Sanz (1793–1876) believed that the book *Tomer Devorah* [The palm tree of Deborah] by the 16th-century Kabbalist R. Moses Cordovero was a protection against cancer, and if one is not able to learn it himself he should have someone read it in front of him.⁴³ *Sefer Shinḥei ha-Besht* [In praise of the Baal Shem Tov] was prescribed by the 19th-century R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1789–1866) as an efficacious means to break a high fever.⁴⁴ R. Ya‘akov Yisrael Kanievsky [the Steipler Rav (1899–1985)] recommended studying the section of *Zevachim* from the Mishnaic Order of *Kodashim* and the laws of forbidden fats⁴⁵ to help a child with birth defects.⁴⁶ R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), the last Rebbe of Chabad, believed strongly in going to doctors but also prescribed spiritual cures as an adjunct to the physician’s care.⁴⁷ He placed great store in the study of the daily portion of *ḤiTaT*—the Pentateuch, Psalms, and Tanya—and prescribed it for such ailments as kidney stones, general pains,⁴⁸ dermatological issues,⁴⁹ and hernias for which study of the Mishnah should be added as a supplement.⁵⁰ He prescribed the study of



⁴¹ *Siddur Tefillah L-David Lelov*, p. 736, Letter 13; as recorded in Teplinsky, p. 201.

⁴² Responsa of the *MaHaRIK*, R. Joseph Colon ben Solomon Trabotto. The Belzer Rebbe, R. Yissakhar Dov, told one of his disciples who was suffering from internal bleeding to study Responsa of the *Maharik*. Upon doing so, he was healed. (*Elef K'Tav, siman* 148; recorded in Teplinsky, p. 219.)

⁴³ See also, *Moshien Shel Yisrael*, vol. 2, p. 239; as recorded in Teplinsky, p. 490.

⁴⁴ R. Yehudah Ḥitrik, *Reshimot Devarim*, second ed. (2009), p. 135. If the patient could not study the book, others were to study it in his presence.

⁴⁵ *Yoreh De'ah, siman* 64.

⁴⁶ <http://judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/23419/learning-hilchos-chalev-and-seder-kodshim-as-segulah-for-refuah>.

⁴⁷ In addition to the various books prescribed below, the patient was also directed to undertake other steps such as checking whether his *tefillin* or *mezuzot* were properly written and to give charity, etc.

⁴⁸ R. Yoav Lemberg, *Otzar Segulot ha-Rebbe* (Afula: 2008), pp. 99-100.

⁴⁹ Lemberg, *Otzar Segulot ha-Rebbe*, p. 103.

⁵⁰ Lemberg, *Otzar Segulot ha-Rebbe*, p. 103.

Ḥassidic texts in general to help one's eyesight as *ḥassidut* is the "light within Torah" and its study will brighten the eyes. At other times he prescribed the recitation of lines from the *Zohar* or other books that use the term "*Ta ḥazq*" (Come see) as a cure for problems with eyesight⁵¹ and the *Tanya* or general study of the Torah under the principal of, "A Commandment is the candle and Torah is light."⁵² For laryngitis before Rosh Hashanah, he prescribed study of portions of *Ateret Rosh* related to Rosh Hashanah.⁵³ Prior to the removal of tonsils, one should say the entire book of Psalms without interruption.⁵⁴ For insomnia, he prescribed recitation of Psalms.⁵⁵ R. Naḥman of Breslov said of his own book, "Everyone says that *Sippurei Ma'asiyot* is a cure for insomnia; I believe that it rouses people from their slumber,"⁵⁶ though it may have been said "tongue in cheek."

Our holy books even have a role to play in stopping or preventing plagues. It has been taught that during a plague, you should go to the cemetery where the books are buried and ask the Almighty to care for you just as you cared for the holy books.⁵⁷

Just like in pharmaceuticals, we can find the difference between generic and brand name books. Thus, according to R. Chaim Yissakhar Gross of Petrova (d. 1938), it is specifically the *first edition* of *Noam Elimelekh* printed in Lvov (Lemberg) in 1788 which, if placed on the birthing bed, will ease delivery.⁵⁸



Noam Elimelekh, First Edition

⁵¹ R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Iggerot Kodesh*, vol. 7 (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 1997), p. 280.

⁵² Quote from Proverbs, 6:23. Lemberg, *Otzar Segulot ha-Rebbe*, pp. 89-90.

⁵³ Lemberg, *Otzar Segulot ha-Rebbe*, p. 98.

⁵⁴ Lemberg, *Otzar Segulot ha-Rebbe*, p. 102.

⁵⁵ Lemberg, *Otzar Segulot ha-Rebbe*, p. 103.

⁵⁶ *Sippurei Maasiyot*, Rabbi Naḥman of Breslov; *Ḥayei MaHaRaN*, *siman* 25, as recorded in Teplinsky, p. 299.)

⁵⁷ Eliezer Yehudah Waldenberg (December 10, 1915–November 21, 2006), Responsa *Tzitz Eliezer*, Part 15, *siman* 10.

⁵⁸ R. Yisrael Baruch Braun, *Obel Elimelekh* [The tent of Elimelekh] (Przemysł, 1910), p. 117, section 289.

The Book as Midwife

There is a long history of the book being used to ease childbirth. While the use of the Torah Scroll and its accoutrements in the various stages of childbirth is well documented,⁵⁹ after the advent of printing, Hebrew books too play an important role, particularly the Book of Psalms. Rabbi Isaac Luria (the *Ari ha-Kadosh*) says that Psalm 20 is good to say for mercy on a woman in labor. It has 9 verses corresponding to 9 months of labor and 70 words corresponding to the 70 pains of childbirth.⁶⁰ R. Hayyim Yosef David Azulai ben Yitzhak Zerahiah (1724–1806), commonly known as the Hida, teaches that one should say this Psalm 12 times and then make a special *Yehi Ratzon* (supplication).⁶¹

Thus we find recorded in R. Moshe Landau's *Sefer Shulhan Melakhim* [Book of Kings] that to assist in a difficult labor, you should place one of the following volumes under the head of the woman: *Noam Elimelech* [The pleasantness of Elimelech] by R. Elimelech Weissblum of Lizhensk; *Ohr ha-Hokhmah* [Light of wisdom] by R. Uri Feivel ben Aaron;⁶² or *Kedushat Levi* [The holiness of Levi] by R. Levi Yitzhak of



⁵⁹ Unlike most *mitzvot*, it is a *mitzvah* for women to gaze upon the letters of the Torah Scroll. Women have a distinct role in the ritual use of the Torah Scroll. While they are not permitted to participate directly in the ceremonial worship of the Scroll, its use in easing labor is well documented. The concealed Torah Scroll may be brought to the door of the delivery room to ease a difficult birth. In addition to bringing the Torah Scroll to the doorway in a difficult labor, having the husband open the doors of the ark to cause the opening of the womb, or tying a string to the doors of the ark and connecting it to the leg of the mother so that she may open the doors by moving her leg, women were permitted to approach the open ark after service to petition the Almighty. In a similar custom, birthing women in the Caucasus sometimes drank water from cuplike parts of the Torah Scroll finials or water in which the Torah Scroll ornaments had been immersed to ease their birthing. Women were permitted to stitch a wimple (a form of girdle) for the *Sefer Torah*, often made from the swaddling cloth used during a child's circumcision. Wimples sewn by virgins were the most efficacious.

⁶⁰ *Divrei Torah* 3:30.

⁶¹ *Avodat ha-Kodesh*.

⁶² R. Uri Feivel ben Aaron, *Or ha-Hokhmah* [The light of wisdom] (Laszczow [false frontispiece showing Koretz as place of publication]: Judah Leib Rubinstein, 1815).

Berditchev.⁶³ *Yesod Yitzhak* [The foundation of Isaac] on the laws of circumcision by R. Yitzhak Isaac b. Yaakov HaLevi Segal, is prescribed for newborns.⁶⁴ The *Sefer Hassidim* [Book of the pious], written in the Middle Ages, records the practice of placing the Book of Leviticus under the head of a child when first put into the cradle.⁶⁵

Sometimes the connection between the prescribed volume and the malady is clear. Thus, R. Naftali of Lizhensk taught that learning *Mishnayot Seder Nashim* (the Mishnaic Order on Women) will help one's wife have normal *vestos*. Similarly, R. Zehariah Mendel of Yaroslav, author of *Darkei Tzedek* [Ways of righteousness], says that when you need healing or happiness or need to appease your enemies, you should learn a section of the Talmud that discusses that situation. Another interesting connection is the belief that ensuring none of your holy books are shelved upside down will protect against a breech birth.⁶⁶

Other times, the prescription of a particular book or text is not readily apparent, and the explanation is complex or attenuated. For example, Psalm 100 should be recited for a woman in difficult labor. It is based on the numerical value of the text. The first letters of the opening words, ל"מ, have a numerical value of 70, referring to the 70 screams of a woman before giving birth. In a nod to homeopathy, it is noted that there are also 43 words corresponding to the Kabbalistic *kelipah* of מל, which similarly has the numerical value of 43 and therefore has the power to counteract the evil.⁶⁷

The curative power of books is not limited to physical ailments. Certain books are said to have the power to cure depression or to instill a general sense of happiness such as *Ma'aseh Rokeah* [Work of the ointment-

⁶³ R. Elimelekh Weissblum of Lizhensk, *Noam Elimelekh*. There are those who believe in placing the first edition of *The Pleasantness of Elimelekh* (1788) on the birthing bed for an easy delivery. (*Obel Elimelekh*, p. 119, *ot* 269, as recorded in Teplinsky, p. 279.) Those who advocate this practice caution that proper respect requires the holy books be placed within two coverings because the delivery room could be a considered an unclean place under Jewish law.

⁶⁴ R. Baruch of Przemyśl, *Ateret Yesod* [Crown of foundation], printed with *Yesod Yitzhak* (Przemyśl, 1910).

⁶⁵ Ed. Lemberg, 1870; Zhitomir, 1879, §1140; (not in the Berlin edition).

⁶⁶ <http://torahmusings.com/2012/06/pregnancy-segulot/>, *Pregnancy & Segulot*, by R. Ari Enkin on June 26, 2012 1:49 a.m. in *Legacy*, citing "Nine Spiritual Months: A Treasury of Jewish Insights for Pregnancy, Birth, & Beyond" by Rabbi Michael Green (Practical Torah Publishers, 2007).

⁶⁷ *Likutei Moharan* II 2, end.

maker) by R. Eliezer Rokeaḥ of Amsterdam⁶⁸ and *Pnei Yehoshua* [The face of Joshua] by R. Yaakov Yehoshua Falk.⁶⁹ Similarly, the study of the works by R. Shabtai ha-Kohen Katz, known as the Shakh, has been prescribed as a cure for a confused mind.⁷⁰

Where the physical ailment is a clear punishment from Heaven, the book can be an effective cure. There is an interesting story told by R. Ḥayyim Halberstam of Sanz (1793–1876) (known as the *Divrei Ḥayyim* after his magnum opus) concerning R. Yeḥezkel Landau (1713–1793), the *Noda B-Yehudah*. When R. Landau was appointed Rabbi of Prague in 1755, there was a group of people who were actively opposed to him, and each was afflicted from On High. The son of one such opponent took gravely ill, and the doctors said there was nothing they could do. Recognizing the cause of the illness, his family desperately sought R. Landau and found him in the bathhouse. R. Landau said there was nothing he could do from that location but that the family should quickly run to R. Landau's house and take a copy of his work, *Tziyun le-Nefesh Ḥayah* [Monument to a living soul], and place it under their son's head; this will help until he can return from the bathhouse to his home to see what he can do. The parents followed his advice and it provided immediate relief; nothing more was needed. Slowly but surely the boy was completely healed.⁷¹

If you want a general prescription for longevity, then it is the *Beit Yosef* [The house of Joseph], by R. Joseph Karo, that you want. The appropriateness of this remedy was confirmed from On High. According to R. Mordechai Ḥayyim of Slonim, R. Yosef Karo came to the Chief Rabbi of Tzfat, R. Shmuel Heller, in a dream and told him that the study of his *Beit Yosef* is a talisman for long life.⁷²

Just as with any medication, you must ensure purity in the manufacture and not use contaminated material. Thus, according to some, a holy book published by a nonreligious publisher does not carry the power of

⁶⁸ R. Yissakhar Dov Rokeaḥ of Belz said that *Ma'aseh Rokeaḥ* was a *segulah* for happiness (Foreward to *Ma'aseh Rokeaḥ* [Jerusalem, 1993], as recorded in Teplinsky, p. 255).

⁶⁹ R. Yissakhar Dov Rokeaḥ of Belz said that learning from *Pnei Yehoshua* was a *segulah* for happiness (*Hanhagot R. Ḥeṣṣkiyahu Greenwald mi-Pápa* as recorded in Teplinsky, p. 333).

⁷⁰ *Sefer ha-Middot, Erekh Da'at* 2-3; as recorded in Teplinsky, p. 443.

⁷¹ R. Chaim Halberstam, *Mekor Ḥayyim* [The source of life], p. 27, section 30, as cited in Teplinsky, p. 349.

⁷² *Ma'amar Mordechai*, vol. 1, p. 36, Letter 114 (recorded in Teplinsky, p. 60). See also R. Meshulam Igra, *Obel Naftali*, p. 94, Letter 268 (recorded in Teplinsky, p. 60).

holiness⁷³ and should not be used to cure. Similarly, the use of a book that belonged to an evil person or which an evil person used or even looked at is not only unhelpful but, like any contaminated medication, actually presents a life-threatening danger.⁷⁴

Methods of Invoking the Book's Power

The mechanism for invoking the protective powers of the book varies



A miniture three inch Noam Elimelekh which can be carried for protection

from book to book. For some, like *Sefer Raziel ha-Malakh*, the mere possession serves as an amulet.⁷⁵ The Steipler Rav, R. Ya'akov Yisrael Kanievsky, for example, said to keep books of Kabbalah in your house even if you do not understand them. Other well-known books whose possession alone are said to act as an talismans include *Noam Elimelekh*; *Likutei Moharan* by R. Naḥman of Breslov (1772–1810); *Ohr ha-Ganuz* [The hidden light] by R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto,⁷⁶ *ve-Zot l-Yehudah* [And this for Judah] by the 13th-

century R. Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia; *Kedushat Levi* [The sanctity of Levi] by R. Levi Isaac ben Meir, of Berditchev (1740–1809); *Sefer Segulot ha-Besht ve-Talmidav* [The book of charms of the Baal Shem Tov and his students]; *Brit Menuḥah* [Covenant of rest], by R. Avraham ben Yitzḥak of Granada, late-13th–early-14th-century; and *Yesod Yitzḥak* (Foundation of Isaac) by R. Yitzḥak Eizik ha-Levi of Zorowitz (1835–1883).

⁷³ *Taharat ha-Kodesh, Ma'amar Kedushat ha-Einayim*, p. 86, as cited in R. Aharon Toisig, *Sefer Kedushat Einayim*, vol. 1 (Bnei Brak, 1986), p. 321.

⁷⁴ *Shomer Emunim*, Forward, p. 66, as cited in Toisig, *Kedushat Einayim*, vol. 1, p. 321-23.

⁷⁵ It is the mere possession of *Sefer Raziel ha-Malakh* that serves as an amulet. Other well-known books whose possession alone are said to act as an amulet include *Heikhal ha-Berakhah* by R. Yitzḥak Isaac Yehudah Yeḥiel Safran of Komarno, known as the Komarno Rebbe (1806–1874). “Anyone who has it in their house will be saved from all bad things, sicknesses, and from lacking their needs and the house will be filled with blessings of Hashem and all good, success, wealth and life, for him and children without pause.”

⁷⁶ Rabbis Mordekhai and Aharon of Chernobyl assert that it is the purchase that triggers the protection. Approbation to *Ohr ha-Ganuz* (Lemberg: Salat Press, 1866).

At least one enterprising publisher has bound together seven such books into a single volume under the title, *Shemirah u-Segulah l-Khol ha-Bayit* [Protection and amulet for the entire house].⁷⁷ According to R. Aaron Twersky of Chernobyl (1784–1871) and R. Yitzhak Isaac of Komarno (1806–1874),⁷⁸ it is the purchase of *Tiferet Yisrael* [Glory of Israel] by R. Israel Harif of Satinov (1694–1781) *at list price* which unlocks its power.⁷⁹ In the case of a Torah Scroll, if you even purchase a single letter, you obtain the healing power.⁸⁰

In some circumstances, it is the physical placement of the book, such as under a sick person's head, that is required. For other books, like *Arba Me'ot Shekel Kesef* [Four hundred silver shekels] by R. Hayyim Vital (1543–1620), and *Tiferet Yisrael* [Glory of Israel] by R. Israel Harif of Satinov (1694–1781), it is their *purchase*, not mere possession that provides the protection, thus mere possession or study is not sufficient. Yet other books require their publication, such as *Seder Ketoret* [The order of the incense] arranged by the Apta Rebbe, R. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel



⁷⁷ “*Shemirah u-Segulah le-Khol ha-Bayit*” containing *Seder Ketoret*, *Brit Menuḥah*, *Arba Me’ot Shekel Kesef*, *Tiferet Yisrael*, *Yesod Yitzhak*, *Or ha-Ganuz*, and *ve-Zot l-Yehudah*; privately published (Jerusalem: R. Yaakov Yitzhak Meizlish, 2001).

⁷⁸ Approbation of R. Yitzhak Isaac of Komarno for *Tiferet Israel* (Warsaw: Argelbrand Press, 1871).

⁷⁹ Approbations for *Tiferet Israel* (Argelbrand Press: Warsaw, 1871). “This book is full of holy Names and names of angels capable of healing and protection from the four categories of damagers, and to effect blessing and success. Therefore (the Admor of Ruzhin) said with the clarity of his words, that the writings of this author are a *segulah* for excellent protection and effecting peace and blessing” (from the words of R. Avraham Ya’akov of Sadigura’s approbation, in the name of his father, the Admor of Ruzhin). Menachem Mendel of Shtefanesht writes: “... so that there will be protection in their homes and an abundance of blessing and success.” R. Aharon of Chernobyl writes in his approbation: “And I will also say this to all who buy this holy book *at its designated price*. They can be reassured that the merit of the author will protect them, and the sanctity of the notebook will place blessing in their homes, protect them with their wives and children, and the members of their households, with complete health, and bring them success as in the good years for blessing ...”

⁸⁰ R. Yekutiel Yehudah Halberstam, *Divrei Yatziv*, *Yoreh De’ah*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: 1998), Responsa 170, p. 388-91.

(1748–1825),⁸¹ and those of R. Aryeh Leib (Maharal Tzintz), whose books are regularly republished by those seeking Divine assistance.

Just as with certain pharmaceuticals, certain book cures require life-time usage. An interesting story is told by R. Menashe Melamed about the Shapiro brothers, renowned Hassidic publishers in Czarist Russia. Their father and founder of the press, R. Pinḥas Shapiro of Koretz, instructed his sons to publish the Bible commentary *Ohr ha-Ḥayyim* [Light of life] each year and its publication would protect them from harm. After publishing it a number of times, the market was flooded and there were no more customers for the book, so they ceased its publication. The following year they suffered greatly.⁸²

There are a number of other works considered to have special powers, but the power comes from their study or, in the case of the *Zohar* according to some, their incantation rather than their mere possession or purchase.⁸³ For example, it is the study of *Sefer Shivei HaBesht* [In praise of the Baal Shem Tov] that breaks a high fever,⁸⁴ and the study of *Tomar Devorah* [The palm tree of Deborah] by R. Moshe Cordovero (1522–1570) that protects one from terrible illnesses;⁸⁵ R. Menachem Mendel of Riminov (1745–1815) says that a sick person should learn *Mesilat Yesharim* [Path of the just] by R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707–1746). Just as doctors sometimes disagree as to how a medicine should be administered, so too, in book cures you sometimes find disagreement. R. Isaiah B. (Judah) Loeb Berlin, also known as Isaiah Pick



A page from *Menorat HaMaor*

⁸¹ *Seder Ketoret* (Munkatch: *Bleierische Buchdruckerei*, c. 1885).

⁸² R. Yehoshua Mondschein, *Migdal Oz* [Tower of strength] (Kfar Chabad: Machon Lubavitch, 1983), p. 268. R. Pinḥas believed in the great power of *Ohr ha-Ḥayyim* and when one of his sons became ill, he took it upon himself to study one page a day of the *Shklov Pentateuch* with the commentary of the *Ohr ha-Ḥayyim*, *Kovetz Siftei Tzaddikim*, vol. 4, p. 31 as cited in Teplinsky, p. 16.

⁸³ See generally, Mondschein, p. 438, regarding the power arising from the mere incantation of the words of the *Zohar* by those unable to understand the text.

⁸⁴ *Reshimot Devarim*, pp. 140–41, as quoted by Meizlish in *Shemirah*, indices p. 60. If the patient could not study the book, others were to study it in his presence.

⁸⁵ The Satmar Rebbe, Reb Yoel, said in the name of R. Ḥayyim Halberstam of Sanz.

(1725–1799), wrote that ten people should gather to read a chapter of *Menorat ha-Maor* [The lampstand that lights] by R. Yitzhak Abuhav.⁸⁶ R. Menachem Mendel of Rimanov said that the patient himself should study it.⁸⁷



When a member of their household was to undergo an operation, R. Y. Twersky instructed the other members to read the second portion of the commentary on *Parshat Naso* (dealing with healing) in *Me'or Einayim* [Light of the eyes] by R. Menahem Nahum Twersky, the first Chernobyler Rebbe.⁸⁸ The author of the book *Kav ha-Yashar* [The straight path], R. Zvi Hirsch Kaidanover (16-- –1712), says everyone should buy it and review it and they will have success in everything. R. Joseph ben Meir Teomim (1727–1792) says that learning *Kav ha-Yashar* is healing for the soul and the body. Extraordinary curative powers are ascribed to the study of the Talmud and Mishnah,⁸⁹ as they are to the Psalms as well.

In other cases, we find that the study of the text has the opposite effect. The Kabbalistic healers of one Kabbalistic yeshivah advise against studying the text or seeking to understand the text but require talismanic rote recitation of the words or letters to effectuate the cure:

⁸⁶ In his approbation to *Nefesh Yehudah* [The soul of Judah], commentary on *Menorat ha-Maor* [The lightstand that lights] by R. Yitzhak Abuhav, as cited by Yechezkel Michel Stern, *Greats of the Generation*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: 1986), p. 95.

⁸⁷ As written by R. Yitzhak Weiss who reported what R. Joseph Meir Horowitz of Spinka said in the name of R. Menachem Mendel of Rimanov. As cited in Shabtai Lifshitz, *Sefer Segulot Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 2000), pp. 239–40.

⁸⁸ R. Yoḥanan Twerski mi-Tolna, *Ki Hayyim Heim L-Motziheim* (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 103.

⁸⁹ Reb Nahman of Breslov says the following in *Sefer ha-Middot*: If one wants to have male children, he should learn a lot of Gemara in depth, and minimize learning aggadah, because learning aggadah is beneficial for having daughters. (This is apparently based on the belief that aggadah, being legends and less intellectually demanding, are more appropriate for women.) Learning the following are for lightening a harsh judgment On High: *Ohalot*, *Mishnayot Zera'im* and *Mishnayot Shevu'ot*. Reb Naftali of Lizhensk says learning *Mishnayot Seder Nashim* will help one's wife have normal *vestos*. *Darkhei Tzedeck* says that when one needs healing, happiness, or needs to appease his enemies, he should learn a Gemara that discusses that situation.

This process involves reading a holy text with correct accentuation and with intention, but without explanation, commentary, or discussion of the text. The main effort is directed at correct pronunciation of the text rather than interpretation of its content. . . . Rabbi Leon and Rabbi Cohen both emphasize that the text's influence is not dependent on understanding, identifying with it, or interpreting it. On the contrary, several times Rabbi Cohen told his supplicants that personal interpretation of the text that is read can even adversely affect the treatment. . . . [When a supplicant stated that she does not know enough Hebrew to know what she is reading,] Rabbi Cohen answered firmly, "That's even better! What do you mean understand?" The rabbi turned to the supplicant and asked rhetorically. "If she takes a pill, she understands it?" Thus, the rabbi emphasized the text's latent significance, and the functional use of the text as an object used for healing purposes.⁹⁰

There is yet another method of using books to effectuate a cure. This is the use of a book almost like a telegraph. Just as Ḥassidim have a custom of submitting a written petition (known as a *pidyon nefesh* [ransom of the soul]⁹¹ or *kvittel* in Yiddish) to their Rebbe seeking his or her intervention Above on their behalf,⁹² there is a custom of placing a *kvittel* between the pages of a book to seek the intervention of the author, whether alive or dead, on behalf of the patient. This custom is reported to have been used to invoke the assistance of R. Elimelech Weissblum of Lizhensk, author of *Noam Elimelekh*, and of R. Aaron (the second) Perlow of Karlin (1802–1872), author of *Beit Aharon* [The house of Aaron], the main Ḥassidic text of the Karliner Ḥassidim.⁹³ This method is also recorded using *Me'or Einayim* by R. Menaḥem Naḥum Twersky, the first Chernobyler

⁹⁰ Guzman-Carmeli and Rubin, "Tikkun (Divine Repair) and Healing," 34:217–241, 233–234.

⁹¹ A ḥassid's request to the Rebbe to intercede on On High for his soul.

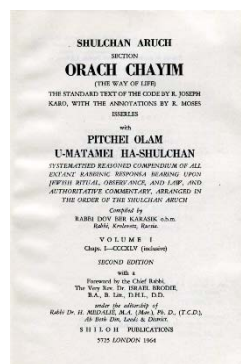
⁹² I take the unusual step of including the feminine pronoun here out of respect for Hannah Rachel Verbermacher (1805–1888), also known as the Maiden of Ludmir or the "Ludmirer Moyd," whom some consider to have been a female Rebbe in the Ḥassidic movement.

⁹³ Meizlish, p. 67–8, citing to כ"ב, אותיות י', כ ; R. Ya'akov (Reb Yankele) Leiser of Pshevorsk (1907–1998) (*Kovetz Beit Aharon v-Yisrael, gilyon* 19, p. 121; and as recommended in a letter by R. Abraham Elimelekh Perlow of Karlin, (killed 1942), *Divrei Aharon*, p. 171.

Rebbe.⁹⁴ There is a similar custom amongst the Chabad Ḥassidim dating at least to 1951⁹⁵ and this practice using *Iggerot Kodesh* [Holy letters] (the collected correspondence of R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the last Rebbe of Chabad) has gained adherents among a certain sector of Chabad Ḥassidim subsequent to the passing of their last Rebbe.

A similar form of bibliomancy has been used by some to determine the malady or the spiritual source of the malady in which the Book of Psalms is opened at random and the text on that page is a diagnosis.⁹⁶

Perhaps the most difficult means of invoking a book's power is by writing



a book. Baal Shem Tov says you can sweeten “harsh judgments” by coming up with new novellae in Talmud and decisors. R. Menachem Mendel Panet, (1818–1884), in his book, *Maglei Tzedeke*, writes that you can accomplish this through *pilpul*.⁹⁷ There are numerous stories of authors being cured by writing or promising to write a book. R. Yisrael b. Shmuel Ashkenazi of Shklov (ca. 1770–1839), author of *Pe’at ha-Shulḥan* [Corners of the table], was suffering from a terrible illness. He pledged to write a book on *Seder Zera’im* (the Order of Plants) of the Jerusalem Talmud if he was granted a cure. He was healed but delayed in publishing the book. In 1825, his house collapsed during heavy rains and high winds, but

⁹⁴ Meizlish, p. 68. Placing a *kvittel* in *Me’or Einayim* has the same effect as visiting the grave of R. Menachem Naḥum Twersky, the first Chernobyler Rebbe, and requesting his intervention On High.

⁹⁵ After *Shaharit* and the recitation of the *ma’amar*, each individual should read a *pidyon nefesh*. (It goes without saying that a *gartl* is worn during the reading.) Those who had the privilege of entering [the saintly Rebbe’s study] for *yehidut*, or at least of seeing his face, should—while reading the *pidyon nefesh*—picture themselves as standing before him. The *pidyon nefesh* should then be placed between the pages of a *ma’amar* or *kuntreis*, etc., of his teachings, and sent, if possible, on the same day, to be read at his graveside.

Letter of R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson “To *Anash*, to the students of *Tomkhei Temimim*, and to those who have a bond or a relationship with my revered father-in-law, the saintly Rebbe, of blessed memory,” *Yud Shvat*, 5711 (January 17, 1951).

⁹⁶ Guzman-Carmeli and Rubin, “Tikkun (Divine Repair) and Healing,” 34:217–241, 231.

⁹⁷ A method of disputation among rabbinical scholars regarding the interpretation of Talmudic rules and principles or Scripture that involves the development of careful and often excessively subtle distinctions.

his family escaped unharmed. He took this as a sign and immediately set about publishing his work to fulfill his oath for which he had already received a cure.⁹⁸ Similarly, R. Dov Ber Karasik writes in the introduction to his *Pithei Olam u-Matamei ha-Shulhan* that he became very ill and searched for the cause of his illness. It dawned on him that perhaps it was due to his failure to complete the volume he had been working on. Sure enough, as soon as he returned to drafting his book, his health returned. When circumstances caused him to stop writing again, his illness returned. He was finally cured only when he completed the book.⁹⁹

The Debate Over the Use of Books as a Cure

The use of books as talismans or folk cures is not without its critics.¹⁰⁰ The Talmud teaches that it is forbidden to use the words of the Torah to heal.¹⁰¹ R. David ha-Levi Segal wrote that the Torah heals the soul and not the body and books should not be used as “cures.”¹⁰² Maimonides, the great 12th-century philosopher, codifier of Jewish law, physician to the court of Sultan Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn (Saladin the Great), and R. Naḥman Girondi’s grandfather, prohibited the use of the Bible either as a whole or in part for magical cures:¹⁰³

Regarding one who incants over a wound or reads a verse from the Torah, and so one who reads verses to calm a frightened child or places a *Sefer Torah* or *tefillin* on a child so that he will sleep—It is not bad enough that these people are numbered among the sorcerers and diviners, but they are also counted as heretics to the Torah by using words of the Torah to heal the body. The (words of the) Torah are for healing the soul only, as it is written, “and they shall be life for your soul.” However, it is permitted to recite verses and chapters from *Tehillim* for protection against troubles and harm—by merit of their recitation.

⁹⁸ Author’s introduction to *Pe’at ha-Shulhan* (Tzfat: Israel Bak, 1836).

⁹⁹ R. Dov Ber Karasik, שלחן ערוך אורה חיים עם פתחי עולם ומטעמי השולחן, חלק א, Introduction, 1901.

¹⁰⁰ Rambam, *Tur* (*Yoreh De’ab* 179), and the *Shulhan Arukh* (*Yoreh De’ab* 179:10) forbade such usage. Rambam in *Hilchos Avodat Kokhavim* 11:12.

¹⁰¹ T.B. *Shevu’ot*, p. 15b.

¹⁰² (C. 1586–February 20, 1667), also known as the *Turei Zahav* (abbreviated Taz) after the title of his significant halachic commentary on the *Shulhan Arukh*.

¹⁰³ Maimonides, *Yad, Akeum*, xi. 12; *Tur, Yoreh De’ab*, 179, according to Shebu, 15b.

Notwithstanding these admonitions, the use of books as amulets and folk cures were, and in certain communities, remain, commonplace. These individuals do not deny that there is a Talmudic prohibition against using the Torah to heal but often go to great lengths to distinguish their use from that which is prohibited. R. Yaakov Yitzhak Meizlish addressed the admonition against using books to heal in a letter to R. Moshe Blau in 2001.¹⁰⁴ He noted, as a threshold matter, that any doubt of violation is eliminated by studying from the texts, as suggested by R. Chaim Kanievsky. He goes on to note that the prohibition relates only to the Written Law and not the Oral Law.¹⁰⁵ R. Eliezer Yehudah Waldenberg, known as the *Tzitz Eliezer*, after his monumental treatise on Jewish law, writes that the prohibition is *only* on using the Torah to cure but if you use it in conjunction with other things like prayer in general, etc., it is permitted.¹⁰⁶ R. Shmuel Eidels, known as the Maharsha, reasoned that so long as you recognized that you were doing so to heal the soul, which would then heal the body, it is permitted.¹⁰⁷ Also, as noted above, in purchasing the book, you have fulfilled the *mitzvah* of writing a *Sefer Torah* so it is the reward of fulfilling the Commandment which is doing the healing, not the object itself. ❧

¹⁰⁴ Appended to his *Shemirah u-Segulah le-Khol ha-Bayit*, indices, pp. 57 *et seq.*

¹⁰⁵ Citing *Sefer Mishmeret Shalom*, *Yoreh De'ah*, *se'if* 179, *siman* 100, 5. (See the *Taz* and *Shakh* and *Biur ha-Gra*, *siman* 100, 23.)

¹⁰⁶ *Tzitz Eliezer*, vol. 17, *siman* 30.

¹⁰⁷ As quoted in Morgenstern, *Yam ha-Hokhmah*, p. 90.