Sublingual Medicine

Throughout the history of medicine, there have been many methods introduced of administering medication, of all of them, the two most commonly used are sublingual and regular oral medicine. Sublingual (from Latin ‘under the tongue’) administration is the placement of medication under the tongue to be absorbed by the body, while regular oral medicine, generally in the form of pills, is taken by swallowing, and digestively processing it like anything else ingested by the body. Sublingual medicine is prescribed when a potent, quickly absorbed medication is needed. The area under the tongue has many capillaries and tiny blood vessels which transports the dissolved and diffused solution directly into the bloodstream, no process of diluting and breaking down via the digestion track is needed and therefore the medicine can be pumping through the blood stream within short seconds of it being administered. Aside for the time sensitive aspect, the digestive track, stomach enzymes, liver, intestines etc. can alter drugs or reduce their potency, leaving sublingual administration a more effective way to receive desired effects of the medicine without any degradation.

In most areas of life, process is key. From the weaving process which begins at picking and refining cotton, to the process of elimination used to weed out bad options and make good choices, a method and system are used to succeed. The world was fashioned in a way that in both material and spiritual realms there are step by step processes that allow man and the world to function. Gd charged man with the task of refining the world and refining himself, making both man and the world wholesome and Gdly. To do so, Chassidus introduces a process of self-refinement, in Hebrew Birur, to purify one’s behavior and character through a step by step, gradual process. The analogy of refining silver is used to better understand this process. When someone is given a chunk of unrefined silver, he begins purifying it by removing the pure silver from the mixture of silver and other unwanted particles. He does this over and over again until he extracts all the clean silver he could. There always remains, though, as small as it may be, a trace of pure silver to be removed and used. In a person this might look something like, after much introspection, man chooses to focus and amalgamate his strengths and slowly come to identify with the selfless part of himself, with each step, more and more of what he does becomes altruistic and selfless. There always remains a part of him left to be worked on, making the process a life time’s undertaking.

When food or medicine is consumed, at each step of the digestive system the nutritive and beneficial parts of the food are extracted and released into the bloodstream and cells to fuel activity. At each step, the food is further refined, leaving more waste and less nutrient to continue through the digestive track. The spiritual process of refinement which the digestive system seems to mimic is one way of fine tuning oneself. There remains another way, however, that’s less systematic and menial and in fact more passive.

Just like sublingual medicine, there are areas in life where things one hears or sees affect the person instantaneously without any conscious break down of what he experienced. When one is taking in information or inspiration some of it needs working at to fully understand and implement, while some of it, seems to be absorbed immediately. No process is necessary, it merely becomes a part of the person without him trying to break it down methodically. While on one hand there’s a major part of life that warrants more technical and meticulous means to bettering oneself, there remains an area of life, an extremely key area, where a person is affected by influences, seamlessly- what he sees/ hears instantly resonates and becomes a part of his vast subconscious.

Sublingual medicine and its implications has a conspicuous connection to a verse in Shir Hashirim, a love song composed by King Solomon used as a metaphor for the romance between Gd and His people. “Your lips drip flowing honey, O bride; honey and milk are under your tongue... (4:11)” According to Rashi’s commentary, the verse is alluding to the pleasant and satisfying objectives of Torah.

Rabbeinu Behaye, 13th Century rabbi and scholar, comments on the two times honey is spoken about in the verse, because two different Hebrew words are used. The first mention of honey - Nofes in Hebrew- actually has a subtle difference in definition than the second and more widely used Hebrew word Devash. R’ Behaye highlights the distinction between the two words stating that “Devash is more advantageous than Nofes.” While Nofes is unfiltered honey, therefore containing bits of wax and other flecks, Devash, used in conjunction with “under the tongue” is pure and unpolluted honey. While one is still in need of refinement before it can be enjoyed, the second is ready as is, no processing is necessary.

Chassidus notes that the phrase “honey and milk” is used as a metaphor for sweet, delightful yet unfrequented layers of Torah. Hence the continuation of the phrase “under the tongue” because, these deeper layers of Torah are not as obvious at first glance as more literal and surface levels. Once they are discovered and uncovered, however, their effects on the person are potent and invaluable. One will find while studying Torah, that as comprehensive and beautifully connected the text and commentaries are, many times only once the deeper yet disguised parts of Torah are understood does the entire picture become more clear and resonant.

Throughout the journey of the Jewish People from Egypt to Israel, attitudes were worked on, lessons were learnt, and the knowledge of what Gd wanted in the world became a reality. The events, conflicts, ups and downs were all part of the ebb and flow of their maturing process- the process of growing from a juvenile, simple nation to a fully developed and confident one. While most of the maturing was done through introspection and gradually bettering their motives and behavior, some of their experiences were ‘sublingual’ ones. One such example is the case of the Manna. In middle of the arid desert, where food was scarce if not non-existent, Gd provided bread from heaven for the Jewish People. Each morning, aside for Shabbas, manna descended from the skies, and landed in the camp of the Jews, ready to be eaten. The Jews were fed with food so clearly directly from Gd; they were consuming Gdliness. In fact, they absorbed every last iota of nutrients, material and spiritual, because there was nothing in the manna to be discarded. It was all good. The only step the Jews had to take was walking outside and collecting it. The food was then ready to be consumed. They were quite literally consuming Gdliness. This experience, as part of their journey to maturity, pumped them with energy and Gdly intuition by merely absorbing, not any active effort on their part.

A lot of life is influenced by such experiences, by ideas and inspiration that can be so much larger than digestible, yet they penetrate awareness and leave deep impressions. This is very clearly seen in child-raising, in fact even before a child is born. Torah teaches that while a baby is still in utero, an angel teaches the unborn child the entire Torah. There’s no question that the baby doesn't understand and cannot, as many adults have to work hard at understanding the Torah. The light of Torah, however, surrounds the baby, is absorbed and provides it with a head start and extra nudge in the right direction.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, on many occasions, spoke of the importance of having a poster of Shir Hamaalos (Psalms 121) hanging in a woman’s delivery room, and in the bedroom of the child as a protection and security for both mother and baby. Aside for the protective benefits, the verses of Tehillim generate added holiness which fills the room. A baby that’s a few days old definitely doesn’t understand the significance of the Tehillim, yet just having it there allows the baby to absorb the presiding holiness.

Gemara (Yebamoth 1:6 3a) discusses the infancy of Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Chananya, a *Tanna* in the first and second centuries C.E, and Rabbi Akiva’s primary teacher. While he was still a few months old, his mother used to take him to shul to hear the Torah being read so that “his ears might be accustomed to the words of Torah.” As an infant, the significance or meaning of the words were of no consequence to him, it was the aura of Torah that was consumed helping him become a Gd fearing scholar and sage. And indeed his mother’s efforts in surrounding him with holiness and Torah were fruitful, as R Yochanan Ben Zakkai, teacher of R Yehoshua, praises her “Happy is she who bore him” (Avot 2:1). Her awareness of the power of allowing a child to be surrounded by and soak in holiness played a major role in R’ Yehoshua becoming an esteemed and celebrated authority.

The above-mentioned phrase from Shir Hashirim “honey and milk” has specific connection to children, or anyone growing. Chassidus teaches that whenever ‘milk’ is referenced in the Torah, there’s a connection to nurturing and development. Milk, the most elementary and first nourishment a child is given, serves as a trope for growing in general. The connection is quite clear; throughout life, which is one continued process of maturing and self-refinement, many factors that shape and steer lives are “under the tongue”/sublingual/ seamlessly absorbed. Sublingual administration involves two people. The administrator of the medication and the patient consuming it. People will often find themselves as the ‘administrator’, the one providing the substance to be absorbed, and often as the ‘patient’ doing the absorbing. One playing a more active role, and one more passive. Yet even in this passivity of receiving inspiration and being so engulfed by goodness that it resonates, there is room for activity and this activity lies in one’s awareness. Identifying a potent and enveloping idea, inspiration, lesson etc makes the personalizing and application of it even more seamless. As for the active role, providing the material to be absorbed, everyone plays the ‘administrator’, the ‘mom’, the ‘engulfer’ at some point in their lives. Everyone has many opportunities to create environments of incubating warmth, encouragement, holiness and goodness for others to absorb from. Everyone possesses the power to create a setting for others in which they grow by merely absorbing the good surrounding them, whether they welcome it or are unaware.