



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Eikev

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

August 8, 2015

Eikev

**Jewish Extremism, Illness
and Health**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Being attacked by a foreign pathogen – an illness from without – is bad enough. But, when a body turns on itself, becoming a victim of an autoimmune disease, that is tragic indeed.

The same is sadly true with Jews: It’s one thing to be attacked from without; but when we attack ourselves from within, that is indeed devastating.

Sometimes events force us to turn over rocks we would rather leave unperturbed and ask questions we would rather leave unasked.

Two headline-producing events occurred last week in Israel, events that force us to ask some very serious questions. The first event involved Jew versus Jew; the second Jew versus Arab.

The first was a Jew stabbing and killing a fellow Jew in the holy city of Jerusalem, which leads us to ask: What drives someone to such an act? How does such animosity between family members, between brothers and sisters, Jew and Jew, happen?

The second event was a Jew firebombing an Arab home, leaving a young Arab child dead. Despite the fact that we have been the victims of such repeated attacks by Arabs, with an existential threat hanging over us for decades if not centuries, to the point of no comparison, yet as Jews we hold ourselves up to a far higher standard and therefore ask ourselves: What drives a Jew to attack his neighbor? Is the Arab not created in the Divine Image? Is the Jew celebrating or desecrating his own Divine Image when he perpetrates such an act?

These are hard questions. And there is only one authority authorized to answer such questions – the Torah. This week’s Torah reading offers a verse which promises a cure for all such ailments: *And the Lord will remove from you all illness, and all of the evil diseases of Egypt which you knew.* What that means exactly we shall soon discover.

JEWISH EXTREMISM, ILLNESS AND HEALTH

1. Quality Of Life (Joke)

Hyman recently had a full medical check up. When he returned three weeks later after the exhaustive lab tests were complete, his doctor said he was doing “fairly well” for his age.

Hyman was obviously a little concerned about that comment and so he asked his doctor, “Do you think I’ll live to be 80, doctor?”

He replied, “Well, do you smoke or drink beer?”

“Oh no,” Hyman replied, “I’ve never done either.”

Then the doctor asked, “Do you eat grilled steaks or barbecued ribs?”

Hyman replied, “No, I’ve heard that red meat is very unhealthy.”

“Do you spend a lot of time in the sun, like playing golf?” asked the doctor.

“No, I don’t. I’m never in the sun.”

Then the doctor asked, “Do you gamble or drive fast cars? Do you flirt with the ladies?”

“No,” said Hyman, “I’ve done none of those things.”

The doctor looked at Hyman and said: “So, tell me my dear Hymie, why in heavens name do you want to live to be eighty?”

2. True Health

True health is not the absence of illness; true health is living a life filled with purpose, with *raison d'être*, with joy and passion. Even if you are 100 percent well, free of any ailment or sickness, but you are lying in bed all day and doing nothing, you are not healthy.

Health is every body part working at its fullest towards the same goal, every molecule humming perfectly and growing accordingly. A healthy body is in tune – fine-tuned, attuned in perfect symmetry – with its purpose and reason.

Illness happens when there is some impediment; when even one cell transmutes into something counter to the purpose of all the body parts around it and multiplies – it makes the whole body sick, God forbid.

Illness is not the opposite of life; that would be death. Illness is the mutation of life, when something is off, when an element has gone rogue. Illness isn't death ... although in acute and unchecked circumstances, illness can cause death.

Living to eighty isn't merely about longevity. Rather, living to eighty is about living a long, healthy, productive life, about ensuring that no bodily agent, not even a single cell, goes rogue and metamorphoses into something counter to its purpose.

Living a long life is about bringing health to the world.

3. Current Events

Sometimes current events force us to turn over rocks we would rather leave unperturbed and ask questions we would rather leave unasked.

Two headline-producing events occurred last week in Israel, events that force us to ask some very serious questions. The first event involved Jew versus Jew; the second Jew versus Arab.

The first was a Jew stabbing and killing a fellow Jew in the holy city of Jerusalem, which leads us to ask: What drives someone to such an act? How does such animosity between family members, between brothers and sisters, Jew and Jew, happen? How does a Jew convince himself that he is doing “God’s work” when in fact God states explicitly that “thou shall not kill”?

The second event was a Jew firebombing an Arab home, leaving a young Arab child dead. And again we ask: What drives a Jew to attack his neighbor (not in self-defense)? Despite the fact that we have been the victims of such repeated attacks by Arabs, with an existential threat hanging over us for decades if not centuries, to the point of no comparison, yet as Jews we hold ourselves up to a far higher standard and therefore ask ourselves does the Jew hate the Arab so? Is the Arab not created in the Divine Image? Is the Jew celebrating or desecrating his own Divine Image when he perpetrates such an act?

These are hard questions. There is only one authority authorized to answer such questions. Not you, not I, but only the Master of the Universe. Thankfully, He gave us a book of divine wisdom, the Torah, to turn to for heavenly insight.

The outcome of these two events – in the words of *The New York Times* – “has stirred a rare outpouring of self-reproach and soul-searching among Israelis across the political spectrum.”

We don’t need the *Times* to be preaching to us, nor can they be trusted with these matters. But for the Jew, it is a mitzvah to ask, to question, to inquire and dissect. What do these events teach us? The aftershocks in Israel (and the greater Jewish world) could and should make us stronger, more united Jews, or fragment us in terrible ways.

Already the questions are swirling: Are religious Jewish settlers a menace to Judaism? Is the ultra-Orthodox element intolerant of any deviation from its fundamentalist stance? Is a Jewish democracy an oxymoron?

Again, many people asking these questions have their own insidious agendas, and we do not have to answer to them. But we do need to answer to ourselves.

The Torah is the Jew's blueprint, the Jew's *only* blueprint. No other document (even a constitution) or authority (no politician, rabbi or judge) can define the Jew's purpose, how the Jew is to act as a Jew, or why the Jew exists.

The Torah and the Torah alone is the Jew's guide in this wilderness called life.

Does the Torah sanction either one of these acts? What does the Torah say about such events? Are they healthy? Are they the opposite?

4. Sefer Devarim

Sefer Devarim, the last of the Five Books of Moses, was relayed and conveyed (not to the generation of Israel that wandered the desert but) to the generation of Israel that would enter the Promised Land.¹

Moses understood that the challenges facing the Jewish people once they would enter the Holy Land would be unlike any challenge faced up until that point.

It's not as if the Jewish people were unchallenged before entering Israel: starting with Abraham and his ten trials through Egyptian slavery, followed by wars waged against them by Amalek, Balak, Sichon, Midian, Moab ... the Jewish people (even before they became a nation) were challenged time and again.

But all of these challenges paled in comparison to the trials and tribulations they would face in the Land of Israel.

The challenges up to entering the Land of Israel were challenges of fighting other people which could be likened to a body fighting a foreign virus. But the challenge in the Land of Israel would be how to live together, how to make sure that the whole corpus of the Jewish nation would never turn against itself.

¹ See Tanya, end chapter 25, and commentary of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

For when a body attacks itself, that is the gravest illness of all. It is (quote unquote) “normal” for outside forces to threaten us (and we have the recourse to protect ourselves), but it is abnormal, unhealthy and devastating when a body turns on its own self – becoming a victim of an autoimmune disease. That is tragic indeed. Because we can’t protect ourselves from ourselves. We have become our own worst enemy.

The challenges up to the time of the people entering the Land of Israel were threats from without; the challenges after they came into the Land of Israel would be primarily threats from within.

We could say that the same is true today: the primary challenges facing Israel – the Land and the People – are existential, fundamental, philosophical, spiritual and essential. They are from within much more than from without. Sure, there are terrible anti-Semitic attacks in Europe and elsewhere, sure there are hate-crimes perpetrated by Arab terrorists, and the threats facing Israel from their neighbors – but in many ways the worst thing is when a Jew attacks a Jew.

We always knew that when we stand together as a people, united as one, no enemy, no matter how formidable can hurt us. But when we splinter within and turn against each other, then we become vulnerable.

When one body turns on itself in the form of Jew attacking Jew – or when the same body swirls with such hate as to provoke a Jew killing an innocent Arab child – it behooves us to deal with this challenge.

To preempt such challenges and provide the tools to overcome them, Moses spoke in the first person – his soliloquy becoming a personalized call to his followers to know God, tangibly as well as conceptually.

One verse from our Torah portion is an example:

And the Lord will remove from you all illness, and all of the evil diseases of Egypt which you knew...²

² Deuteronomy 7:15.

The literal meaning is quite clear: God will remove all illness from Israel.

But if you take a closer look, the wording seems a bit peculiar. The verse states: *And the Lord will remove from you [mimcha] all illness, and all of the evil diseases of Egypt which you knew.* Whereas it could have simply said: *And the Lord will remove all illness and all of the evil diseases of Egypt which you knew.*

Why do we need the word *mimcha*, “from you?” What is that coming to teach us?

5. The Midrash

The Talmud³ and the Midrash⁴ discuss this verse.

Said R’ Acha, “A person could ensure that illness never comes upon him.” What was his reasoning? R’ Acha said, “*And the Lord will remove from you [mimcha] all illness, ‘mimcha,’ from you, [implying that you yourself can ensure illness does not touch you].*”

The Midrash derives from the word, *mimcha*, meaning “from you,” that the power to alleviate all illness comes *from you*. In other words, the Midrash seems to assert that illness may be avoided by the way you conduct yourself.⁵

But how can that be? We know that oftentimes illness, devastatingly, is not at all in our hands. In most cases, we have no control when attacked by certain diseases. So how can the Midrash state that it is in our control? Is this not why we pray, to beseech God (not ourselves) to cure us?

To understand this perplexity let us look at the cure for all illness.

³ Bava Metzia 107b.

⁴ Leviticus Rabbah 16:8.

⁵ The Midrash continues: R’ Avin said, “This refers to the evil inclination, which first is sweet [chol] but then is bitter.” [The word chol, meaning “sweet,” also means “ill.”] Cf. Bava Metzia 60a.

6. The Rambam's Cure

The great 12th century Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, also known as the Rambam, was a master physician in addition to being a Torah scholar and Jewish leader. He prescribed⁶ a healthy regimen for the human body (and soul), including what to eat, how to eat, when to eat, how to exercise, be intimate, etcetera...

He concluded his prescription with these words:

Whoever conducts himself in the ways which I have drawn up, I will guarantee that he will not become ill throughout his life, until he reaches advanced age and dies. He will not need a doctor. His body will remain intact and healthy throughout his life.⁷

This is a rather strong guarantee. What compels the Rambam to make it? How can the Rambam ensure that if someone follows this prescribed health system one's "body (not only soul) will remain intact and healthy throughout his life"?

7. Mystical Answers

To answer this question, let us open the mystical texts.⁸

The Hebrew word for "ill" is *cholah*. *Cholah* has the *gematria* (numerical equivalent of) forty-nine. Forty-nine is seven times seven, which refers to the seven emotional attributes⁹ comprising the human corpus.

Illness, *cholah*, is when you only have forty-nine steps but not the fiftieth. The fiftieth is the Torah.

⁶ Mishne Torah, Hilchot De'ot ch. 4.

⁷ Hilchot De'ot, 4:20

⁸ See M'ohrei Ohr 8:35, cited in Ohr Hatorah, Eikev, Devarim II, p. 512.

⁹ The seven emotional attributes are: *chesed, gevurah, tiferet, netzach, hod, yesod, malchut*.

We are taught that we control those forty-nine steps, and the fiftieth comes from heaven. This is reflected in the forty-nine days of the Counting of the Omer – which begins at Pesach and continues until Shavuot – when we work on refining our seven emotional attributes. At the end of the count, we celebrate, on the fiftieth day, the giving of the Torah on Shavuot.

Illness can attack all the forty-nine levels – the entire human biology, all the molecular structures, all the cells, limbs, bones, sinews, tissue and attributes – but it cannot attack the fiftieth, the Torah, the divine wisdom within it all.

As it states regarding the Torah: *It shall be healing for your body and tonic for your bones¹⁰ ... for [its words] are life for those who find them, and healing for his whole body.¹¹*

But the question is obvious: Sure, we understand how Torah cures spiritual illness, even perhaps psychological and emotional illness, but pray tell how exactly the Torah cures physical illness, biological illness?

For this we must understand how illness exists in the first place. After all, God, the Creator is the epitome of health, so where does illness come from?

Let us go back to the root of all illness, ailments, and disease.

8. Dynamics of Life

Part of life is the ability to evolve. Creation is not static; rather the Creator built into life a system of dynamics. Things not intended to feed off certain energies may do so anyway – like an ugly weed may sprout in a lush garden, unwanted elements may sprout in beautiful environments. This is what happens when the world is dynamic and alive but the source of that dynamism and life is concealed.

¹⁰ Proverbs 3:8.

¹¹ Ibid 4:22.

It can then be distorted.

The more alive someone (or something) is the more possibility for illness and the more devastating the character of that illness.

Rocks don't get sick, but trees and flowers do. Trees are more alive than rocks. Animals (called *chai*, meaning "alive") are more alive than the flora and can get sicker than vegetation. Human beings, the most alive of them all, can get sicker than animals, with diseases so utterly unspeakable that they boggle the human mind.

Why is this? Why is it that humans, who are created in the Divine Image, can become ill in such terrible ways? If it weren't so heartbreakingly factual, it would be almost unbelievable – a human being, the highest of the high, to be manipulated in such a way that his or her very life is the cause of pain?

The answer – intellectual only, never emotional, as no explanation could ever dare address such a painful situation – is found in the question itself: the human and the human alone is sadly visited by diseases precisely because the human is the epitome of life.

Why do people attack Jews? For the same reason that illness attacks living flesh, not comatose rocks ... because Jews are alive, and thus give off energy. Diseases need energy to live. Thus they attack energy sources.

We need extra care and sterilization when the vital organs are exposed, in surgery, for example, because bacteria gravitate to the strongest sources of nutrition.

Even more: a byproduct of energy is illness – just as the byproduct of nuclear power, which can energize a city, is nuclear waste, which can contaminate it. Illness and disease live in and off of life's awesome power.

Illness is a mutation of life. Thus, the greater the life, the greater the mutation.

This is the reality today, when God, the source of the fiftieth level of divine wisdom, the Torah, is concealed and the possibility for mutation and rogue behavior is present. But in a time of perfection, when every single molecule realizes that it is part of one cosmic organism and has one purpose, then: *The Lord will remove from you all illness, and all of the evil diseases of Egypt which you knew.*

And this guarantees that you will reach such a state of perfection, where there will be no byproducts or outside parasites feasting on your blood, and when you will live with holiness personified – and you will! – for all illness will be removed, recycled into light.

9. Where There Is Illness There Is Cure (Story)

In the summer of 1929, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, visited the Land of Israel. The Rebbe departed the Holy Land on Thursday, August 22, two days before the Arab riots of 1929, in which scores of Jews were massacred in Hebron and Jerusalem. Among the dead and wounded were several of the Rebbe's family relations and disciples.

In a letter to the then Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak writes:

When the sad news of the pogroms perpetrated in the Holy Land reached me on Sunday [August 25], on the boat from Alexandria to Trieste, I fell ill with a kidney ailment out of sheer pain and distress. Thank God, the most precious of men, the wise and truly God-fearing Dr. Wallach was with us on the boat, and did much to relieve my illness ... In such a state I was forced to continue my journey here; for several days after my arrival I was still unable to recover from the effect upon me of the conflagration with which God scorched the House of Jacob in general, and specifically from reading the list of the killed and slaughtered, the holy martyrs, may their souls be bound in the bond of life . . ."

On another occasion, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak related that at the conclusion of the voyage Dr. Wallach approached him and begged his forgiveness. "Rebbe!" he said, "How can I atone for my being the cause of your illness?"

"You, the cause of my illness?!" asked the Rebbe in amazement. The doctor had obviously healed him, and certainly did not cause the illness!

"Yes," said the doctor. "There is no doubt in my mind that if I had not been on the boat with you, you would not have fallen ill. You, Rebbe, are a man upon whom the entire Jewish nation depends; surely, God would not have allowed a life-threatening illness to befall you unless the instrument of your cure was on the ship with you."¹²

10. Personal Lesson

The above anecdote holds a lesson for us. When another Jew suffers, we suffer; and certainly any illness or difficulty would not befall us unless the instrument for complete recovery was present even before.

The cure precedes the illness,¹³ so if there is an illness there must be a cure.

A rift in one body, where one limb attacks another, where one cell attacks another, is the greatest of disasters. It is called disease. A virus or a cancer does not recognize that it is attacking another part of its own organism. The same is true of the mutation that does not allow one Jew to recognize his brother or sister, as all Jews are part of one organism.¹⁴

How does a Jew stab another Jew, kill another Jew? It is unthinkable! It can only happen if there's a mutation, if a healthy cell morphs into a distorted version of truth, and we don't sense that we are all one body, and when we hurt one part it's as if we are hurting ourselves!

¹² http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/52562/jewish/Cause-and-Effect.html

¹³ See Talmud Megilah 13b.

¹⁴ Jerusalem Talmud Nedarim 9:4.

If this is the illness, then the cure is the exact opposite. The cure is doing acts that ensure the whole body recognizes that it is one organism, one whole, one entity.

Torah – the healing for your body and tonic for your bones ... for [its words] are life for those who find them, and healing for his whole body – is the foundation for this cure.

Every single Jew, no matter what his or her position or disposition may be, no matter what his or her inspiration or orientation may be, stood at the foot of Sinai and received the Torah.

If we, you and I, perform acts that illustrate and magnify this fact – if we invite Jews to our Shabbat table, share a mitzvah with them, if we teach our children not to judge a Jew by his *kippah* or lack thereof, or by the way he dresses, etc. etc – we will be making a statement, declaring for all to hear and see, that we are all part of one whole.

This is the hope, the dream, the ideal. And this ideal towards which we all must strive is what Moses taught the Jews entering Israel – you must ensure a universe where *the Lord will remove from you all illness, and all of the evil diseases of Egypt which you knew.*

Each of us, who is a part of the collective body Israel, must do our limb's part.

11. The Good Doctor (Joke)

Morris, the Brooklyn tailor, is worried because his wife, Hanna, is very ill and needs a good doctor. Everyone knows that Dr. Myers is the best doctor in New York City, so Morris rings him to say that he would like him to treat Hanna.

Dr Myers says, "OK, but can you afford me? What if I'm unable to save Hanna and you decide not to pay my bills?"

Morris replies, "I promise to pay you anything, no matter whether you cure Hanna or kill her."

So Dr. Myers agrees to treat Hanna. Unfortunately, Hanna dies soon after. When Dr. Myers invoice arrives, Morris refuses to pay, despite his promise. After much arguing, they agree to take the issue to a local rabbi for a decision.

Dr. Myers puts his side of the story to the rabbi. "He promised to pay me, 'no matter whether I cured his wife or killed her.'"

After a few minutes deliberation, the rabbi says, "So did you cure her?"

Dr. Myers has to reply, "No."

The rabbi then asks, "So did you kill her?"

"No, I certainly did not," replied Dr. Myers.

"In that case," says the rabbi, "Morris owes you nothing – you fulfilled neither of the conditions to which you agreed."

12. The Cure (Conclusion)

At the end of the day, the Creator – and the Creator alone – gives life, cures life and takes life.

But it is up to us – through our acts of health and beauty – to shape that life. To live united, never allowing an evil force to encroach upon our health.

We must do our part to live healthy, both physically and spiritually. We must do our part to not tolerate divisiveness and hatred within our families and communities. We must do everything possible to advance our oneness as a nation. We may disagree about things, but we are still one family, one body, one organism. And if one part of the body is ailing we are all ailing. When that part is healthy and strong than it brings health and strength to all the parts.

Let each of us resolve here and now – especially as we bless today the month of Elul, which is an acronym for *Ani L'dodi V'dodi Li*, I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me – to make a special effort to practice unconditional love in our own lives and influence anyone we come in contact with to do the same.

Then surely – as the Prophet Isaiah promises – *The eyes of the blind shall be clear-sighted, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened ... the lame shall leap as a hart and the tongue of the dumb shall sing...*¹⁵ And ultimately: *Death shall be swallowed up forever and God shall wipe the tears from every face...*¹⁶

Amen v' Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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¹⁵ Isaiah 35:5-6.

¹⁶ Isaiah 25:8.