



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

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Disease and Death?**



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

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SHEMOT

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Can We Conquer Disease and Death?

ABSTRACT

Any thinking, sensitive human being is bothered by the presence of disease and death in the world. Are illness and disease – and its ultimate manifestation, death – inherent to the human condition or is it an aberration? Will we see a day when there will no longer be illness and death? And what can we do to help eradicate disease and illness?

The fascinating answer to all these questions can be found in an unusual experience documented in this week's Torah portion: at Sinai, as the Jews received the Torah, every ailment was cured, every disease remedied, every illness healed, every blemish restored.

What does the revelation at Mount Sinai have to do with curing all illness? And what lesson does this hold for our own lives?

The answers to these questions come down to understanding the root of death, and its henchman, disease: they are not natural to existence, but rather a direct result from Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, creating a schism between man and his purpose, between matter and spirit. At Sinai, the schism between matter and spirit was bridged and the physical and spiritual harmony intended at the beginning became reality once again. Thus, the Jewish people were (spiritually and) physically healed, until this dissonance recurred with the Sin of the Golden Calf.

We are charged with the mission of realigning matter and spirit through our performance of Torah and Mitzvot – so that the physical reflects and manifests its spiritual objective. This is ultimately what will bring healing to ourselves and to the world.

CAN WE CONQUER DISEASE AND DEATH? THE HEALING POWER OF SINAI

1. Opening Jokes

It's true what Ben Franklin famously said: "Nothing in this world can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." The difference is, death doesn't get worse every year.

When G-d created the Angel of Death, the angel presented a complaint: Why are You charging me with such a distasteful mission, one which will cause me to be hated by people for all time, blaming me for bringing death to their homes? G-d replied: Don't worry. They'll never blame you. They'll blame cancer, heart disease, doctors, health insurance companies, the tobacco industry, the government and so on...

2. How Can There Be Sickness and Death?

We're all touched in one way or another by the painful realities of sickness and death—whether of loved ones, friends, or family. This inevitably leads any thoughtful, sensitive human being to wonder: how can a benevolent G-d allow for such an actuality? How can an all-powerful and loving G-d permit something as gut-wrenching and agonizing as innocent people enduring pain, sickness and death (may we never know of such things)?

I can assure you that even the staunchest believers in G-d (including yours truly) have been bothered by this question. It can be incredibly difficult—yes, even for a Rabbi!—to reconcile these two realities that seem so diametrically opposed: on one hand, a G-d Who embodies kindness, love, and truth; and on the other, the raw physical and emotional pain we witness all around us, and perhaps even experience ourselves.

But what if I told you that sickness and death are, in fact, not to be taken for granted, that in Judaism death is an aberration and not "the way of all flesh," that there will soon come a time when they will be eradicated

from the face of this earth? And what if I told you that you can help bring about this reality?

3. Healing at Mount Sinai

This brings us to this week's Torah portion, in which we learn that at Sinai, as the Jews received the Torah, every ailment was cured, every disease remedied, every illness healed, every blemish restored (Rashi to Exodus 20:15 from *Mechilta*). The Jews had left Egypt fifty days earlier physically broken; the Midrash describes in detail what the severe slavery and inhuman torture of Egypt did to the bodies of the Jewish people. And now, standing at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, the Jews were miraculously restored to perfect physical health.

But, why? What is the connection between the Jews receiving the Torah and them being healed of all physical illness? As we know, the Mount Sinai revelation was a lofty, ethereal, divine experience, the likes of which the Jewish people had never known and would never know again. Their souls shone so bright in those moments that were hardly even aware of their bodies. So why does the Torah put an emphasis on bodily healing?

Knowing the answer to this question will help us resolve the tension between two seemingly irreconcilable realities – G-d's existence, and the existence of illness and pain, suffering and death.

4. The Birth of Death

To answer this question, we need to go back to the beginning . . . the beginning of humanity. G-d commanded the first human being, Adam, "Of every tree in the garden you may freely eat. But of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall not eat, for on the day you eat from it, you shall surely die."

While Adam and Chava did not die immediately after eating the forbidden fruit, they did become mortal beings. In other words, at that moment, they -- through their misdeed -- introduced the concept of

death into the world, where it had not existed before. Working backwards, we can conclude that death was not an inherent part of the world as G-d had originally created it, but rather an outcome of human error. Though we think of sickness and death as natural and inevitable, the truth is that the most true, most natural state of the world is one where there is absolutely no atrophy or decay of the body, where human beings live forever — happily ever after. And we will one day return to this state. As the prophet Yeshayahu prophesied about the future redemption: “G-d shall conceal death, and He shall wipe the tears off every face.”¹

Thus, disease and death were not brought on by G-d, but by humans. Were it not for their sin there would have been no death and no disease.

Because when you think about it, why should a person die? The soul has endless energy, so death is not due to it running out of juice. So why then does the soul ultimately disconnect from the body? Think of it like a cup of water: why should the cup ever dry up (were it not for evaporation)? Only, because the cup gets punctured, and the water runs out of it. So too with life: Before eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the body -- the cup -- was intact, completely aligned with the energy (the soul) within. Once they ate from the tree the physical body was "punctured," pollutants and toxins began to cause it to erode, and like an appliance, it ultimately aged, gets infected or suffers injury, that ultimately causes the body to be unable to contain the soul within, bringing on death.

This begs the question: How did eating a piece of fruit from a tree suddenly bring death to the world?

Before they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Chava were spiritually innocent and pure beings. They were totally in sync with and connected to their soul's mission. Their physical and spiritual identities were one in the same. They didn't feel that tug that we all so often feel to act contrary to their soul's purpose. Similar to the way one might look out through a clear window at a gorgeous sunset and not notice the physical barrier of the window at all, Adam and Chava's physical existence was completely transparent to their souls. They possessed no ego and desired nothing other than to do G-d's will. The utter synchronicity

¹ Isaiah 25:8.

of body and soul is not something we can easily relate to, yet it was business as usual in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Chava disobeyed G-d's command and ate from the tree on that fateful Friday morning 5777 years ago.

At that point, everything changed. The "knowledge of good and evil" that the tree's fruit imparted to Adam and Chava was an awareness of a part of us that feels a "self" that is separate and independent from our soul, with desires that are opposed to our soul's desires. In short, for the first time, they experienced a divergence of body and soul, matter and spirit, ego and divine purpose. And is this not what death is – the soul and the body going their separate ways? Thus, humanity's spiritual "death" – the divergence of matter and spirit – marked the beginning of physical death: the spiritual schism created between body and soul enabled physical death to enter the human condition.

(This explains the immediate consequence to Adam and Chava eating the forbidden fruit – not death, but rather that they saw their "nakedness" for the first time. In other words, they were aware of their bodies as being separate entities from – and with the potential to be at war with – their souls.)

Now the good news: just as human action of disconnecting body and soul caused bodily deterioration and death to come into the world, human action can return the world to its natural state – where there is no such things as sickness or suffering, and we will all live forever in perfect spiritual and bodily health.

5. Mending the Divide = Ending Death.

Now we can understand what truly happened at Mount Sinai, the reason that all illness was healed at the moment that the Torah was given, and what this means for all of us.

For those precious moments when G-d gave the Jewish people the Torah, matter and spirit reunited. Physical and spiritual, body and soul, were brought into alignment for the first time since before Adam and

Chava ate the fruit.

“G-d came down on Mount Sinai, to the peak of the mountain. He summoned Moses to the mountain peak, and Moses climbed up.”²

The Midrash³ offers the following parable to explain what happened at Sinai:

“Once there was a king who decreed: “The people of Rome are forbidden to journey to Syria, and the people of Syria are forbidden to journey to Rome.” Likewise, when G-d created the world He decreed and said: “The heavens belong to G-d, and the earth is given to man.” But when He wished to give the Torah, He rescinded His original decree, and declared: “The lower realms may ascend to the higher realms, and the higher realms may descend to the lower realms. And I, Myself, will begin” – as it is written, “And G-d descended on Mount Sinai,” and then it says, “And to Moses He said: Go up to G-d.”

This enigmatic Midrash teaches us that heaven and earth came together when the Torah was given. The “body” – everything’s outward existence – merged with the “soul” – everything’s true purpose. Because, this is, in fact, the entire purpose of Torah: it is our blueprint for a healthy material, physical, and spiritual life, a life aligned with its cosmic purpose. (In fact, Kabbalah teaches us that 613 mitzvot correspond to the 613 organs and limbs of the human body.)

A core tenet of Judaism is not only that physicality is a reflection of spirituality, but that one directly affects the other. Thus, when body and soul are so aligned, illness and death of the body are impossibilities.

Everything around you – from the clothes on your body to the toast you ate for breakfast to the blood running through your veins – everything in the world has a body and a soul – an outward existence and a divine purpose. The more we succeed in synchronizing the two in our own lives, the closer we bring the world to the ultimate state where disease and suffering will be eradicated and death will no longer exist.

At Sinai G-d gave the human race another chance to revisit Paradise -- the Garden of Eden pre-sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, when

² Exodus 19:20.

³ Tanchuma Vaeira 15. Shemot Rabba 12:3.

body and soul were seamlessly aligned. At Sinai the toxins introduced by eating from the forbidden fruit ceased flowing, only to return after the building of the Golden Calf.⁴ But through our efforts we can usher in a world when the toxins will be eliminated forever, “the spirit of contamination I will remove from the earth.”⁵

6. The Rebbetzin's Blessing (Optional Section for Chabad Rabbis)

This Shabbos is also Chof Beis Shvat, the 29th *yahrzeit* of the Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka Schneerson. Her life, as partner with the Rebbe, embodied one of bringing healing to many.

On the 25th of Adar, 1976 (5736), Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka's birthday, the doorbell rang while she was having dinner with the Rebbe at their home on President St. in Brooklyn, New York.

Their attendant answered the door and was handed a bouquet of flowers which N'shei Chabad had sent the Rebbetzin along with a letter containing the names of people in need of blessings.

The attendant went to the dining room, presented the flowers to the Rebbetzin, and gave the letter to the Rebbe. The Rebbe told him. "It's for the Rebbetzin."

The attendant responded, "It's for the Rebbe. It's a letter requesting *brochos*." The Rebbe said, "She can also bless."

The attendant then gave the letter to the Rebbetzin in her holy hand.

After this, he thought to himself, "Yes, [I see] The Rebbetzin can give blessings in the *zechus* of the Rebbe."

But the Rebbe then said to the attendant, "She can give blessings in her own merit."

The attendant thought to himself, "Then what is the difference between the Rebbe's *brochah* and the Rebbetzin's *brochah*?"

The Rebbe then said to him, "Did you learn *Derech Mitzvosecha*?"

⁴ See Shabbat 146a. Zohar I 52b. II 193b.

⁵ Zechariah 13:2.

The attendant answered yes.

The Rebbe asked, "Which part?"

The attendant answered, "*Shorush Mitzvas haTefilla*."

The Rebbe then said, "Surely you know the difference between *memalei kol almin* [the divine energy that permeates the world] and *sovev kol almin* [the divine energy that surrounds the world]. When I give a brochah it comes from *memalei*, which means the person has to do something for the brochah to be fulfilled. When she gives a brochah, it comes from *sovev*. Therefore, even if the person doesn't do anything for it, the brochah is fulfilled."

This aspect of the Rebbetzin, her being a source of brochah, has been mostly hidden from us; revealed only to a select few. On the last yartzeit of the Rebbetzin in which the Rebbe spoke to us, he publicly associated the date of her passing with the verse: "Through you, the Jewish people will be blessed." It was understood that the Rebbe was inferring that the Rebbetzin is a source of blessing.

In that eloquent talk delivered by the Rebbe in 1992, in honor of the Rebbetzin's 4th yahrzeit, the Rebbe explained how the Rebbetzin's name, Chaya Mushka captures her essence: Chaya (life) -- infusing people with life and vitality, Mushka (from the beautiful muscat fragrance) -- creating an environment filled with perfume and beauty.

In brief: A life aligned with its purpose.

7. You Can Heal the World

We've learned a quite simple formula, but one that is not necessarily as simple to implement in our lives: the separation of body and soul = death. The synchronization of body and soul = life. What made Mount Sinai so momentous was that the Jewish people tasted true life. And this is what each of us can strive to attain in our own lives every day, by tapping into the Torah's eternal guidance and teachings. The more we recreate the Sinai experience by aligning our physical, day-to-day activities with the true desire of our souls, the more we heal ourselves and the world around us — not only spiritually, but physically as well. This means that together, we can eradicate disease and suffering and wipe all the tears from the earth.

Thus, when we see sickness and death we should not be looking to G-d alone, asking Him why He allows such suffering. Because from G-d perspective He gave us the power of eternal life; it was man that introduced death into existence. We therefore need to look at ourselves, what can we do to realign our bodies and our souls, matter and spirit, and reclaim Paradise.

Today, there are miraculous advances in medicine, in global peace, in human life expectancy. From a Torah perspective, the accumulative good deeds and mitzvot for the past 3300 years—the sacrifices made, the prices paid, the collective billions of good deeds done—have refined the physical world and allowed for stunning breakthroughs in medicine, the conquering of diseases that have plagued mankind for millennia, and the prolonging of life. There is still immense suffering, which means we still have much work to do. But we are standing at the threshold of the messianic world, when all disease and death will be vanquished. When we finally cross that threshold is largely up to us.

Let us learn from this week's Torah portion not allow ourselves to get so caught up in material distractions that we become disconnected from our purpose.

Let us strive to connect to the soul, the life, of the world around us by seeing past its false, superficial exterior to the depth and life within. Let us make our physical existence like that window to the sunset—transparent to our souls. Let us make our souls shine through in everything we do. Because when we reveal the soul, we reveal life. And when we reveal life, we have the power to dispel death in all its forms.

Every ounce of goodness and kindness, every mitzvah, brings us one step closer to realizing this reality.

So, what new mitzvah will you do to introduce healthy spiritual energy into existence?

My friends, you have the power to heal yourself, your community, and your world.

Shabbat Shalom!

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