

Faith versus Medicine: Dilemmas in Jewish Law and Thought

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What is the place of medicine in Torah thought? May a Jew, through his trust in God, refrain from seeking the care of doctors and rely exclusively on Him? If one is able to reach this level of *bitachon* (trust in God), is this praiseworthy? And, in fact, if it is a desirable goal to not seek the doctor's healing, this beckons a serious question. According to Jewish law, to preserve and protect life is one of the most powerful of Torah obligations. Included in this mitzvah is the requirement to seek care from the most qualified physician. While not absolute, it is nearly so, and one not only may, but must, transgress even the most severe prohibitions such as observance of the Sabbath and the fast of Yom Kippur in order to seek medical care to save a life. Implied in the laws of *pikuach nefesh* (the mitzvah of saving a life) is that disease is undesirable and should be eradicated if at all possible. While seemingly obvious, this formulation presents considerable problems to the religious person. In fact, the proactive seeking of medical care as a *halachic* obligation is not at all obvious.

This is because there are principles in Torah thought that seem to be paradoxical to the obligations of seeking medical attention. What could be called the first foundation of Torah thought is *ein od milvado*, "there is no existence except for Him."¹ This means that God has total dominion over the world, and all that befalls a man is only because it is His will. This leads to the discomfiting conclusion that suffering, just as much as fortune, befalls a person only because it is His will. Even more problematic, it is axiomatic that the purpose of the creation of man is because the Creator wishes to share His bounty; all that He

¹ Rambam, *Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah*, Chapter 1,4, derived from Deuteronomy 4:35.

does for us is because of His infinite kindness, all is for our personal benefit. The *Chovot Halevavot* writes:

“One is only to rely on *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. This is... in matters of the physical body – life and death, food and sustenance, clothing and shelter, health and sickness. One should throw oneself to *Hashem’s* desire and know that one’s end is that which only *Hashem* has decreed. This is correct. In this way *Hashem* deals with His creatures equally. *Hashem’s* choice is [by definition] for the good and for each person’s benefit.”²

The logical and most difficult conclusion is that disease and suffering is not only His will, but it is for our ultimate benefit.

When the rabbis speak of “ultimate benefit” they refer to benefit to our eternal souls. That is to say that suffering is given as a means to improve our souls. That being so, our first and primary response to disease and suffering must be spiritual. Generally, this is understood to mean that we are being directed to repent our sins and strengthen our observance of the mitzvot. Moreover, illness and suffering may serve as *kapparah* (atonement) and is therefore desirable and of eternal benefit. With this premise, what business do we have involving ourselves in the mundane matter of medicine? After all, by pursuing medical cures are we not circumventing the underlying spiritual purpose of the illness, and trying to destroy the very gift that God is giving us and which is for our ultimate benefit? Moreover, since it is God’s will that we suffer illness it would seem to follow that medicine should be prohibited. After all, do we have authority to intervene with the will of the Master of the universe?

In addition, there appears to be an inherent contradiction between Torah *hashkafa* and the basic foundations of science and of medicine. There is a premise that all healing comes from God, as it is written, “I am your Healer” (Exodus 16:26). If this is true, then the whole modern scientific concept of a physician capable of healing is illusory. If He alone decrees who will live and who will die – what sense is there to involve ourselves with the great effort of seeking the best medical care? Does such an effort ultimately make a difference in the outcome of our diseases?

² Rabbi Ibn Pakuda, *Chovot Halevavot, Bitachon*, Chapter 4.

In trying to cope with the daily problems of living, the religious Jew is faced with the tension between *bitachon* and *hishtadlut* (the physical efforts to solve problems). In other areas of daily life, such as making a livelihood, it is a well-established principle in *hashkafa* that while some *hishtadlut* is always necessary, the extent of *hishtadlut* is inversely proportional to our *bitachon*: the greater our trust in God, the greater He will provide for us with a concomitant lessening of our need to make an effort. Is this principle not also true for disease and healing? If we have a strong trust in *Hashem* and know He is the True Healer, what need do we have to make an effort and seek medical care? It is because of this ideal of increasing our *bitachon* and lessening our *hishtadlut* that it is not at all unusual for religious Jews to live by the belief that disease is in the hands of Heaven, and however much a Jew is able to trust exclusively in *Hashem*, it is best to leave these matters to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.

Are these ideas proper and consistent with the *halachic* obligations of preserving life? How do *Chazal* and the rabbis contend with the apparent dilemma between the ideal of trust in *Hashem* versus the *halachic* obligation to preserve health and life?

Trust in God by not seeking the doctor

The Talmud teaches that illness is so important that it is desirable that it be kept in the world, even to the exclusion of total healing. In *Pesachim* 56a the Mishna says, “[For the following action did the sages] praise King Hezekiah for... he hid the *Book of Remedies*.” While there is some dispute as to what was in the *Book of Remedies*,³ the majority opinion amongst the commentators is it was a book, perhaps written by King Solomon, that contained powerful, secret remedies for illnesses. However, the righteous King Hezekiah considered the existence of such knowledge to be a problem, and the sages agreed. Rashi comments (and most subsequent commentators consider his view authoritative) that when the *Book of Remedies* was used “people did not subjugate their hearts on account of their illnesses, but rather were healed immediately according to the *Book of Remedies*.” In other words, with this extraordinary book they were able to undergo a physical

³ See for example *Mitzudat David* on the verse.

healing of their illness without any of the spiritual benefit that illness was intended to bring.

The most influential opinion that casts doubt on the benefit and advisability of medicine is from the great medieval authority, the Ramban, who writes:

“The principle is that when Israel is [in its] fullness it will not act according to nature, not in their physical bodies, not in their land, not as a people, not as individuals because their “bread and their water He will bless” (Exodus 23:25) and He will remove disease from their midst to the extent that they will not need doctors, but [only seek] prophets... the meaning of the verse “you will surely heal” (Exodus 20:19) gives permission to the doctor to treat. It did not say that it gave permission to the patient to be treated... it is the will of *Hashem* that a man not seek medicine.”⁴

Support for this idea comes from Chronicles II:16:13 which tells of the righteous King Asa who was afflicted with a fatal illness. There it is written that “Even in his sickness he did not seek out God, but he turned to the doctors.” The commentators^{2,4} make clear that King Asa’s illness was a result of sin, and he should have turned to God and repented rather than seek cures from doctors. If he had done so, his life would have been spared. As it was, he died from his disease.

In support of the Ramban’s opinion the *Avnei Nezer* writes:

“[According to the Ramban] one is allowed to be stringent on oneself because it is not correct for a man to inquire of doctors... King Asa... was certainly a *tzaddik* who should not have inquired of doctors at all... The *tzaddik* who becomes ill can rely on the Ramban and not rely on doctors... The question remains on one who is not a *tzaddik*... can he be stringent [and not rely on doctors]? It seems to me that one called a *tzaddik* would be so stringent on himself even if he would not be generally considered a *tzaddik*, and this would be allowed.”⁵

The *Avnei Nezer* cites a *gemara*, *Bava Kama* 80a, to support his position. The *gemara* discusses the prohibition of raising small

⁴ Ramban, *Commentary on the Torah*, Leviticus 21:12.

⁵ Responsa of the *Avnei Nezer*, *Choshen Mishpat* 193.

domesticated animals (such as goats) in the Land of Israel. It then recounts a story of a pious man who was ill from a heart ailment:

“[He] would groan from his heart. [His friends] asked the doctors and they said that he has no remedy except suckling the fresh milk [from a goat] every morning. They tied it to the legs of the bed and he would suckle from it every morning. After several days [the scholars] entered to visit him. But once they entered and saw that the goat was tied to the legs of the bed they backed out and exclaimed, ‘Armed robbers are in the house. And we should visit him?’ [The rabbis] sat and examined and they found in him only this sin of the goat. And even he himself at the time of his death said, “I know that I have no sin but the sin of the goat.”

The sin referred to here is that such animals tend to graze in other people’s fields. This is considered theft and is prohibited. In this case there was an assumption that even though the goat was tied to the bed, he must have been fed at times by grazing in other men’s fields. But this is difficult to understand. The Maharsha asks: Why should the judgment against him be so great if it was, after all, not a sin at all, but permissible because it was for *pikuach nefesh*? He answers: “Perhaps he did not have a life-threatening illness,” but he admits it seems to be stretching the plain meaning of the text. But the *Avnei Nezer* seems to have a clearer reading of this *gemara* as he says, “This is a support for the Ramban that this pious man stole to live and was judged as a sinner.” But why? Does not *pikuach nefesh* overrule prohibitions? The answer implied by the *Avnei Nezer* is that he was a pious man and did not need to follow doctors’ orders.

The mitzvah to preserve life

On the other hand, in the practical matter of *halachic* decisions, the codifiers have ruled that one must safeguard one’s health, heal the sick, and be zealous in saving lives. The *Tur* states:

“[The doctor] should be exceedingly careful as is proper to be careful in [all matters] of life and death... Doctors are given authority to heal. The mitzvah includes

pikuach nefesh and one must be quick to act; this is praiseworthy. If he abstains from acting he is a murderer.”⁶

In fact, as has been carefully studied by Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Feivelson in *Sefer Pikuach Nefesh*, there are no less than seventeen different verses in the Torah from which we derive the Torah obligation to heal the sick. This is incumbent on the patient, the doctor, or anybody else who may be able to help.⁷ Ironically, the Ramban himself writes that one is mandated to transgress the prohibitions of Shabbat in order to save a life. He says, “no place do we see that there is such a thing as piety if a sick person refuses to transgress Shabbat, but rather all who are zealous in saving a life are praised.”⁸ Ramban teaches that not only overt harm but even inaction that will result in harm is prohibited. As the *Beit Yosef* writes in *Issur ve’hetter*, “it is prohibited to cause the death of oneself even by sitting and not acting [if what is required is the seeking of medical attention].”⁹

Not only is treating the ill a Torah mitzvah but protecting one’s health is as well. The *Shulchan Aruch* codifies this principle by writing, “It is a mitzvah to protect one’s health in order to be healthy and strong to serve the Creator.”¹⁰ Ultimately the concern of *halacha* is that the Jew uses the gifts he has been given to achieve the purpose for which he was created – to serve *Hashem*.

In trying to understand the Torah *hashkafa* that underpins the many halachot of preserving health and life, we turn to *Sefer Pikuach Nefesh* which uses a marvelous metaphor of the offering of a sacrifice in the *Beit Hamikdash*. A kosher offering is most joyfully accepted and cherished by *Hashem*. However a *piggul*, an improper sacrifice that does not meet the requirements of being kosher, is not only not desired by *Hashem*, but the owner is liable for a Heavenly-decreed death sentence. So, too, is one who improperly gives his life to *Hashem*, as he writes:

“It is indeed true that the death of piety is precious in the eyes of *Hashem*. But this is only true where there is *kiddush Hashem*, and this is a high ambition. But, besides this, He does not desire our death whether we cause it

⁶ *Tur Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah, 336:1.*

⁷ Feivelson, Rabbi Eliyahu Meir, *Sefer Pikuach Nefesh*, Chapter 1.

⁸ Ramban, *Milchemet Sanhedrin*, Chapter 8, (p 18 in *Nimukei Yosef*).

⁹ *Issur ve’hetter*, 60:1 and 60:9.

¹⁰ *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 155.*

ourselves or by indirect means. For this is an improper death, a *pigul*, like a holy offering sacrificed outside [the *Beit Hamikdash*]. Here there is *karet* [death by Heaven].”⁷

If the Ramban argues that there is a place not to use doctors, the Rambam epitomizes the opposing position and argues that seeking healing is as essential to living as eating.¹¹ The Talmud (*Ta’anit* 25a) relates a story of the holy sage Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa. As Shabbat was approaching, his daughter noticed that the Shabbat candelabra contained vinegar rather than oil. She was distressed as there was no time to replace the vinegar with oil. Her father told her not to worry, “As *Hashem* commands oil to burn, if it is His will the vinegar will burn, too.” And so it did. Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa represents ultimate trust in God. He understood that the natural world only behaves as such because it is the will of its Creator; it is no less miraculous that the oil burns than that the vinegar burns. In this type of individual is the distinction between the Ramban’s and the Rambam’s approaches. For the Ramban, such individuals transcend nature and do not need to inquire of physicians. However, the Rambam remains unconvinced. He would argue, is it not true that Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa had to eat? Is he not a human being living within the limitations of the physical world? According to the Rambam, Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa is therefore obligated to seek physical cures for his ailments.¹²

Towards a resolution

Resolving the paradox between the Ramban’s normative Jew who has complete trust in *Hashem* by not seeking out the doctor, with the Torah obligation to preserve health and seek healing, is not simple and there are no single answers. In attempting to answer the challenges of disease and healing in Torah thought, five principles are now presented.

There is a distinction between safeguarding one’s health from the issue of the sick person seeking medical care. All authorities accept the mandates of the preservation of health, the prohibition to enter unsafe places, and so forth. In the very commentary where the Ramban dissuades a Jew from seeking doctors, he writes that

¹¹ Rambam, Commentary of the Mishna, *Pesachim* 4:9.

¹² See Eisenberg, *Ve’chai bahem*, for a useful discussion and summary of responses to the Ramban’s commentary, pp. 5-13.

“the function of the medical profession should be to give... advice what to eat... and what to avoid.”⁴ One should never say, I have great merit and I will be protected, as it is a well-known precept of *Chazal* that it is prohibited to place oneself in danger and rely on a miracle.

Illness arises not only from Heavenly decrees but also from negligence. It is incorrect to say “all is decreed from Heaven, so it does not matter if I am careless.” It is *not* a sign of trust in *Hashem*, for example, to drive a car carelessly or smoke cigarettes. A *gemara* in *Bava Batra* discusses this question, as it writes: “...All is in the hands of Heaven except cold drafts.” *Tosafot* comment with an interesting statement:

“Thieves that come upon him on the road – this is a decree from Heaven. But cold drafts were not decreed because he is able to guard against it. Certainly, if he wants to kill himself in fire or in a river [it is in his power] even though nothing was decreed. This is not similar to what is said (in tractate *Berachot* 33b), ‘all is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven,’ because there they are speaking about the traits of a man – if he will be strong or weak, rich or poor, tall or short, smart or stupid... Yet another question can be brought from *Bava Metzia* 107b which says, ‘*Hashem* should remove from you illness.’ [But this really] means that He should give you intelligence to guard yourself from cold and give you clothing.”

Here we see unequivocally that such an idea that all is decreed, regardless of one’s carelessness, and that one’s fate regarding sickness and health is only in the hands of *Hashem*, is clearly not correct.

Irrespective of the cause of disease (whether from negligence or from Heavenly decree), one has an obligation to preserve one’s life. The *Chovot Halevavot* writes in the same essay we quoted above that, in fact, there is no contradiction between trust in *Hashem* and the obligation to protect one’s health:

Even though one’s end and the measure of one’s days are decreed by *Hashem*, a person must concern himself with obtaining his food and drink, clothing and shelter according to his need and not to leave this to *Hashem*... It is an obligation to pursue one’s health, food, clothing, housing and good traits, and distance oneself from their

opposites. *Even if it is obvious to him in his clear faith that those means are of no direct benefit, and do not in themselves achieve those ends, nevertheless Hashem made these obligations.* As it is so with a farmer who must plough and weed and sow and water **and** trust in *Hashem*. In health and in sickness a man is to trust in *Hashem*, and to make an effort and be vigilant in one's health in the normal ways to maintain health, to treat disease, as *Hashem* commands 'You shall surely heal him.' But one should not trust in those causes of health and disease that they benefit or harm, but rather that only *Hashem* has authority in these areas, as it is possible that something that usually harms will heal."²

In the italicized portion of the *Chovot Halevavot*, we may find one solution to our dilemma. Here we see clearly that the truth lies in the life of Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa. Vinegar may burn like oil if *Hashem* so wills. Therefore, the medicines work only if *Hashem* wills them to work. Likewise, if *Hashem* wills that we are cured without medicine that is no less plausible. *But in spite of this*, the Torah has commanded us to protect our bodies and our health. As one of the obligations that He has given us, there is a Torah decree that we protect our health. Whether the effort to protect our health or cure our diseases directly benefits us by a cause and effect principle is entirely irrelevant.

Not only illness, but healing may be subject to the forces of nature. Did we not learn from Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa that all is according to the will of *Hashem*? A more discerning look at the problem of illness indicates that the matter is not so simple. Perhaps in the case of a person such as Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa it is true that all is directly decreed. However consider the understanding of the Ramban, who is the strongest advocate for the ideal of total trust in *Hashem* at the expense of seeking doctors. He admits to a role for nature-based remedies. He writes:

“When a man does not so act and cleave to Hashem, then he is left under natural forces. He created in His world herbs and trees and the like that will heal, and He

gave us authority to use them and be benefited by them by the physical laws of nature.”¹³

In trying to resolve the dilemma between the Ramban’s complete trust in God and the Rambam’s understanding that medicine is a basic to living as food, latter-day authorities have had considerable problems with both approaches. The *Birkei Yosef* writes that it is “almost prohibited ...to conduct oneself as if he were a *tzaddik*...He is to go to the doctors, and his heart should cleave to *Hashem* and trust in Him.”¹⁴ Others take strong issue with the Ramban,¹⁵ finding him inexplicable in light of *Chazal*’s need to teach the permission to heal; no such necessity is found with food.

Another of the great *rishonim*, the Rashba, charts a middle course, acknowledging that *Hashem* has created cures in nature which are intended to be used to achieve physical cures. But they must be used only with one’s heart toward Heaven and “knowing that true healing only comes from Him... There is no contradiction in seeking medical care and being careful to remember Providence... This principle applies to all men except those whose trust is complete, like Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa. Normally one does not have the authority to pursue complete trust at the exclusion of making an effort, but rather must pursue the way of the world.”¹⁶

A *mashal* (metaphor) is brought to illustrate this approach. A sick person is compared to a person sentenced to a prison term. The prisoner is confined to jail as a punishment for a crime. Part of his condition for release is regret and repentance. Once he has completed his term and conditions, he must now unlock and open the door and walk out of the prison in order to be free. So, too, is this true for the sick person. The prison term is the illness. The condition for release is the complex process of *teshuva*. God may accept the *teshuva*, and decree that he may be healed. The sick person is then given the key. The person must still be healed of his disease – the unlocking and opening of the door and walking out of the prison. This latter process is the medical therapy. By this *mashal* we learn that medicine is in no way contradictory to the proper Jewish response to illness – of spiritual growth, but rather

¹³ Ramban, *Torat Adam*, *Sha’ar “Sakkana”*.

¹⁴ *Birkei Yosef*, *Yoreh De’ah*, 336.

¹⁵ See for example, Chazon Ish, *Emunah Ve’bitachon*, 5:5.

¹⁶ Responsa of the Rashba, I:413.

very much a part of it. This is because we generally do not merit healing by miracles. Even with proper spiritual *tikkun*, physical disease must in any case be healed by physical means.

To try to further resolve this dilemma, we present a story told by Rabbi Chaim of Brisk about the Maharil Diskin. He once fell ill and his doctor recommended a strict diet that prohibited hot foods. When Shabbat came, he requested the traditional hot foot, cholent in defiance of the doctor's order, saying, "Shabbat food does not harm." He ate and it did not harm him. The next Shabbat, assuming he wanted cholent again, he was served a hot meal. This time the Maharil Diskin refused it. Asked why, he explained that on the previous Shabbat, "I had trusted in *Hashem* that the Shabbat food could not hurt me. But today, I have a concern that the hot food could hurt me. This concern [that a physical substance may hurt me] has become mixed into my thoughts and affected my trust in *Hashem*. The moment my trust in *Hashem* is not total, I am obligated to follow the doctor's advice."¹⁷ We have no reason to assume that the Maharil Diskin's illness was even life-threatening, yet he was still utterly scrupulous that with the taint of doubt it was necessary to follow the doctor's advice. The awareness that the Maharil Diskin possessed of the working of his own mind is striking. It is clear that this sort of clarity and honesty is necessary to even begin contemplating the idea of being released from the obligation of going to doctors.

We now return to the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Yoreh De'ah* 336:1) which uses the difficult phraseology of "The Torah gave **permission**, to the physician to heal... and it is an **obligation**..." The *Taz* asks: Why this change of wording? He writes:

"In truth, *Hashem* alone heals. But a person does not have the merit except by doing medical therapy by way of the natural world. *Hashem* agrees to this and gives the doctor [permission]. The Torah allows for medicine because man does not merit healing by a miracle. But, ultimately, with merit, one would not need medicine, and therefore it is not proper to call it a mitzvah for those that have the merit and do not need medicine. [So,] according to his spiritual level a man is permitted, [But specifically

¹⁷ Pinkus, Rabbi Shimshon David, *Chanukah*, pp 98-99.

for this type of man, with a lack of merit], it is a mitzvah (*i.e.*, obligatory) because his life then depends on medicine.”

The *Taz* understands that since some are meritorious and will be healed directly by *Hashem*, it is inappropriate for the Torah to say that medicine is obligatory. There are rare individuals like Maharil Diskin who know as a certainty that healing is only from *Hashem* and *for them*, who are already living to a great degree above the confines of nature, or as the *Sefer Hachinuch* says: “because of their great actions... *Hashem* gave nature into their hands,”¹⁸ medicine can in no way add to their possibility of being healed. The *Shevet Yehuda*, writing on the obligation to seek a doctor, notes that there are righteous people who “did not have to act in the normal way, [but] one cannot learn from them, because they are different... [T]hey exist outside of nature and the control of the stars. These are very few, and even they are not permitted to rely on a miracle.”¹⁹ This opinion must be examined more carefully. Is it not a contradiction to say “they did not act in the normal way” of seeking medical treatment, yet “even they are not permitted to rely on a miracle”? Is it also not problematic for the *Taz* to say that “it is not proper to call it a mitzvah” for the righteous to seek a doctor? The question can be phrased simply as **why should the righteous be exempt from the mitzvah of preservation of life that is incumbent upon all of Israel?** Even though seeking the doctor may in no way result in healing, the fact remains that seeking the doctor is a Torah obligation! Nowhere else in Torah do we see such exemptions. This is all the more true with the *halachot* of danger to life, where the rulings always tend towards the side of stringency and safety.

Perhaps we can say that in the *tzaddik's* lifelong efforts of cleaving to Torah, working on his traits and flaws, in his utilizing illness as an opportunity for *teshuva*, and finally, beseeching *Hashem* (in prayer) from the depths of his soul – in all these acts of great toil do we find, in fact, the *tzaddik's* fulfillment of the mitzvah of saving his own life. This is true because in these actions he is seeking out the True Healer. In being above nature, the remedies of medicine cannot add to his chance of cure. Nay, for the worthy *tzaddik* pursuing medicine could be considered a breach of his total

¹⁸ *Sefer Ha'chinuch*, mitzvah 546.

¹⁹ *Shevet Yehuda*, *Yoreh De'ah*, 336.

bitachon, and in the words of the *Chovot Halevot*, “a defaming of His honor.” Therefore, in the final analysis, these great individuals are no more exempt from the *mitzvah* of saving their own life than you or I. But their way of fulfilling their obligation is different, rare, and it is perilous to learn from them. If one errs and considers himself more of a *tzaddik* than he really is, and, says the *Shevet Yehuda*, “he blesses himself and says to himself: no bad will come – this is a piety of idiocy.”

This understanding fits well with the above-cited *Avnei Nezer*'s comment on King Asa, who should not have turned to doctors at all. Such a *tzaddik*, who was on the level of total trust in *Hashem*, had no need in going to doctors. So, too, can this explain the gemara from *Bava Metzia* that the pious man sinned by keeping the goat, even in the face of *pikuach nefesh*. He did not need to follow the doctor's order of drinking milk from a goat. For him it was a sin, because his way of fulfilling the *mitzvah* of preserving his life should have been direct appeal to *Hashem*. What is problematic with the *Avnei Nezer* is his lenient approach, that apparently anyone can take on the Ramban's approach of not going to doctors. If we understand the *Taz* correctly, this approach can only be adopted by one certain of his trust in *Hashem*, and in so doing he is fulfilling his obligation and serving *Hashem* on a higher level. What such a *tzaddik* is specifically not doing is blessing himself and hoping for the best. Therefore, such a *tzaddik* is in no way giving up on his life, but rather knows with certainty that he has fulfilled his obligations to *Hashem*. This then becomes the test of such actions. If someone says: I have no need for doctors but I will put myself completely in the hands of *Hashem*, he should be asked, “In trusting in *Hashem* are you fulfilling completely your obligation to preserve your life? Are you being as scrupulous in your self-examination as the Maharil Diskin, and do you know as a certainty that no harm will come to you by forfeiting medical treatments? Know, that in your trust of *Hashem* this does not make you exempt from this obligation of preservation of life, but rather, through your trust in Him, you are fulfilling your obligation.” Such is a difficult test indeed, and for most (and for practical purposes all) Jews it is far easier to fulfill this obligation by pursuing standard medical treatment.

Following this idea, we may even come to a deeper understanding and a resolution of the difficult Ramban that we started with. He stated that “when Israel is [in its] fullness...[*Hashem*] will remove disease from their midst to the

extent that they will not need doctors, **but [only seek] prophets.**” As explained by *Michtav Me’Eliyahu*, the time of prophecy was a different time in the history of the relationship between *Klal Yisrael* and *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. Rabbi Dessler explains that during the First Temple period, prophecy and *ruach hakodesh* were integral parts of the national and personal life of Israel, our relationship with *Hashem* was much closer and communication with Him much clearer. If someone got sick, one could know through prophecy what the causative sin was and what the appropriate spiritual remedy was in order to be healed of the illness. “Man knew,” Rabbi Dessler writes, “[that] there was no healing through medicine, but only by remedying his sin according to what the prophet would instruct.”²⁰ This understanding resolves any contradiction between this Ramban, where he says that a Jew should not go to a doctor, and the *halachic* mandate to seek medical care. In the era of prophecy, the way to be healed was through prophetic inquiry and appropriate repentance. Such a process was in no way releasing one from the Torah obligation to protect one’s health and save one’s life. To the contrary, in this great era a more complete healing from disease was possible by making a spiritual *tikkun* of the precise spiritual cause of the illness. In such a time, seeking doctors was the great folly.

Michtav Me’Eliyahu concludes that the golden era of prophecy teaches us a lesson for all time. The truth of the matter is that all illness, even when one lives on the lower spiritual level that we find ourselves, ultimately comes from sin, or if you will, living misguided lives. This is a fundamental principle of Torah. It is true that we lack the knowledge to know the exact spiritual remedy for our illness. But the response to illness must be the same, *i.e.*, repentance. That is the cornerstone of the Jewish response to illness. However, given our lack of prophecy, we are unable to fulfill the mitzvah of protecting our lives through repentance alone, and, therefore, we must also seek the doctor.

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²⁰ Dessler, Rabbi Eliyahu, *Michtav Me’Eliyahu*, Vol. 3, p. 174.