



The Power of Prayer in the Healing Process

An Anti-Missionary Concept from a Simple Grammar Rule

ספר בראשית פרק כ פסוק יז וַיִּתְּפֹלֵל אֲבֹרָהֶם אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּרְפָּא אֱלֹהִים אֶת אֲבִימֶלֶךְ וְאֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאִמְהֶתָּיו וַיֵּלֶדוּ:

ספר בראשית פרק כא פסוק א והנשם פקד את שרה כאשר אמר...

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Hebrew, you will notice that all the verbs in verse 20:17 וַיִּרְפָּא וַיֵּלֶדוּ are written with the ו/vav conversive, turning future into past. Yet, “Hashem פָּקַד/pakad – remembered Sarah” is written in regular past tense. I know grammar can be tedious, but Hebrew grammar greatly affects the inner meaning of the Torah text. Rashi employs the grammatical rule that the regular past tense following a series of verbs with ו/vav conversive takes the meaning of plu-perfect, meaning it happened before the preceding section. Consistent with this rule, Rashi learns that the intimacy, birth and conception of Chava took place before eating from the Tree (see *Bereishit* 4:1). This grammar rule is important to dispel a certain well-known Christian doctrine.

The First Healing in the Torah Teaches us the Nature of Disease and Healing

Avraham teaches us that the most effective cure is through prayer. The very first instance when the root for healing ר-פ-א/resh/fey/alef appears in the Torah, is regarding Avimelech's healing through the prayer of Avraham. Since, the disease of Avimelech's household is the very first description of sickness and healing in the Torah, it teaches us about the nature of disease and healing. The words describing the condition from which his household suffered are עָצַר עָצַר/ki atzor atzar – “For I had surely shut.” If you unscramble the word עָצַר/atzar it spells the word צָעַר/tza'ar – ‘pain,’ which is primary in disease. Experiencing pain is the body's wakeup call to pray and adjust our lifestyle. Unfortunately, we have learned to repress our various pains rather than dealing with them. The first principle in healing is to learn to listen to the body. The other permutation, which we can make from the word עָצַר/atzar, is צָרַע/tzara – the root of the word צָרַעַת/tzara'at – the archetypal biblical disease, often mistranslated as leprosy, but being in truth closer to psoriasis. As we know, tzara'at is a spiritual disease, that comes upon a person as retribution for evil speech. This teaches us about the link between morality and health (without judging the sick as being immoral). Since every ailment has a spiritual root, the primary process of healing is teshuva – repentance. Avimelech's healing depended on his repenting from lack of fear of G-d:

ספר בראשית פרק כ פסוק יא וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם כִּי אֲמַרְתִּי רַק אֵין יִרְאֵת אֱלֹהִים בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְהִרְגוּנִי עַל דְּבַר אִשְׁתִּי:

“And Avraham said, for I have said, there simply is no fear of G-d in this place, and they will kill me on behalf of my wife” (*Bereishit* 20:11).

Therefore, in his prayer on behalf of Avimelech, Avraham invokes the name Elokim, which is even repeated in verse 20:17. The name Elokim – representing Divine judgment or ‘awe,’ is the inner experience of gevurah. The healing takes place through this name to rectify Avimelech's lack of fear of G-d. Incidentally, I find the degree of Avraham's kindness incredible. He goes out of himself to pray sincerely and precisely for the sake of the healing of the household of a man, who has just harassed his wife!

What is the Most Vital Function of True Health?

It is interesting to note that the first healing described in the Torah concerns the opening of orifices that had been closed by Hashem, due to Avimelech's harassment of Sarah:

ספר בראשית פרק כ פסוק יח כִּי עָצַר הָשֵׁם בְּעַד כָּל רָחִם לְבֵית אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ עַל דְּבַר שָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ אַבְרָהָם:
 “For Hashem had surely shut every womb of Avimelech's household, because of Sarah, Abraham's wife” (*Bereishit* 20:18).

This teaches us the primacy of fertility – being able to give birth – in the definition of health. Both the Hebrew words בְּרִיאָה/briyah – ‘creation’ and בְּרִיאָה/briyah – ‘health’ share the same Hebrew root בָּרָא/beit/reish/alef. This teaches us that true health is to be fully created with the power to (pro)create. We can also extend the concept of opening orifices to the function of the digestive

system and elimination. According to Rambam, the first objective in maintaining proper health is regularity and the first sign of disease is constipation. Rambam teaches that regular bowel movements and exercise are so important, that their proper maintenance can override the effects of an unhealthy diet:

“A person should always attempt to keep his bowels soft and closer to a very soft stool. This is an important principle in healing. Whenever a person is constipated or it is difficult for him to move his bowels, bad sicknesses come upon him” (Rambam, *Hilchos Deot* 4:13).

The Healing Power of the Blessing after Using the Bathroom

After eliminating, we thank Hashem with the following prayer of praise:

אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם בְּחָכְמָה. וַיִּבְרָא בּוֹ נִקְבִּים וְנִקְבִּים. חֲלָוִים חֲלָוִים. גְּלוּי וַיְדוּעַ לִפְנֵי כֹסֶא כְבוֹדָךְ שָׂאֵם יִסְתֵּם אֶחָד מֵהֶם אוֹ אִם יִפְתַּח אֶחָד מֵהֶם אִי אֶפְשָׁר לְהִתְקַיֵּם אֶפְלוּ שְׁעָה אַחַת. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה הָשֵׁם, רוֹפֵא כָּל בָּשָׂר וּמַפְלִיא לַעֲשׂוֹת:

...Who formed the human being with wisdom and created within him many openings and many hollows. It is revealed and known in the presence of your glorious throne that if one of them were ruptured, or if one of them were blocked, it would be impossible to exist and stand in your presence even for one hour. Blessed are You, G-d, Who heals all flesh and performs wonders.

The numerical value of the words חֲלָוִים חֲלָוִים is 248, corresponding to the 248 limbs of the body. This teaches us that reciting this blessing carefully, with *kavana* (intention) and thinking about the meaning of the words is a spiritual remedy for good health for our entire body throughout our lifetime. Many people have been saved from a great variety of diseases by making a commitment to make this bracha with *kavana* while reading it from a printed text.

This can be illustrated from the following anecdote: A sad and worried Jew once came to visit the *Chazon Ish* (Rav Yeshaya Karelitz) in B'nei Berak. When the man entered, the *Chazon Ish* was reciting the *Asher Yatzar Bracha*. He pronounced each word slowly and clearly. The man couldn't contain himself any longer and blurted out, "My child has polio, and the doctors say there's no hope." The *Chazon Ish* emphasized the last words of the bracha: "Who heals all flesh and acts wondrously." The *Chazon Ish* then turned to the man and said, "So, you hear that Hashem does wonders." This is all the *Chazon Ish* said to the man. The child had a complete recovery. The Mashgiach of the Mirer Yeshiva, R. Yerucham Levovitz, z"l, used to say, that if a person were aware of everything that happens to food from the time it enters until it leaves the body, he would send a telegram home to inform his family that everything turned out well.

Summary of the Healing Principles Learned in *Parashat Vayera*

At this time, when we are all concerned about our health and about strengthening our immune system, let us not forget the lessons from the first instance of healing in the Torah:

1. The Power of Prayer in the Healing Process
2. Every Ailment has a Spiritual Root
3. Repentance is Essential to Healing
4. Learn to Listen to the Body
5. Keep the Bowels Moving
6. Be Careful Reciting *Asher Yatzar* with Proper Intention