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"Can Religion Banish Pain?" 10 April 1943.

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A sermon delivered Saturday, April 10, 1943, Temple Israel

This Sabbath is known as Sabbath Tazriah and on this day it is traditional to read from the second book of Kings the story of Naaman, the ~~leper~~ ^{leper}. The king of Aram treasured Naaman above all his captains and he was very grieved ~~at~~ at his lepersy. He had heard of the wonderous power of the God of Israel and so the King of Aram sent a letter to the King of Israel, saying: "And now when this letter is come unto thee, behold, I have sent Naaman, my servant, to thee, that thou mayest ~~see~~ recover him of his lepersy."

When the King of Israel received this letter he rent his garments in anguish. Only when Elisah, the Prophet, offered a cure did the King find peace.

Elisah sent a messenger to Naaman and said: "Go and wash in the Jordan ... and thou shalt be clean." Naaman was angry for he expected elaborate incantations would be uttered over him. Finally, however, he was persuaded to do as he had been told and behold his flesh was like that of a new child and he was healed.

The traditional Jewish attitude toward sickness has been two-fold.: Avail yourself of the best of ~~the~~ medical advice and avail yourself of the spiritual resource of faith.

This story illustrates Judaism's attitude toward healing. We read in the Midrash: "Rabbi Ishmael and Rab i Akiba were walking a street in Jerusalem when a sick man accosted ~~them~~ ^{them}. He complained about his ailment and solicited their advise. When they told him of a remedy another man standing ~~nearby~~ ^{nearby} accused them of irreligion.

"If," argued the man, "it is God's will that this man should have a certain disease, are you going to counteract God's decision by removing the disease which has been decreed for him?"

"What is your occupation?" demanded the rabbis in reply to this piece of ~~the~~ philosophy. "I am a gardener, as you must see by the tools which I carry in my hands." "But why do you interfere with the earth ~~which~~ which God has created?" continued the wise man. "If I were not to manure, prune and water the trees, " retorted

the man, "how could I expect them to produce any fruit?" "And man is even like the tree of the field," said the Rabbis; "he requires tender treatment and attention to his body to make it flourish and keep in good trim."

Judaism has always had a good healthful respect of medicine.

We may ask: how can religion help us to keep physically fit and to banish pain? Our own religion ~~can~~ answers by incorporating within its tradition rules of health. There is a rabbinic saying: Physical cleanliness leads to spiritual purity. Our sages forbid Jews to live in a city where there was not a proper disposal of waste. Washing the hands in the morning and before meals is part of Jewish law. In Talmud we read:

"It is forbidden to live in a city in which there is no physician." A corollary to this is the rabbinic ~~advice~~ advice "Do not reside in a town where the mayor is a physician"- Our teachers realize that a physician must be left free to look after his patients and incidentally that good governing is a full-time job.

Religion can help to banish pain by banishing fear. "An Arab folk tale relates that Pestilence once met a caravan upon the desert-way to Bagdad. "Why," asked the Arab chief, "must you hasten to Bagdad?"

"To take 5000 lives," Pestilence replied.

Upon the way back from the City of the Caliphs, Pestilence and the caravan met again. "You deceived me," The chief said angrily, "Instead of 5000 lives, you took 50,000!"

"Nay," said Pestilence. "Five thousand and not one more. It was Fear who killed the rest."

Our texts condemn mere incantations - not magic words but the message of religion must be given to the sick. The rabbis taught that healers who promised to cure by word alone could never get to heaven.

The best way that we can help our dear ones who are sick is to provide them with a good doctor, follow his instructions, and then if he permits - we visit the sick.

One of the greatest mitzwoth or good deeds of the Jew is Bikkur Cholin, the visiting of the sick. Rabbi Akiba said: He who does not visit the sick is as if he shed blood. Rab said: that the spirit of God hovers over the bed of the sick and indicated that those who visit ~~are~~ are in God's very presence. Elsewhere in Jewish literature we find the phrase: There is no limit as regards the visitation of the sick. The rabbis split in interpreting this sentence.

Rabbi Joseph argued that it meant there is no limit to the God-given reward tendered those who do so. Abbai, his opponent, argued: No limit means that there is no social limit in visiting the sick and even the great must visit the small. Haba, interpreted no limit as meaning: (if it is permitted) we should visit the sick even a hundred times a day.

The general sentiment so praised this act that ~~it~~ it was held: whosoever visits the sick takes away a sixtieth part of his illness. Someone objected to this and said: If this is true that a visitor takes away one-sixtieth part of a man's illness, then let sixty men visit the sick and he will rise from his bed and walk away with them.

This obviously didn't work and so the phrase was interpreted as meaning that the first man to visit the ~~sick~~ takes away one-sixtieth part of his illness and that the second man takes away one ~~sixtieth~~ sixtieth part of that which is left. Since this could go on ad infinitum the sentiment remained in force while the patient remained in bed.

Dear friends, there are several churches in America which teach that there is no pain and that there is no disease - that ^{there} is only a lack of faith.

We teach ~~that~~ ^{that} there is pain and there is disease; we believe that great faith may overcome pain and that medical science can conquer disease.

There is an old anecdote about a scene in a hospital ~~for~~ room: looking down at the sick man, the doctor decided to tell him the truth.

"I feel that I should tell you. You are a very sick man. You haven't much chance and I'm sure you want to know the facts. Now - is there anyone you would like to see?"

Bending down toward his patient the doctor heard him feebly ~~answer~~ answer, "Yes."

"Who is it?"

In a slightly stronger ~~tone~~ tone, the sufferer said, "Another doctor."

This patient had a type of faith - just what the source of that faith was, I don't know. I do know this, however, that a modern Jewish interpretation of life stemming from ~~the~~ Maimonides who was ~~the~~ greatest rabbi and the greatest physician in the world in his day has an answer to our question. Avail yourself of the best of medical advice and avail yourself of the spiritual resource of faith.

I served as the Jewish chaplain in Lincoln hospital located in New York City. There as I made the rounds and talked with the patients, both Jewish and Gentile, I was able to see how much more receptive to their treatment religion could make them. Religio therapy will come into its own as the man of science turns to religion and the religious among us live according to rules of health.

Our writings tell us to be clean, to employ ~~our~~ doctors, to avoid intemperate habits, and to visit the sick. (in fact Jewish law teaches that we have an obligation to care for the sick of all peoples) Our writings also teach us to pray in our homes, to pray in our synagogues, and to lead ~~prayerful~~ prayerful lives.

Religion can not cure a real disease; it can not heal a wound - but religion can help to banish pain by giving us faith in our God, in ourselves and in the resources of science.

AMEN