

Dear Rabbi Fried,

There was recently discussion on the radio about the will of God for people to be sick and doctors treating them. If God made them sick, how can a doctor “play God” and cure them, seemingly in contradiction to His will? I know we Jews go to doctors, but is there an answer to this question?

Rose W.

Dear Rose,

The greatest Torah scholars and sages throughout the millennia were also leading doctors. To name a couple of note, Maimonides was chief physician to the Sultan of Egypt, (imagine how his mother swooned ‘my son the doctor’), Nachmanides was a leading physician in Spain, and many of the sages mentioned in the Talmud were doctors as well.

The source for this custom is in this past weeks Torah reading, when discussing the damages one is liable to when wounding another Jew, the Torah says one should pay worker’s compensation and should surely heal him, as it says “verapoh yeirapeh” (Shemos/Exodus 21:19). The Talmud comments upon this, that from here we see that a doctor has permission to cure a sick person. (Bava Kama, 95:a). The classical commentary Rashi explains that Talmudic statement, that one can ask “G-d struck him and you’re going to heal him?!”, therefore the Torah informs us that one has permission by G-d Himself to cure a sick person, and it’s not considered “playing G-d” or infringing upon His will to do so. The “Code of Jewish Law” (Yoreh Deah 336:1) goes a step further, stating: “The Torah has given permission for a doctor to cure, and it is a mitzvah (to do so), and is included in the mitzvah to save a life. Furthermore, if one (who is capable to cure and) withholds himself from curing the sick person, it is tantamount to spilling his blood”.

The rationale to the above ruling can be found in the following fascinating story cited in the Midrash. Two sages, Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva were walking with a layman. They were approached by a sick man, who described his illness to the Rabbis and asked them if they know a cure. They replied that they do and prescribed it to the ill person. When he left, the layman asked them, who afflicted that man with sickness? They replied, the Holy One, Blessed Be He. He said to them, are you so wise that you entered into an domain that is not yours, He (G-d) afflicted and you will cure?! The Rabbis replied to the man, and what is your livelihood? He said I work the land, and behold here is the hoe in my hand. They asked him, and who created the ground, who created the vineyard? He replied, The Holy One, Blessed Be He. They asked him, and how are you entering an domain that is not yours (by you plowing and changing the land)? G-d created the ground, go and eat the fruits that He has produced! (without making your own changes) He replied, don’t you see the hoe in my hand? If I don’t go out and plow the land, smooth it out, fertilize it and weed it, the ground will produce nothing. They proclaimed to the man, don’t you see the answer from your own livelihood? Just as a tree not treated properly, fertilized and watered will not only not produce, but will die, also the body of man is like the tree, at times the fertilizer is the medicine he needs, and the “man of the land” is the doctor.’ (Midrash Shochar Tov, Shmuel 4:1)

We learn from this Midrash that for a doctor to cure is included in the general will of the Creator that man should repair and perfect the world, and therefore is not contradicting His will.

There is also a level of cognizance that a sickness is a wake-up call from above to improve one’s ways. There were pious people in past generations that would cure themselves with repentance, heeding the wake-up call and circumventing the need for the doctor. We, however, are not on any such level, and don’t have permission to circumvent doctors and the way of the world which is to be involved in healing processes.

This does not mean, however, that we are not to heed the wake-up call, and utilize any illness as an opportunity for prayer, repentance and growth.

I once was relating a course of treatment being administered to a colleague of mine to my Rabbi in Jerusalem, a rare pious tzaddik. He was satisfied with what I told him, and I interjected that we need to add a chapter of psalms to the treatment. He became upset at me, and said “we don’t add the psalms to the treatment- we add the treatment to the psalms!”

May we all be blessed with good health!