

The Miracle of the Answered Prayer

By: JOHN D. LOIKE and MOSHE D. TENDLER

Introduction

Case: It is a Friday afternoon and the oncologist calls Reuven's parents into her office to share the terrible news. She tells them that their 21-year-old son has glioblastoma and because there are no chemotherapies that work, he will die within the year. Devastated, Reuven's parents go to shul on Shabbos and offer a *Mi Shebeirach* and *daven* with intense *kavanah* to ask G-d to convert the cancer to a treatable form. On Sunday, they give a lot of *tzedakah* to various causes and submit their son's name to Kupat Ha'ir¹ so that *Gedolim* associated with this organization will say many *tefillos* to "lead to a miraculous *yeshuah*." Unresponsive to the traditional chemotherapies, and as happens in almost 100 percent of the time, Reuven dies within the year.

In today's world, there are many cases when a doctor approaches a family to inform them that no effective treatments are available for their sick family member and that he or she is terminally ill. The response of the family members, like Reuven's parents, to this devastating news often includes praying to G-d to heal their beloved with a miracle that defies medical science. In some cases, the desperate family members often turn to others, like Chassidic Rebbes, to ask them to pray for their loved one.

Fundamental questions arise from these situations and stories. How does prayer work in healing the sick? Can miraculous cures be requested from G-d to heal the sick? In this article we discuss the meaning of miracles in prayer and healing. We also highlight an intimate conceptual relationship between the prayer of knowledge (*daas*) in effecting a positive

¹ <www.kupat.org>.

Dr. John D. Loike (corresponding author, jd15@columbia.edu) is Director of Special Programs, Center for Bioethics, Columbia University, New York, NY.

Rabbi Dr. Moshe D. Tendler is Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Rabbinical Theological Seminary, the Rabbi Isaac and Bella Tendler Professor of Jewish Medical Ethics and Professor of Biology, Department of Biology, Yeshiva University, New York, NY.

response from G-d. Finally, we show that in today's times one needs to redefine how miracles operate to effect a "miraculous" cure.

Do Miracles Violate the Laws of Nature?

From a conceptual perspective, miracles can be divided into three basic categories. The first are miracles created *ex nihilo*—literally, "out of nothing." The creation of our universe as described in Genesis is the miracle of the first order, beyond duplication by man. The second category of miracles comprises events that appear to violate the laws of natural order and include the parting of the Sea, the manna in the wilderness, the talking donkey, and the *Menorah* that burned in the Sanctuary for eight days (the miracle of Chanukah). The third category of miracles constitutes those events that we experience every day of our lives and can include commonplace happenings and seemingly coincidental occurrences. The Sages teach us to "praise Him for every breath we draw." We are to give thanks to G-d for our every heartbeat, for the smooth performance of all our vital functions, and, indeed, for all the day-by-day workings of nature. All miracles are designed to confirm that G-d is the global Master over nature. In addition, any miracle can serve as a simple or complex form of communication between human beings and G-d.

In current times, do Jews experience miracles that defy natural law and order? According to Jewish law and tradition, there is a spectrum of opinions on whether G-d performs miracles that violate the laws of nature and whether we are allowed to pray for such miracles. At one end of the spectrum, Ramban and many other medieval *Gedolim*² (like Sforno, Chovos Halevavos, Ibn Ezra,³ etc.) believe that Jews must recognize the personal intervention of Hashem in everyone's life.⁴ Thus, Reuven's parents would be justified to ask G-d for a supernatural miracle to cure their son.

On the other end of the spectrum, Rambam and others (e.g., Rav Saadiah Gaon and the Ran) state that miracles can never violate natural

² Exodus 13:16. The Ramban also states that the implementation of Divine supernatural miracles is in part a function of the righteousness of the parties involved.

³ Ibn Ezra says that the word *Sb-dai* and the word *shoded* have the same root, for sometimes Hashem robs the laws of nature to fulfill His Will.

⁴ Interestingly, Ramban states that one should not rely on miracles (Lev. 21:17, Numbers 1:45; Numbers 13:2; Deuteronomy 20:9).

law.⁵ *Taanis* (25a) states that Hashem does not wish to change the laws of nature even slightly except for certain select and rare situations.⁶ In his earliest work, the Commentary on the *Mishnah*, Rambam asserts that even the splitting of the Sea did not violate natural law. The *Mishnah* (*Avos* 5:5 or 5:6, depending on the text in the Rambam's edition) lists items that were created during the last moments of the six days of Creation, and each of them can be viewed as supernatural miracles that were all preprogrammed into nature during Creation. All the apparent supernatural miracles described in *Avos* were ordained at the time of Creation to occur at a specific time in history. In addition, *Midrash Rabbah*⁷ explains that the Biblical phrase “and the sea returned to its strength” means that the splitting of the sea was a precondition of its very creation. Hashem, the *Midrash* says, made a stipulation with the Sea on the day it was created that when the time came, and the Alm-ghty would give the cue, it would miraculously split its waters to save *Bnei Yisrael* from the Egyptians.⁸ Rambam⁹ and Rabbeinu Bachya¹⁰ state that from the time of Creation, G-d will never violate the laws of nature. Rabbeinu Bachya adds an important insight to his understanding of miracles. He states about Exodus 14:27 that “when we speak of something supernatural occurring, this is a subjective truth applicable only to the beholder of that phenomenon, not to its Creator. G-d never makes a sudden revision in

⁵ Bechor Shor (*Shabbat* 21b) writes that although the defeat of the Greeks by the Chashmona'i family was certainly miraculous, nevertheless, this miracle can still be considered “natural,” for it is conceivable that a few individuals who are brave-hearted may defeat many, even naturally.

⁶ Rabbeinu Bachya (in his introduction to *Parashat Shelach*) quotes Proverb 21:31 that if someone is sick and prays to G-d to be healed, such a prayer is useless unless one has first done everything known to medical science. Only when medical intervention has been engaged can one ask for heavenly assistance. Miracles are exception not norms. This is why G-d commanded Noach to build an ark even though He could have saved Noach and his family through a miracle. All the detailed instructions that the Torah provides in building the ark is proof that G-d wanted Noach to do everything humanly possible to make salvation appear compatible with natural law.

⁷ 21:6.

⁸ Exodus 14:27. The Baal Shem Tov allegedly stated that proof of Hashem's love for *Bnei Yisrael* is that He included the miracle of the splitting of the sea in the Creation of the world (see *Baal Shem Tov al HaTorah*, ed. Rabbi Shimon Menachem Mendel, [Machon Pitchei Megadim]).

⁹ *Avos* 5:5. In addition, Rambam writes (*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 8:1): “Anyone whose faith is based on miracles and ‘signs’ will always have in his heart a nagging doubt.”

¹⁰ *Avos* 5:8; *Bereishis Rabbah* 5:4.

His plans for the world to adopt measures that He had not previously thought of. Thus, these Rabbis define any current miracle (*pele, nes*) as describing an outstanding event that causes amazement because it is a coincidence of time and action.¹¹ Since G-d is eternal and unchanging, miracles do not destroy the objective scientific nexus or violate Divine natural law.

Rashi appears to be on the same side of the spectrum as the Rambam and quotes Proverbs¹² that states that since the days of Creation the laws of nature remain immutable except for rare occasions when G-d changes the laws of nature so that man should fear G-d. Rashi in *Parashas Tzav* mentions the people who are saved from four different dangerous situations and states that there does not seem to be anything supernatural or miraculous about a person successfully crossing the ocean or the desert.¹³ Similarly, Rashi quotes two cases, the sick who recovered and the imprisoned who was freed from prison as examples in which a successful mission is referred to as a miracle. Rav Ovadiah Yosef presents an interesting idea. He states that it is permissible to pray for a miracle which is in the confines of the laws of nature, although it seems farfetched that such an event will occur naturally. Similarly, one may even pray for a complete miracle to occur to the Jewish nation collectively; however, one should not request a complete miracle for a single person.¹⁴

Thus, according to these Rabbinical perspectives, Reuven's parents offered improper and ineffective prayers for their son. They did not have the right to ask G-d to alter medical science to save their son.

Can One Pray for a Miracle?

In this article we will focus on the view of Rambam to explain the relationship between the nature of prayers and miracles as it relates to healing the sick. Several Jewish philosophers follow the thinking that we should not ask for or rely on miracles that defy nature (*ein somchin al banes*

¹¹ In contrast, a *mofes* connotes clear and unmistakable interference with the natural order in order to illustrate a power superior to nature. The verses in the Torah convey this theme in the Ten *Makkos* that G-d brought to the Egyptians.

¹² 3:14.

¹³ Leviticus 7:12. "If regarding a thanksgiving for a miracle that was done for him, such as the seafarers or those who travel the deserts or those incarcerated in prison or a sick person who was healed [they] must give thanks for it is written regarding them (Psalms 107): "Let them thank Hashem for His kindness and His wonders for mankind. And let us sacrifice thanksgiving offerings."

¹⁴ <<http://halachayomit.co.il/en/Print.aspx?HalachaID=2321>>.

—one does not [should not] rely on miracles).¹⁵ Shaagas Aryeh asserts that prayers should be limited to instances where a desired outcome is perceived as being within the realm of possibility.¹⁶ Similarly, Or HaChaim deduces from the Talmud’s phraseology of “*ein mazkirin maaseh nissim*—we do not mention miraculous occurrences”—because praying for a miracle constitutes a violation.¹⁷ Thus, the power of prayer to invoke Divine mercy must take place via natural order rather than supernatural means.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Shabbos* 32a, *Yerushalmi* 1:4, *Pesachim* 64b. The Divine “reluctance” to resort to miracles which disrupt natural order is a motif that is emphasized frequently by Rambam, Ramban (see commentary to *Bereishis* 6:19; *Vayikra* 21:17; *Bemidbar* 1:45, 13:1; *Devarim* 20:8) and other *Rishonim* (see *Derashot HaRan* [Mechon Shalem edition, 5737], *Derush* #3, p. 46, and *Derush* #8, p. 129). The Talmud (*Shabbos* 32a) advises that “One should never put himself in a dangerous situation and say, ‘A miracle will save me.’ Perhaps the miracle will not come. And even if a miracle occurs, one’s merits are reduced.”

¹⁶ *Gevuros Ari* to *Taanis* 19a.

¹⁷ *Talmud Yerushalmi* to *Taanis* (3:2): “*Ein matri’in al maaseh nissim* — we do not cry out for miraculous developments.” See *Chefetz Hashem* on *Maseches Berachos*, *Yerushalmi Taanis* 3:2: A person should never put himself in a dangerous situation saying that a miracle will be performed. Perhaps a miracle will not ensue, and [even] if a miracle is done, G-d may deduct merits from the individual [see *Shabbos* 30a, *Taanis* 20b]. Rashba (Responso, Vol. 1 #413) and *Sefer HaChinuch* (*Mitzvah* # 546) explain that extraordinary righteous individuals stand above the laws of nature and need not be concerned about subjecting themselves to the normal risks and hazards that the average person needs to avoid. The *Midrash* remarks that when one prepares to be *moser nefesh* (avoid transgression by sacrificing one’s life), he should do so with the assumption that he will, in fact, be killed and not saved by a miracle. “Whoever sacrifices himself while relying on miraculous salvation will not merit to have a miracle performed on his behalf.”

¹⁸ There are, however, examples cited in the Talmud where it appears that G-d performed supernatural miracles regarding our forefathers and other *tzaddikim*. There are numerous legends recording Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa’s frequent reliance on apparently supernatural miracles. In response to these events, several commentaries state that the principle of “*ein somchin al hanes*” (we do not rely on miracles) is waived with respect to certain outstanding personalities (see Rashba, Responso, Vol. 1 #413 and *Sefer HaChinuch Mitzvah* # 546). From these exceptional examples we may conclude that Hashem’s preference to preserve the laws of nature only applies to ordinary people but not to people of extraordinary character for whom Hashem is happy to “bend” His Will to accommodate their will. Bechor Shor (*Shabbos* 21b) states that it is forbidden to pray for miracles that cannot come about through natural means and will benefit an individual. However, one is allowed to pray for a supernatural miracle that will impact the entire *tzibbur*.

The fact that we cannot rely on miracles that operate outside of natural law is relevant when praying for a terminally ill patient. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach takes a very cautious approach to the issue of whether one can pray for a full recovery of a terminally ill patient. He rules that prayer for a terminal patient who is suffering and for whom there is no known medical cure is forbidden under the prohibition against praying for a supernatural miracle.¹⁹ Furthermore, Rabbi Auerbach writes that prayer gatherings for a person whose physicians have already given up on curing may lead to a weakening of faith, especially when the patients do not recover. Yet, Rav Auerbach emphasizes that we must always maintain hope and trust in G-d for His support and guidance, but that does not mean that we should engage in numerous, persistent prayers for a miraculous cure that violates natural law.²⁰

If a terminally ill patient appears to be unresponsive to medical treatment and is in great pain, then the Ran²¹ allows one to pray for the life of a patient to end. Several cases in the Talmud are presented where Rabbis have prayed for mercy and for the death of a colleague classified as *goseis* (terminally ill, who has only hours or days to live) or a patient who lost mental competence.²² While many authorities, including Aruch HaShulchan, Tiferes Yisrael, and a host of more contemporary authorities,²³ accept Ran's opinion, others do not fully accept Ran's ruling. Rav Moshe Feinstein²⁴ and Rav Shmuel Vosner²⁵ fundamentally accept Ran's position, but argue against relying upon it nowadays in a practical sense because human beings can't always predict which treatments are futile and which are beneficial.

The Innovative Prayer for *Daas*

If we do not rely on supernatural miracles to either heal a person or allow the person to die, then how are we asking G-d to intervene? This fundamental question applies to any *bakashah* or request that we ask of G-d, including bolstering our finances, delivering justice, etc. The answer

¹⁹ *Nishmas Avraham, Yoreh De'ah* 335:4.

²⁰ *Halichos Shlomo, Hilchos Tefillah*, ch. 8, n. 56.

²¹ *Nedarim* 40a.

²² *Taanis* 23a and *Bava Metzia* 84a.

²³ *Aruch HaShulchan, Yoreh De'ah* 335:3; *Tiferes Yisrael, Yoma* 8:7; Rabbi Yitzchak Yosef, *Yalkut Yosef, Yoreh De'ah* 335.

²⁴ *Iggeros Moshe, Choshen Mishpat* 2:74:1. *Iggeros Moshe, Choshen Mishpat*, part 2 #73:1, #74:1 and 4.

²⁵ *Siach Halachah*, 772.

to this question is found in the first *berachab* of the *bakashab* section of *Shemoneh Esrei* requesting that G-d “provide us with *daas*” and “teach us *binah*.” What is the difference between *daas* and *binah*? *Daas* is simply the knowledge of facts or common sense, whereas *binah* is translational knowledge—engaging in a deep understanding of scientific processes to uncover discoveries that may be applicable to complex, real-life situations. The outcome we request from G-d through this *berachab* is for G-d to educate us with *binah* to make the right decisions in our choices and to provide us with novel insights (*chiddushim*) in all matters of life.²⁶ Indeed, these outcomes apply to Torah learning, medical treatments, finances, and any other requests, including any non-spiritual matter that we request.

When we pray for *parnasah* (sustenance), for example, we are not only asking Hashem to create opportunities for us to earn money, but also requesting an endowment of intelligence to make the appropriate business choices. As long as we grasp that Hashem deserves the credit for giving us these ideas. Hashem credits us with having complete faith in Him.²⁷

The prelude that Hashem can provide educational insights to us applies to health as well and is intimately linked to the *berachab* of *Refa'enu*. Here, we ask G-d to reveal to us the medical knowledge (or “introduce” us to the appropriate medical experts) so that the patient can receive a therapy that is effective. It is important to keep in mind the view of the Talmud that states: “G-d created the cures of all diseases before He set the diseases in motion.”²⁸ Our request from G-d is to reveal these cures to us in a timely manner to help the sick person we are praying for. How does G-d reveal this knowledge to us? The study of Hashem’s laws of nature is an ongoing process of education in uncovering new scientific principles and potential therapies to treat disease. G-d can choose to

²⁶ *Iggeros Moshe* (Y.D. 4:8.2) noted that the Jews who were hijacked in Uganda and then were saved by [Israeli] soldiers who went to Uganda is spoken of as if it was an open miracle. Hashem creates both the injury and the cure. He caused that those Jews be captured. But He also implemented the rescue of the hostages by means of providing the Israeli soldiers with special courage and motivation so that they were able to save the captives. He also arranged natural circumstances so the soldiers, in fact, were successful.

²⁷ This idea is expressed in *Targum Onkelos* to *Devarim* 8:18, where the Torah states, “And you shall remember Hashem, your G-d, because He is the One Who gave you strength to make wealth.” Onkelos translates this *pasuk* as commanding us to recall that Hashem presented us with the idea to acquire property.

²⁸ *Megillah* 13b uses that statement to prove that Esther’s becoming a queen and Mordechai’s saving the king’s life preceded the emergence of the wicked Haman as second-in-command to Achashverosh.

communicate to us, at times, and guide our quests for new scientific breakthroughs.

Since there is a great deal of medical knowledge on how to alleviate pain and suffering, one may pray that G-d withhold great suffering from the patient and family via natural means.²⁹ One should always pray for Divine assistance and advice on how to relieve suffering and pain, even in the extreme case of a terminal illness, as stated that one should pray “even if a sword rests on a person’s neck.”³⁰ Even when praying that the suffering of a terminal patient end quickly, we are asking G-d for the knowledge to devise and formulate an appropriate medical protocol to achieve this outcome.

Thus, the unifying theme of the prayer of *daas* and *Refa’enu* is asking G-d to help us make new discoveries to cure disease. Thus, we can now expand on the prayer stated before *Shemoneh Esrei* when we declare that G-d is *borei refuos*. We appeal to G-d to serve as the master instructor of medical health. G-d directs human beings to partner with Him to discover the therapies and cures that He already created. Divine education about medical cures comes in different forms. G-d can educate us about new types of cures or teach us the power of preventative medicine, as presented in a verse in Exodus. Exodus 15:25 states: “And he cried unto the L-rd; and the L-rd showed him a tree, and he cast it into the waters, and the waters were made sweet. There He made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there He tested them.” Rabbeinu Bachya comments that G-d, as the Healer, made for *Bnei Yisrael* a statute and an ordinance in teaching the people the power of herbs that can cause sickness or cure disease.³¹

Exodus 15:26 states:

He said, “If you hearken diligently to the voice of Hashem, your G-d, and do what is just in His eyes, give ear to His commandments and observe all His decrees, then any of the diseases that I placed upon Egypt, I will not bring upon you, for I am Hashem, your Healer.”

²⁹ *Minchas Shlomo* 91:24.

³⁰ *Berachos* 10a. The language of the abbreviated *tefillah* asks G-d to “distance us from pain” without asking G-d to cure our illness (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah Hilchos Tefillah* 2:3).

³¹ Chasam Sofer (#75, *B’shalach*) states that the word “*v’yarehu*” in this *passuk* is strange. If it meant “showed,” it should have stated *v’yarehu*. Chasam Sofer states this term is related to the term *torah* — meaning Hashem taught Moshe about the properties of bitter trees and its capacity to sweeten bitter waters.

Many of the Biblical commentators point out the following anomaly in this verse.³² If G-d will not bring the diseases of the Egyptians to *Bnei Yisrael*, why does he state that He is the “G-d who heals”? Without a disease there is no need for a physician to heal. The classical answer to this question is that if *Bnei Yisrael* heed the *mitzvos* of Hashem, then no diseases will be inflicted upon them, but even if the people do not completely listen to the commandments of G-d, He will still serve as their healer, as an act of compassion.³³ The other traditional answer is that while G-d will not bring those “Egypt-based” diseases to *Bnei Yisrael*, there will be other diseases that require G-d to serve as the Healer.

We offer another explanation: that if we follow G-d’s Will and commandments, the causes of disease from various internal and/or environmental sources will not be removed, but, rather, G-d will teach us how to prevent these sources of disease from manifesting into an illness. In other words, G-d will be a Healer by teaching us preventative medicine, as Rabbeinu Bachya states, “I will preserve your good health so that you will not become a victim of natural diseases.”³⁴ In fact, in the phrase in our *tefillah* of *Refae’nu*, the term “*ve’neirafei*—we shall be healed” highlights this thought. We ask Hashem to teach us about preventative medicine to protect us from becoming ill.³⁵

We seek G-d as the expert healer and teacher of preventative medicine to sustain our health to help protect us against random events that could cause illness.³⁶ Thus, we could speculate that G-d taught us through the research of Alexander Fleming that antibiotics can prevent infections and through the research of Edward Jenner that vaccines prevent many human beings from contracting devastating infectious diseases.

³² See *Tosefes Berachah* (Exodus 15:26) for a more detailed discussion.

³³ *Talmud Sanhedrin* 100a.

³⁴ Rabbeinu Bachya (Exodus 15:26) and Ramban (Exodus 26:11). Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik offers a similar interpretation of that *passuk*. “*Rofei*” does not refer to “one who heals” in a remedial or therapeutic sense; but rather, the *passuk* clearly indicates that *healing will not be necessary*. The reference, therefore, is more to one who protects and sustains.

³⁵ See Rav Chaim Friedlander in *Siddur Tefillah L’Moshe*.

³⁶ In various other prayers such as *Bircas HaChodesh* (“a life of physical health”) and *Yekum Purkan* (“May the Holy One... protect and deliver them from all trouble and distress, remove all illnesses and heal our bodies...”) we ask G-d to sustain our health and preserve well-being by removing the pathogen or pathological insult (*machalah*) and then providing the therapy for the illness. Also note that the phrase in the *Yekum Purkan* section concludes with the request that G-d forgive our iniquities since good health is associated with doing *teshuvah*.

Another important aspect of *refuah* is the role of sin and *teshuvah*. Sins can cause illness and a sick person does not merit a full recovery until his sins are forgiven.³⁷ The intimate link between *teshuvah* and recovery is highlighted in the words of the *Mi Shebeirach*. In this prayer, we ask G-d for both *teshuvah* (*refuas hanefesh*) and medical intervention (*refuas baguf*).³⁸ In addition, the opening text of *Refa'einu* states: "Heal us and we will be healed, save us and we will be saved" and is based on a verse from Jeremiah: "I will be healed only if You, G-d, heal me, I will be saved only

³⁷ *Nedarim* 41.

³⁸ *Talmud Arachin* 15 and 16 presents the view that *tzaraas*, as an illness, serves as a punishment for various transgressions involving interpersonal misconduct, particularly the sin of *lashon hara* (slander/gossip). (See Rambam, Commentary to the *Mishnah*, *Pesachim*, Chapter 4, for another perspective.) *Berachos* 33a, commenting on the lethal effects of snake bites, references Chanina ben Dosa's statement, "See, my sons, it is not the lizard that kills, it is sin that kills." *Bava Metzia* 85a states that Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi was ill for six years with fever or urinary tract problems and also was ill with scurvy for seven years. Rabbi's illnesses came about because he had sinned against an animal. There was a lamb designated for slaughter, but fearing his fate, he hid beneath Rabbi's cloak and cried. Rabbi told him: "Go to the slaughter; it is for that that you were created." The Heavens decreed that since he did not pity the lamb, he would be punished with 13 years of illness. His cure eventually came about when he did a good deed. Ramban goes into great deal about the relationship between sin, illness, *teshuvah* and healing. His perspective on human disease is based on his belief that in the majority of cases people get sick because they have sinned or that G-d is testing them. Since illness is Divinely decreed, Ramban believes that the best and preferred action for sick individuals is to engage in *teshuvah* and to improve their spirituality. According to the Ramban, if *teshuvah* were done properly, their illnesses would most likely be cured. Ramban concludes that ideally, a sick Jew should not seek out a physician but a moral guide who will help the person repent. However, in his times as in our times, most people who get sick rely on their physicians for treatment. As for the Rabbinic comment on the verse, "He shall cause him to be thoroughly healed" (Exodus 21:19) — Ramban states that "we learn that the physician has been given sanction to heal — the Torah did not say that license has been given to the sick to resort to use medication. What is meant is that if a doctor is approached by a patient who was in the habit of resorting to medicine and was not part of the community of G-d... the doctor should not refrain from treating him, not from fear that the patient might die under his hand — seeing as the doctor is expert in his craft — nor on the grounds that G-d alone is the Healer of all flesh — because this patient is already in the habit of resorting to medicine... But this is because Torah law does not rely on miracles, for G-d knew that 'the needy will not cease from the midst of the earth' (Deuteronomy 15:11). But when a person's ways find favor in G-d's eyes, he has no need for doctors."

if You save me...”³⁹ The term “heal us” is via medical interventions while the term “save us” is in response to a *teshuvah* process. Like the prayer of *Mi Shebeirach*, these phrases emphasize the necessity of eliciting *refuas haguf* and *refuas hanefesh*⁴⁰ to trigger a healing process.

The intimate link between *teshuvah* and *refuah* is also highlighted in the phrase *refuah sheleimah* of *Refa'einu*. We learn from the prayer of *Teshuvah* in *Shemoneh Esrei* that we ask G-d to help us return to *teshuvah sheleimah*—meaning that we ask for Divine assignments and assistance as we do our part to achieve *teshuvah sheleimah*. The mutuality of Divine and human efforts in *teshuvah* are reflected in merging Ezekiel 36:26⁴¹ and Ezekiel 18:31.⁴²

Engaging in the Divine Directive of *Borei Refuos*

Currently we are living in a time when exciting new treatments are being discovered with the help of G-d. As G-d has already put in place the cures of all diseases, it is the obligation of humankind to seek and discover these cures through scientific research. In fact, we live in a generation where amazing scientific discoveries are being made. Two of the most exciting potential medical technologies that are being researched are gene editing and cellular immunology. Gene editing, using a method called CRISPR, can edit the human genome and correct genetic mutations. The CRISPR process is analogous to using a word editor to correct spelling mistakes in a document. If this technology can be developed safely, it could eliminate many genetic-driven diseases including many forms of cancers, familial forms of neurodegenerative diseases (Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s disease), hemophilia, Tay-Sachs, cystic fibrosis and several forms of heart disease. In fact, all of the 6,000 genetic mutations that cause human diseases are candidates for gene editing using CRISPR. Not only can CRISPR be applied to curing genetic diseases, but it is being examined as a method to create mosquitos that harbor malaria, a parasitic disease that infected over 200 million people and killed an estimated 438,000 people in 2015.⁴³

³⁹ Jeremiah 17:14.

⁴⁰ Rabbi Shimon Schwab, *Rav Schwab on Prayer* (Mesorah Publishing: New York, 2001), p. 454ff. In addition, the *psbat* of Jeremiah 17:14 is evoking a spiritual healing, not a physical healing.

⁴¹ A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh.

⁴² Cast away from you all your transgressions, wherein ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit; for why will ye die, O House of Israel.

⁴³ <<http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/malaria/en/>>.

The other exciting medical technology that has multiple medical applications is cellular immunotherapy. Cellular immunotherapy has interesting origins. In 1891, William B. Coley recognized that certain cancer patients who survived bacterial infections also survived their cancer. Thus, he injected heat-killed bacteria into a patient with an inoperable cancer. The patient survived the cancer and Dr. Coley demonstrated one of the first examples of immunotherapy. Over the next forty years, Dr. Coley reported excellent results using this therapeutic approach, especially in bone and soft-tissue sarcomas causing regression of the majority of tumors, with some cancers eliminated entirely. Currently, scientists are applying genetic engineering techniques to develop even better cancer-curing bacteria.⁴⁴ In addition, new understanding in cellular immunity is leading scientists to develop an effective method to cure mice of colorectal and prostatic cancers that will hopefully be successful in humans.⁴⁵

Another dimension to cellular immunology is the push to develop vaccines to treat cancers and even Alzheimer's disease. Glioblastoma in young people, for example, is almost always fatal within months after diagnosis. In one recent study,⁴⁶ physicians were reviewing all their patients who were diagnosed with this cancer and discovered several patients who were disease-free and continued to live disease-free 7–9 years after diagnosis. Careful review of their medical records indicated that these individuals had cut themselves with a rusty nail right after the diagnosis and required a vaccine to prevent contracting tetanus from their cuts. This led the physicians to speculate that the vaccination against tetanus also stimulated their immune systems and triggered the appropriate immune T-cells to destroy the glioblastoma. Preliminary evidence now supports the use of tetanus vaccine to help patients fight

⁴⁴ Frahm, Michael, Sebastian Felgner, Dino Kocijancic, Manfred Rohde, Michael Hensel, Roy Curtiss, Marc Erhardt, and Siegfried Weiss. "Efficiency of conditionally attenuated *Salmonella enterica* serovar Typhimurium in bacterium-mediated tumor therapy," *mBio* 6, no. 2 (2015): e00254–15.

⁴⁵ Shalpour, Shabnam, Joan Font-Burgada, Giuseppe Di Caro, Zhenyu Zhong, Elsa Sanchez-Lopez, Debanjan Dhar, Gerald Willimsky *et al.*, "Immunosuppressive plasma cells impede T-cell-dependent immunogenic chemotherapy," *Nature* 521, no. 7550 (2015): 94–98.

⁴⁶ Mitchell, Duane A., *et al.*, "Tetanus toxoid and CCL3 improve dendritic cell vaccines in mice and glioblastoma patients," *Nature* 519.7543 (2015): 366–369.

cancer. Moreover, genetically engineered poliovirus and herpes virus are being investigated as new anti-cancer agents.⁴⁷

These new scientific discoveries may be relevant to the case presented at the beginning of our article. According to Rambam, Reuven's parents should not have prayed for a supernatural medical miracle. Rather they should have asked G-d to grant them, their physicians, scientists or the people doing research in the pharmaceutical industry the capacity and direction to make new discoveries that may help Reuven. Assuming that Reuven's immune system was capable of responding, his medical outcome may have been different if somehow G-d would have helped the physicians decide to give him a tetanus vaccine during chemotherapy.

Conclusions

From a Jewish religious perspective, prayer can, in many instances, impact the medical recovery or sufferings of a patient. "And Yitzchak prayed for his wife because she was barren and Hashem answered him and Rivkah his wife conceived."⁴⁸ This passage is the first instance in which the Torah explicitly illustrates the medical efficacy of prayer in asking Hashem to have children.

Often we do not know how or when prayer is effective. One lesson described by our Sages⁴⁹ is that the Divine response to any plea is dependent on his or her relationship (*emunah* and *bitachon*) with G-d.⁵⁰ While G-d listens to all our prayers, sometimes His response to our prayers is that they will not be answered in the way we want. Nonetheless, G-d seeks the prayers of His people to establish a relationship with Him.

⁴⁷ <<http://www.cancer.duke.edu/btc/modules/Research3/index.php?id=41>>; <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2015/05/26/scientists-are-using-herpes-to-treat-skin-cancer-and-its-working/>>.

⁴⁸ Genesis 25:21. Yitzchak's prayer appears to be more explicit than Avraham's request to have children. See Rashi's Commentary on Genesis 16:5.

⁴⁹ See Responsa of the Rashba #413.

⁵⁰ *Rosh Hashanah* 29a. It was the faith of *Bnei Yisrael* that secured the healing power of the fiery snake that Moshe made in the desert. This applies to all things in life, and not just to *parnassah*. The Chovot HaLevavot writes (in "*Shaar HaBitachon*," chapter 4) that when a person falls ill, he should take all the necessary steps to regain his health — visiting doctors, taking medication, and so on — but he must remember throughout the process that the doctors, procedures and medications are not what will cure him; his health depends solely on the Will of Hashem. And when a person truly relies on Hashem, and is fully aware when he visits the doctor that the doctor is only G-d's messenger, then Hashem will heal him with just His Word (*Tebillim* 107:20 — "He sent His word, and healed them").

This concept is one moral lesson learned from Moshe as the *Midrash* describes his pleas to enter the land of Israel. The *Midrash (Devarim Rabbah, V'zos HaBerachah 11)* writes that Moshe prayed 515 prayers, which is the equivalent of the numerical value of *Va'eschanan*. Moshe did not simply repeat his requests; each time he prayed he redefined his relationship with G-d. After each prayer, Moshe transformed himself into a new person, not asking G-d to retract His answer but rather to respond to a different person making this request. Some commentaries claim that, in fact, G-d did not “change His Mind” but rather responded positively to a transformed Moshe and allowed Moshe to climb the mount to see the Land and the future of his people. *Tefillah* has the power to transform a person.

The language of our prayers for *daas*, health and *refuah* provide important conceptual insights into how we should pray and what we ask of G-d and of ourselves to maintain good health, prevent illness, and effect appropriate medical and spiritual actions to treat or manage our illnesses. We rely on our *bitachon* that G-d can communicate with each of us to provide us with the correct medical knowledge or to enable us to meet the appropriate knowledgeable physicians to treat our conditions.⁵¹



⁵¹ “Rav Yehudah ben Rav Chiyya remarked: Come and see how the characteristic of man differs from that of the Holy One, blessed be He. The characteristic of mortals, when a man administers a drug to a fellow, it may be beneficial to one individual but injurious to another, but with the Holy One, blessed be He, it is not so. He gave a Torah to Israel and it is an elixir of life for all his body, as it is said: ‘And healing to all his flesh’ (Prov. 4:22)” (*Erwin 54a*).