Within Tanach, there are several examples in which podiatry and podiatric problems are mentioned. These instances include Esav clutching Yaakov’s heel, Mefiboshet, the son of Shaul, being lame and King Asa suffering from a mysterious ailment in his legs. Although the Navi does not elaborate on the nature of King Asa’s disease, historians and contemporary physicians have asserted that King Asa suffered from gout, a painful disease which is similar to arthritis.

Gout was clinically described only recently. It was first explained in the seventeenth century by Thomas Sydenham in his work entitled, “Tractatus de Podagra et Hydrope” [1]. Only in the second part of the nineteenth century was it discovered that crystals of monosodium urate were observed to be present during a gout attack. Finally in the 1960s were the crystals determined to be the cause of the attack [2].

Surprisingly, gout may also have existed in Biblical times. When examining the description of King Asa of Judah’s ailment in his legs, the disease described bears a striking resemblance to modern day gout. King Asa (915-875 BCE) led the Jewish people for forty peaceful years. In I Kings 15:23, there is a description of the end of Asa’s rulership:

“Now the rest of all the acts of Asa and all that he did and the cities which he built, are they not written in the book of chronicles of the Kings of Judah? But in the time of his old age, he was diseased in his feet.”

Another source for King Asa’s podiatric disease is found in 2 Chronicles 16:12:

“And in the thirty ninth year of his reign, Asa became diseased in his feet his disease was exceedingly great.”

The Babylonian Talmud comments in two places about King Asa’s ailment (Sanhedrin 48b and Sotah 10a). There, Rav Yehudah quoting Rav states that Asa was afflicted with podagra. Mar Zutra, the son of Rav Nachman states the condition is similar to “a needle in the raw flesh.” The Gemorah asks the question of how Mar Zutra knew how the disease feels. We are given three explanations accounting for Mar Zutra’s knowledge and they include either he himself suffered from it, he received a tradition from a teacher, or he knew it by Divine revelation. The phrase ‘like a needle in the raw flesh” is found in other places in the Talmud (Berakhoth 18b; Shabbat 13b; 152a).

Another relevant source on gout is found in the Mishna in Shabbat 6:6, which states, “One may not go out (on the Shabbat) with a sela upon a zinit.” The sela was known as a silver coin that was used as a cure for foot ailments. The Babylonian Talmud translates zinit as a corn or a bunion (Shabbat 65a) while the Jerusalem Talmud translates it as a podagra, (Shabbat 6:8:22) Rav Yehudah’s translation of King Asa’s illness [1].

Mar Zutra, the son of Rav Nachman, states the condition is similar to “a needle in the raw flesh.”

Recently, there has been significant doubt raised as to whether King Asa’s illness was in actuality gout. The historians DeVries and Weinberer state that because the evidence that the illness was really gout is tenuous, King Asa more likely suffered from peripheral obstructive vascular disease with ensuing gangrene. This disease is commonly found in elderly males with symptoms of discomfort in the legs when the individual is walking, which is generally expressed as pain and numbness or fatigue in the claves, below the obstructed arteries. These historians believe that this is more likely to be the cause of King Asa’s ailment, because he became ill only at an advanced age and suffered from an ailment in his legs. However, Dr. Fred Rosner asserts that King Asa most likely did suffer from gout since clinical gout may occur at an old age and because King Asa died two years after he contracted his foot ailment, demonstrating that the disease is not life threatening [3].

Although it is impossible to ascertain whether King Asa’s ailment in his legs was definitely caused by gout, the description in the Navi with the supporting evidence in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds substantiates the understanding that King Asa most likely suffered from gout. However, many scholars assert that without stronger evidence supporting the gout possibility, it is impossible to eliminate other possible diseases.
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