Epilepsy in the Talmud

For centuries, the human brain lay largely beyond the reach of science, but new tools and techniques have enabled a neuroscientific revolution. Several neurological diseases are mentioned in ancient literature. For instance, epilepsy is a neurological disorder that has been described in most of the world’s major religions. The Talmud notes some religious legal (halachic) issues that might arise from medical conditions or practices, but comprises very few detailed clinical descriptions of diseases. In fact, there is no specific medical fit of the epileptic in the Talmud, yet the legal status of epileptic cases is discussed, and some eminent figures, such as King Saul, are thought to have experienced epileptic seizures. However, before exploring these references and interpretations, we will examine the current scientific definition of epilepsy and attempt to explain how numerous disorders described in the Talmud, according to their symptoms, may be correlated to epilepsy.

Epilepsy remained for many centuries closely linked to demonology, in both ancient Jewish and non-Jewish sources. However, as Hippocrates vehemently argued, epilepsy is definitively not a sacred disease, but rather a natural disease with neurological causes (i.e., an excess of phlegm rushing into the blood of the brain). Epilepsy is defined as a recurrent neurological disorder characterized by sudden, brief attacks that may alter motor activity, consciousness, or sensory experiences. Some attacks are preceded by an aura with complex hallucinations or sensory illusions. Convulsive seizures are the most common type of paroxysmal event, but any current seizure pattern is considered epilepsy. In some cases, a brain tumor, an infection of the central nervous system, a cerebral trauma, or a congenital defect may be responsible. However, in the majority of cases, no pathologic basis for the seizure is evident (idiopathic epilepsy).

During the time of the Talmud, the Jews referred to an epileptic person as a nikpah, meaning “one who writhe,” perhaps also “one who is bent or forced over (by the demons, nephilim).” The Hebrew nikhpe (from the noun kefiah) has actually the same meaning as the original Greek term epilambano, to seize, to attack. Later the term holi nophel was used, being an equivalent to the Latin morbus caducus, the so-called “falling sickness.”1 Maimonides draws a compari-
son between epilepsy and several syndromes described in the Talmud, where the patient is “sometimes in full conscience, sometimes like insane” (Terumot 1:3; Rosh Hashana 28a). It was assumed that the disease could possibly be induced by the froth that appears during the attack, which would render the patient’s breath dangerous. We find in the Talmud some hints of this approach, not directly directed to nikhpe, but with another, controversial, syndrome called ra’atan.

Other syndromes are related to epilepsy, such as kordikos (perhaps delirium tremens), bulmos (bulimia), dalaria (possibly delirium), and ruah qezara (also interpreted as asthma). All these syndromes have in common a psychic condition leading to confusion or even unconsciousness. In the Talmudic description of the organic brain syndrome kordikos, the victim falls suddenly into a state of mental confusion and dizziness. Maimonides commented that the patient experiences an epileptic seizure accompanied by “confusion of the senses,” and attributed the symptoms to a filling of the chambers of the brain (Gittin 67b, 70b).

Maimonides called kordikos a form of epilepsy and considered the patient to be delirious even after the seizure occurred. The clinical fact that epileptic seizures are often a part of delirium may provide the explanation for his comments on kordikos.

Talmudists considered epilepsy a serious disease which may be hereditary and contagious. Genetic and eugenic aspects are mentioned: “a man should not marry a woman coming from a family of epileptics” (Yebamot 64b). An epileptic is unsuited to serve in the Temple all the time, “even if it occurs only once in days” (Bekhorot 44b), and concealed epilepsy by a woman may be grounds for divorce. Maimonides lists lunatics, which means not only insane persons but also epileptics, among ten categories of people who are incompetent to attest or to testify (Yad, Edut 9:9-10). Maimonides remarked that there are epileptics whose minds are deranged even when they have no attacks and, thus, the validity of testimony should be checked by the court with the utmost thoroughness (Mishneh Torah, Edut 9:9). These discussions in the Talmud suggest a disorder that persists beyond an episode of disturbed consciousness, even if the epileptic patient is considered normal most of the time, but insane, i.e., irresponsible, at given times. Curiously, indecent behavior during cohabitation is often stated to be a cause of epilepsy. The relationship between epilepsy and coition was common in ancient medical literature, and eminent authors such as Democritus, Hippocrates, and Aretas considered coition as an equivalent to a slight epileptic attack.

The Midianite priest and prophet Balaam called himself “fallen down (nophel) with open eyes” (Numbers 24:16). Rosner asserts that the term “fallen down” is the designation of epileptic, and thus Balaam might have been epileptic. The term vayipol is used in relation to Saul after he became manic: “and he fell down the entire day and the entire night” (1 Samuel 19:24), that is, he had frequent epileptic seizures. Therefore, the evil spirit, ruah ra’ah, mentioned in the passage: “the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him,” (1 Samuel 18:10) may refer to epilepsy. According to Preuss, King Saul was a complicated psychiatric case and probably not a status epilepticus.

The clinical picture, etiology and diagnosis of epilepsy are still to be elucidated by scientific progress. Epilepsy was of great concern in antiquity and today it affects approximately 0.5% of the American popu-
lation. The causes of recurrent epileptic seizures cover such a wide range as trauma, tumors, congenital, metabolic, vascular, degenerative, and infectious diseases. The International League Against Epilepsy has classified seizures and the current imaging technology applied on brain damage allows more clinical findings. Talmudist commentaries raised the supernatural aspect of this disorder and many symptoms described in the Talmud relate to the current clinical examination of epileptic cases. Because medical practice was not the object of the Talmudists' intellectual efforts, epilepsy has mainly been considered in its legal implications. The legalistic relationship of epileptic seizures with insanity may help us understand chazat's consideration of King Saul as a tzadik, despite his injustices toward David.

Sarah Wizman, a senior at Stern College, is a Biology major.

NOTES