The typical Jewish mother in mid-twentieth century America is thought to have been inordinately proud when she was able to introduce her child as “my son, the doctor.” Of all the white-collar professions, why has medicine become so esteemed by Jews? Did this outlook on medicine change over time, or was the field always respected? When looking back through Jewish history, one finds that as a nation, not only have Jews always valued the medical field, they have also contributed greatly to its development.

When exploring the Jewish outlook on any subject, one must first refer to the Torah, the primary and ultimate source of all legal and ethical views in Judaism. When seeking the Torah’s view of medicine, one must first turn to what is probably the most widely referenced passage relating to this subject, which is found in Exodus (21:19), “virapo yirapey - and he shall cause him to be thoroughly healed.” According to Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, this passage means that one who causes bodily harm to another person is required to pay the physician’s fees necessary to heal the victim. This indicates that the Torah must generally require one who is ill to utilize available medical services. Otherwise, the Torah would not assume that a victim will seek medical help for which the “attacker” would be obligated to pay [1].

As is always the case when following the path of the development of Jewish law and belief, one must next turn to the Talmud for its interpretations and comments on the Torah and general Jewish thought. When exploring the Talmud’s references to medicine, numerous sources regarding the medical field and its practitioners are noted. One significant incident mentioned in the Talmud (Shabbos 82a) occurred when Rav Huna encouraged his son, Rabbah, to study under the tutelage of Rav Chisda, who was known for inserting health tips into his Torah lectures. Though Rabbah was very reluctant at first, eventually he became so enamored by Rav Chisda’s style that he too began commenting on various aspects of medical science (Gittin 69a). [2]

The next stage in the development of Jewish law and belief is the commentaries on the Torah and Talmud by Jewish scholars who lived in approximately the eleventh to sixteenth centuries. Perhaps the most famous Jewish scholar and physician, even among non-Jews, was Maimonides. In his commentary to the Mishna, Maimonides interprets the commandment written in Deuteronomy 22:1 obligating the return of lost objects to their owners as referring to health as well as physical property [3]. When a physician helps heal a patient, the physician is returning the “lost” health to its “owner,” the ill person.

What is often viewed as the final stop on the journey towards practical applications of the Torah and Talmud is the more recent category of scholars who have codified the laws contained in these works and their details in separate texts. It is safe to say that the Shulchan Aruch is the one such text to which all others turn when researching a particular topic. The Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 336) declares that not only did the Torah give permission for the physician to heal, but it is his/her religious obligation to do so. The Shulchan Aruch includes the act of healing in the commandment to save an endangered life. Because Judaism values each moment of life, saving a life overrides many other commandments [4]. Therefore, a physician is constantly performing acts which are considered meritorious in Judaism.

In order to properly understand the manner in which Jewish law views medicine, one must trace its attitude towards medicine throughout Jewish history. This is achieved by starting with the original source in Torah, and then tracing it through the Talmud, the earlier commentaries from the first half of the second millennium and to the later compilers of practical Jewish law in the latter half of the second millennium. When doing so, one encounters an overwhelmingly positive outlook on the field and practice of medicine. As healing the ill and saving a life is greatly valued, it is easy to understand the pride of a Jewish parent when a child has devoted his or her life to medicine.

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Bibliography