Gastrointestinal Ailments of Priests

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During the time of the Second Beit Hamikdash many sacrifices and rituals took place on a daily basis. Jewish priests (kohanim) played a big role in these procedures, supervising the sacrifices of different types of cattle or birds, and consuming parts of the animals for food. Although it was an honor to serve in the Temple, two factors caused digestive ailments. First, as a result of continuously eating burned or, perhaps, ill-properly handled meats, many priests developed gastrointestinal illnesses and needed medical treatment. Second, in addition to the large amount of meat ingested, the manner and time frame in which it was consumed manifested as certain diseases. For instance, the priests were required to boil or roast the meat on the same day the sacrifice was completed, and precisely in the Temple courtyard. These constraints often led to difficulties in the digestion of the food.

The Talmud elaborates on the reason as to why these intestinal issues arose so severely. Due to the harsh working conditions of their job, the kohanim’s immune systems were weakened. The priests were not permitted to wear footwear while in the Temple area, causing cold feet from walking on the stone floor. The 12th century rabbi and physician, Maimonides, adds that only four garments were worn by the priests during a ritual service, of which only the light coat provided them some warmth and protection, and thus, their systems were weak and their organs suffered [1].

In response to these issues, during the Second Temple, Ben Achiya, a special official, was put in charge of treating these health cases experienced by the priests. He was adept at herbal medicine and the health benefits that some wines provided to the digestive tract. The Talmud (Berachoth 51a) suggests that aged wine is beneficial for the bowels, as opposed to fresh wine which causes intestinal difficulties [1, 4]. A plausible reason for the positive effects provided by aged wine is its ethanol content, which is low enough dosage to stimulate gastric secretions. Fresh wine, however, can inhibit these secretions and even irritate the gastric mucosa. Additionally, the purple pigments, or anthocyanins, in wine have antiseptic activity towards pathogenic microorganisms, which is why wine is commonly used to treat infections. Although consumption of such wines would have aided the digestive processes, the priests were forbidden to drink wine on Temple grounds during their Temple worship, Arodah (Vayikra 10:9). Thus, while performing their duties, their only beverage was water [1, 2]. Therefore, Ben Achiya must have treated these men at a location outside the Temple [1, 3, 4].

The natural question bothering many sources is why eating the meat would cause digestive harm and suffering if the priests were following the commandments and performing mitzvot. This seems to contradict the verse in Kebel (8:5) which states, “Shomer Motzah Lo Yeda Dvar Ra” – “He who performs a mitzvah will know no harm.” The Kuntrus Divrei Torah explains that perhaps the meat from the Korbanot only caused pain and illness when the priests did not eat it with pure intentions. Similarly, the Talmud (Pesachim 8b) implies that when one does a mitzvah for his own personal benefit and intention, the protection principle does not apply [2].

Although the Talmud clarifies this case, it does not specify the gastrointestinal ailments these men suffered. Current medical research indicates that ingestion of undercooked meat can lead to infectious diarrhea, caused by Campylobacter enteritis, and shigellosis. C. enteritis is a bacterial pathogen known to cause diarrhea and to be associated with meat, often proving to be an infectious agent in digestive illnesses. A study in Tanzania by Komba et al. reviewed research articles on the mechanism through which these bacterial pathogens cause diarrhea [5]. Although the research is still in its early stages, it is known that bacterial pathogens are the leading causes of enteritis in developing and newly developed countries. Interestingly, the bacteria grow in various animals without harming their hosts, yet humans are infected through direct contact with the animal host or consumption of the contaminated meat. These infections have a stronger link to meat that is raw, undercooked, or barbecued [5, 7].

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention explains that campylobacteriosis manifest as diarrhea, cramping, abdominal pain, and fever after exposure to the bacterium. In individuals with a weakened immune system, such as the priests, Campylobacter can migrate to the bloodstream and cause serious life-threatening infections. This organism is isolated more commonly in men than in women. The bacterial species that often causes campylobacteriosis in humans is Campylobacter jejuni, spiral-shaped bacterium that grows best at 37°C to 42°C, the body temperature of birds. Birds often carry the disease without themselves becoming ill. It is no wonder that the priests during the Second Temple could have been sick with this type of infection. With their weakened immune system and direct exposure to and consumption of large quantities of birds and cattle, the priests could have easily been infected and may have developed severe illnesses [6].

The prescribed remedy for treating chol meaning (Sotah 42b), intestinal illness, which include diarrhea with fever, is drinking a lot of water, specifically “one cupful per loaf of bread or other food,” rubbing the abdomen with oil and wine, and applying warm towels to the abdomen. For internal medications, the Talmud prescribes 70 year old apple wine, very old grape juice, fresh chamomile cooked in water as an astringent, and dried chamomile for a
purgative purpose. The Talmud (Sotah 39a) also suggests paying close attention to the food eaten. For example, leek is good for the intestines and should be swallowed, and a broth of mangold is good for the stomach and intestines. The same benefits are found in cabbage sprouts wine, and one glass of it should be taken early in the morning on an empty stomach [3].

In retrospect, the fact that the Talmud was able to provide explanations, as well as treatments, to these types of diseases is itself a miracle from G-d. As we know nowadays, digestive illnesses are among the hardest to identify and treat. Scholars of that time had no way of seeing inside the digestive tract to know what the cause of the pain was. The knowledge they possessed to cure these ailments allowed the priests to serve G-d and the entire community better. Perhaps the phrase from Koheles is correct; doing good deeds commanded to us by G-d can serve as a protection against suffering.

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank Dr. Babich for his help with this article as well as my parents and twin sister for supporting my education and for the endless guidance in my life.

References


