

# THE JEW and HEALTH

(A Symposium)

THE JEWISH PHYSICIAN THROUGHOUT THE AGES

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THE JEW AND DIET

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THE JEW AND PUBLIC HEALTH

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*Dr. Max Gerson* attended the Breslau and other universities. Following his clinical research in tuberculosis, he was called, in 1924, to the Clinic of Munich University, in which city the Bavarian Government arranged a department for his treatment of tubercular diseases by means of a diet experimentally developed, and in 1930, he was appointed by the Prussian Government a member of the State Board of Health. Before leaving Germany in 1933, he lectured in various European countries, and in 1936 left for America, where he received his medical license in 1938.

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# The Jew and Diet

• By **MAX GERSON, M. D.**

**A** SURVEY of the literature of the Jewish people for thousands of years on what the Jewish physician accomplished particularly in the field of diet, will reveal not very much except the gigantic contribution of the laws of nutrition, expressed in clear language in the Bible. There one of the most difficult problems is solved, in a simple way still to be admired today.

The culture of the Jews was influenced by the culture and science of the old neighboring peoples, mostly the Egyptians and Babylonians, starting with the Twelfth Century B. C., though later Greek and Roman physicians were in the lead, They led in medical science and were the great teachers of the medical schools situated all about the Mediterranean Sea.

When Cyrus (538 B. C.), the great humanitarian emperor of Persia, gave permission for the return of the Jews from captivity in Babylonia to Jerusalem, only 42,000 families, (or 200,000 out of the two million), made the journey, In Babylonia and Persia we find Jewish physicians as teachers of high schools and universities and, during the, first centuries of the Christian era, the rectors of the universities were Rabbis and at the same time physicians, teaching about nutrition, diet, conservation of health, and life extension, using the experiences of the old Indian and Egyptian priests. At that, time beer brewed with barley was the most popular drink—a kind of nourishment. These Rabbis taught the art of brewery in Babylon, a practice understandable only when we know the importance of the beer problem of that time—and, in addition, it was very profitable, too. (Literature on the subject is compiled in a special book by E. Huber “Beer and Preparation of Beer by the Old Hebrews,” Berlin, 1927.) The names of some of these rectors, Rabbi Huna ( -275). Rabbi Hisda ( -299), and Rabbi Papa ( -359 C.E.), appear in Professor Hintze’s “History of Nutrition,” (Leipzig, 1934).

Before the deluge, it appears that the human beings were vegetarians. The habit of eating meat came later, and several explanations are given for it. The common meal played an important role, It was a kind of intimate community, all partners and participants were sacrosanct, all alliances and the highest obligations were made at such a common meal. At festivities and Sabbaths, meat and wine were prepared and a special kind of bread made of wheat rather than barley. The common man ate barley bread daily, with vegetables and fruit as his average meal.

Dr. Prausz, in his work “The Jewish Physician in the Talmud,” (Berlin, 1930) and other commentators state that the animals which were consecrated to other gods or were mostly eaten by strange people, were forbidden in the Bible. They think that the prohibition of certain animals is referred to this motive and that therefore the use of their meat was supposed to make the Jewish people impure in soul and body. These authors think that hygienic reasons did not account for the prohibitions, but rather the intention to separate the Jewish people in habits and customs from those surrounding them,

Maimonides (1135 C.E.) the excellent Aristotelian commentator, and many Rabbis believed that this doctrine had hygienic causes. These, however, are only philosophical assumptions corresponding to the knowledge and philosophy of that time. The Bible itself does not give any reasons for these laws of nutrition, only the remark “These are the laws of your God ...”

At that time there were no laboratories, no chemistry, no bacteriology, no hospitals, no animal experiments, no fundamentals of physiology. Therefore, everything had to be based upon keen observation and experience through generations. In this respect, the laws of nutrition in the Bible are the highest achievement, clearly and simply admonishing people to moderation, precaution and cleanliness of body and purity of soul. Many expressions are replete with beauty and poetry, such as, “Lo tevashel gedi bahalev imo,” ‘do not boil the calf in her mother’s milk,’ thus ennobling our sentiments.

Many dietetic prescriptions of the Jewish Bible were general rules of health, probably thus put together for memory, such as, the use of ten things makes the sickness worse: beef, fat meat, fried meat, fowl, fried eggs, water cress, milk, cheese, haircuts, steam baths,

Six things cure: cabbage, beets, chamomile, rennet stomach, womb, liver, also young fish.

I repeat, the essentials in the nutrition of the common man in Egypt, Palestine and Babylonia were vegetables, fruits, salads, bread. Meat and fish were reserved for Sabbaths and holidays. They used to drink water, fruit juices and beer. Wine on holidays only. I shall not enumerate the vegetables, salads and fruits they used, as we do not know exactly all of them today.

In the Ten Commandments, there is a reference to “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them. ...” It seems that they knew the laws of heredity

through generations as they knew that some deficiencies in plants and animals could produce degeneration in succeeding generations. One of the decisive experiments in that field was made by Professor Fisher (Wurzburg), who could prove that food lacking in iron given to a litter of mice brought about no disturbance in the second, third and fourth generations; the fifth and sixth generations, however, showed all kinds of secondary anemia and the worst degenerate malignancies and blood diseases of the red and white cells. The authors of the Talmud, furthermore, knew that excessive and extravagant living, debaucheries and over-indulgence in wine and liquors produced sickness and degeneration among the children and children's children.

The classical book about dietetics of the Middle Ages was written by Isaak ben Salomon Israeli, who lived in Egypt about 850 C.E. In Oxford and other medieval universities, his book on fever was included in the medical curriculum. A counterbook was written by Petrus Hispanus, later Pope John XXI. When the Popes worried about their own person or their own diet, they preferred to take Jewish physicians, as they were of the opinion that Jewish medicine and specially the Jewish diet was superior to the Italian diet of that time, with its excess of condiments, salt and meat. In the Middle Ages, and even centuries later, it was the general custom of the rich people to eat great quantities of meat and to drink heavy wine and a variety of liquors. The Jewish physicians, following the doctrine of the Bible and the Talmud, in the main, were dieticians and propagandists for moderation in meat and alcohol. This doctrine gave them a great number of laws of cleanliness, moderation and prescriptions on how to live a healthy life and to increase health and to live long.

The above-mentioned author can be designated as the leading dietician from the Ninth Century to the Twelfth. The founder of his great reputation seems to have been the khalif Zladet Hubai, who sent him 500 gold pieces and invited him to his residence in Kairuwan. At the court of the khalif, he met many competitors, especially Greek physicians, but he surpassed them all, including the Greek jester, Hubaish, with his great knowledge of diet and medicine. There were also a half dozen Jewish body physicians and about two dozen Jewish physicians of the Spanish and French kings, the khalifs and the Persian shahs and Arabian sheiks. But it must be mentioned that the famous doctrine of the great Hippocrates (400 B.C.) laid the groundwork for diets to be used as essential medication in acute and chronic diseases. I think that some of them should be used more often in our time. The second great physician in later centuries was Galen (130 to 200 C.E.), leading the medical schools for centuries up to the Middle Ages. In Rome he was the physician of Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Needless to say that these latter two were not Jewish physicians, but they deserve the greatest credit for developing the dietetic treatment in their time.