

## Pigeons as a remedy (*segulah*) for jaundice

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**A popular treatment** for jaundice in Israel (and elsewhere) is to place a pigeon on the navel of the patient to "transfer" the jaundice to the pigeon, so that the pigeon will die and the patient will recover. Sometimes more than one pigeon is required.

This type of remedy is called a *segulah* or nostrum, a form of medical treatment that has no rational or scientific basis but is nevertheless sometimes efficacious. It is not a folk remedy in the usual sense of that term. A *segulah* is an alternative or unconventional medical therapy, having a place in traditional Jewish practice alongside traditional scientific medicine. Elsewhere, I have written that Judaism sanctions alternative therapies such as prayers, faith healing, amulets, incantations and their like, when used as a supplement to traditional medical therapy.<sup>1</sup>

The present essay probes the source for the pigeon remedy (*segulah*) to treat jaundice, cites other treatments for jaundice in classic Jewish sources, briefly discusses pigeons in the Bible and the Talmud, and expounds on the concept of "transference" of illness and sin from a human being to a non-human species.

### PIGEONS IN THE BIBLE AND THE TALMUD

In this discussion, the term pigeon, dove, and turtledove are used interchangeably. Doves and turtledoves are found in abundance in Israel where many varieties live, especially near Lake Tiberias. In this latter area, they are so abundant that several valleys are known as The Valley of Pigeons.<sup>2</sup> The dove is first mentioned in the Bible in connection with the story of the Flood,<sup>3</sup> where it is considered a symbol of peace because it brought back an olive leaf to Noah's Ark. Abraham used a dove when he made a covenant with the Lord.<sup>4</sup> Doves were used as a general purification offering.<sup>5</sup> The dove was brought as an offering by the poor<sup>6</sup> and by the Nazarite.<sup>7</sup>

Doves are monogamous, the female following the male.<sup>8</sup> At nesting time, the male coos.<sup>9</sup> The dove builds its nest in the clefts of precipitous rocks inaccessible to birds and animals of prey.<sup>10</sup> The Talmud mentions about ten varieties of doves and raising pigeons was probably popular in talmudic times. To race pigeons was forbidden, and bettors on pigeon races were unfit as witnesses in legal proceedings.<sup>11</sup> The Talmud refers to the catching of wild pigeons in nets.<sup>12</sup> The loft dove is a wild variety of pigeon found under the eaves of houses in Jerusalem, whereas the cote dove is bred.<sup>13</sup> The state of young doves' development was considered in intercalating the year.<sup>14</sup>

The Sages consider the dove to be persecuted like the Jews.<sup>15</sup> The dove symbolizes marital felicity,<sup>16</sup> as well as beauty, purity, and innocence.<sup>17</sup>

Pliny reports the use of pigeons by ancient navigators who released them when the ship lost its course. The captain would follow their flight direction to seek land.<sup>2</sup> Medieval Jewish poets such as Moses Ibn Ezra, Abraham Ibn Ezra, and Judah Halevi represent the Jewish people as a lovely turtledove longing for her lover.<sup>18</sup>

Moses Maimonides stated that turtledoves increase memory, improve intellect, and sharpen the senses. Pigeon eggs are good aphrodisiacs, and house pigeons increase natural body heat. On the negative side, young pigeons may produce migraine headaches.<sup>19</sup> (Maimonides also described the therapeutic efficacy of chicken soup.)<sup>20</sup>

### USING PIGEONS TO TREAT JAUNDICE

It is not clear when or where the use of pigeons to treat jaundice originated. The book most people point out when asked for a classic rabbinic source for this remedy is *Taamey Haminhagim* ("Explanation of Customs"). This book is a collection of laws and customs of the Jewish people. The book cites sources from early rabbinic and more recent *Responsa* literatures. The book was edited by Abraham Issac Sperling-Danzig in Lvov, Poland in 1896, reprinted in Lvov in 1906 and again in New York in 1944. The most recent revised edition was published in Israel in 1982. In a paragraph entitled, "Remedy (*Seguleh*) for jaundice which is called *gehl zucht* [yellowness]," the author writes the following:<sup>21</sup>

Take a male pigeon for a male patient or a female pigeon for a female patient. Place it on the patient's navel. The pigeon will draw all the yellowness out [from the patient] and the pigeon dies. This [therapy] has been tested and is efficacious.

At the end of this brief description of the remedy, the source is cited in parentheses: a work called *Segulot Yisrael* ("Remedies of Israel"). This book, also known as *Sefer Hachayim*, ("The Book of Life") was authored by Shabtai Lifshitz and first published in Munkatch, Hungary in 1905.<sup>22</sup> The title page indicates that it is a collection of medical nostrums or remedies for spiritual and bodily healing based on a variety of books and other sources. The book was reprinted in Israel (undated) and again in Brooklyn, New York (undated) by the author's grandson, Isaiah Karpen. Section 8:2 of this work is entitled, "The Illness of Jaundice," and the following remedy is recommended:<sup>23</sup>

A tested [and efficacious] therapy and remedy for the illness of jaundice called *gele zucht* [literally: yellowness] is to take a male pigeon for a male patient and a female pigeon for a female patient. Place it on the patient's navel, and the pigeon will draw the

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yellowness out until it is finished. The pigeon dies. This [therapy] has been investigated and found to be efficacious. Another tested remedy for the aforementioned illness is for the patient to take a slice of bread and eat a little when he is actually moving his bowels. This should be done at the beginning of the illness when he observes the yellowness.

At the end of this paragraph, in parentheses, is the source citation: *Divrei Yitzchak* ("The Words of Isaac"). This work was authored by Yitzchak Isaac Weiss and was published in 1896 in Munkatch, Hungary. Remedy 130 on page 33 of that book states as follows:<sup>24</sup>

I received word of a tested [and efficacious] remedy for the illness of jaundice called *gele zucht* and that is to take a male pigeon for a male patient and a female pigeon for a female patient. Place it on the patient's navel, and the pigeon will draw out all the yellowness therein until it is finished. The pigeon will die. This [remedy] has been tested and found to be efficacious.

There is no source indicated at the end of the paragraph suggesting that this book is the original rabbinic source for the pigeon therapy to cure jaundice. The title page of this book indicates that the remedies and therapies described therein were gathered from earlier holy and pious rabbis but the latter are not identified.

This pigeon therapy for jaundice is widely used in Israel and to a lesser extent in the United States and elsewhere. It is usually performed by non-physicians. Although most patients with hepatitis and jaundice recover spontaneously over several weeks time, the reported rapid recovery after the pigeon therapy suggests an additional effect. It is unclear why the pigeons die. Perhaps, they are held so tightly to the patient's abdomen that they suffocate. The pigeons do not become jaundiced, although they are supposed to absorb the patient's yellowness by transference. One reliable observer witnessed pigeon treatments applied to six patients with jaundice. All six patients survived, but the pigeons only died in two cases. Autopsies on the pigeons revealed ruptured spleens in both cases (personal communication from Rabbi M. D. Tendler, November 21, 1990). In another instance where a physician tried the pigeon therapy for a patient in hepatic coma, both patient and pigeon died (Personal communication from Rabbi A. Soloveitchik, November 23, 1990). Thus, the pigeon therapy is not always successful.

This unusual treatment relies to a considerable extent on the faith and belief of the patient and the practitioner. The scientific community, including the medical profession, tends to dismiss such healing as quackery. To true believers in nostrums, the explanation is simple—it is a miracle by divine intervention, perhaps associated with fervent prayers by the patient and others for recovery and cure from the illness.

A similar but earlier-described remedy for jaundice is the placement of live fish under the soles of patients suffering from jaundice or similar ailment. This remedy is cited by Shimshon Morpurgo in his book of *Responsa* published in Venice in 1743,<sup>25</sup> although the responsum in question was written in 1716. The question posed to the Rabbi was whether or not a patient with *hydrakon* (dropsy, ascites, or anasarca) is allowed to eat non-kosher snake meat as a remedy. This remedy was recommended by an expert physician because the patient failed to respond to all the standard therapies. Flesh of snakes was supposed to prolong life and was recommended already by Galen.<sup>26</sup> The Rabbi answered that since snake meat consumption is not a scientifically proven medical therapy, it is categorized as a

nostrum or *segulah* and is therefore not permissible, since snake meat is not kosher. He defines standard medical treatments as those whose efficacy is known and predictable and are accepted and used by expert physicians. He contrasts such therapies with nostrums and amulets whose efficacy is not scientifically provable. This Rabbi was also a practicing physician and, in his responsum, points out that many remedies are used for many illnesses, but their efficacy depends not only on their scientific rationale, but also on the constitution of the patient and the circumstances of the time and place of the illness. He cites numerous examples of nostrums from classic Jewish sources such as the Talmud and Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* and repeats the definition of a nostrum several times: a remedy which is sometimes efficacious and which has no scientific basis or rationale.

An even earlier source for the treatment of jaundice using fish to take away the patient's jaundice is found in a 16th or 17th century Hebrew manuscript in the library of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine in London.<sup>27</sup> This manuscript is a medical notebook, including remedies for "urinitis, exhaustion in children and youths, and pain in the ileum." Remedy no 6 in this manuscript is as follows:

For a person jaundiced because of illness, take a *tinga* fish, fresh and moist, tie it to the chest of the patient between the breasts, and leave it there until the *tinga* dies. Then one observes that the fish is yellow and the patient returns to the normal appearance. This [remedy has been tested (and found to be efficacious)].

Here the death of the fish can be readily explained by the fact that it cannot survive outside water. That the jaundice is transferred from the patient to the fish which then becomes jaundiced cannot be verified.

#### TRANSFERENCE TREATMENT OF OTHER ILLNESSES

Other transference of disease is mentioned already by Pliny.<sup>26(p 252, note 192)</sup> The Talmud describes a therapy for fever which is based on the transference principle.

Let one sit at the cross-roads, and when he sees a large ant carrying something, let him take and throw it into a brass tube and close it with lead, and seal it with sixty seals. Let him shake it, lift it up and say to it, "Thy burden be upon me and my burden be upon thee." But if this is impossible, let him take a new pitcher, go to the river and say to it, "O river, O river, lend me a pitcher of water for a journey that had chanced to me." Let him then turn it seven times about his head, throw it behind his back, and say to it, "O river, O river, take back the water thou givest me, for the journey that chanced to me came in its day and departed in its day!"<sup>28</sup>

Zimmels cites Tobias Hacohen's work *Maaseh Tobiah* which mentions remedies called transplantations or transferences, the value of which was greatly exaggerated by medicine men.<sup>26(p141)</sup> These remedies are all based on the principle that a body is able to transplant or transfer its nature to another, or that an illness can be transferred by grafting. One example given is that a man loses his illness when he places his excrement on a plant or seed growing in the earth, to which his illness will be transferred.

Zimmels also cites other examples of the transference of illness from the *Responsa* literature from the 17th and 19th centuries. For a child who could not sleep, old women advised the cutting of the nails of its fingers and toes and of a little of its hair which should be put into the shell of an egg and laid on a willow.<sup>29</sup> It was recommended that a man with epilepsy place his hand in the hand of a dead Gentile, saying, "Take this disease from me; it will do you no harm

but will do me good."<sup>30</sup> Zimmels also suggests that selling the disease to another person is also a form of transference.<sup>26(p 142)</sup>

### TRANSFERENCE OF SIN

The concept of transference of sin from a human being to an animal has been suggested as one of the explanations for the sacrifices offered in the Temple. The sinner is guilty of transgression for which the death penalty should be imposed.<sup>31</sup> However, as part of the repentance and atonement for the transgression, the guilt and hence the death sentence is transferred to the animal, which is then offered to G-d.

This scapegoat principle is illustrated by the law of the two goats on the Day of Atonement. The High Priest placed a lot over the he-goat for a sin offering and said, "For the Lord, a sin offering." The other goat was designated as a scapegoat and sent away. Thus, the High Priest effected atonement for himself, his family, and for all the Israelites.<sup>32</sup>

Nowadays, two annual customs performed by Orthodox Jews may illustrate the principles of transference of sin. These are the *Tashlich* ceremony, usually performed on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, and the *Kaparot* ceremony, usually performed on Yom Kippur eve.

The *Tashlich* (literally: throw away) prayers are customarily recited on the first afternoon of Rosh Hashanah at a body of water, preferably one that contains living fish. The custom began during medieval times. The opening prayer is a scriptural passage,<sup>33</sup> symbolizing hope that the Lord will dismiss the sins of the people on this day of judgment.

At the conclusion of the prayer recitation, some people cast crumbs or empty their pockets into the water perhaps symbolizing the transfer of one's sins to the fish in the water. According to at least one source,<sup>34</sup> there is an allusion to this emptying of one's pockets in the Scriptural phrase, "Also I shook out my lap and said: So G-d shake out every man from his house. . . ."<sup>35</sup>

The *Kaparot* (Atonement) ceremony is an ancient custom of taking a white rooster, for males, and a white hen, for females, on the eve of Yom Kippur and performing the *Kaparot* ritual, as follows. One takes the chicken in one's hand and recites a prayer three times.<sup>36</sup> Then one revolves the chicken around the head three times each time reciting the following phrase:<sup>37</sup>

This is my exchange, this is my substitute, this is my atonement.  
This chicken will go to its death while I will enter and go to a long life, and to peace.

Fish or money may be substituted for the fowl. Some people use a different chicken for each person, although others use a single rooster for many men and a single hen for many women. A pregnant woman customarily takes both a hen and a rooster: a hen for herself and in case she is carrying a female offspring, and a rooster in case she is carrying a male. This custom was banned by Moses Nachmanides (*Ramban*) and by Solomon ben Abraham Adret (*Rashba*) because it resembled the ways of the Amorites.<sup>34(pp183-184)</sup> Rabbi Joseph Karo, in the first edition of his *Shulchan Aruch*, calls it a foolish custom.<sup>38</sup> However, most rabbinic authorities and Orthodox Jews throughout the world participate in this ritual every Yom Kippur eve.

The custom of *Kaparot* symbolizes the scapegoat which the High Priest used to atone for the sins of the Israelites. The chicken is the symbol of the atonement. Some people

use plants for the *Kaparot* ritual based on *Rashi's* interpretation of the word *parpisa* in the Talmud:<sup>39</sup>

... they made baskets of palm leaves and filled them with earth and animal excrement [as fertilizer]. Twenty-two or 15 days before Rosh Hashanah, they designated one for each male and female child in the household and planted therein an Egyptian bean or pulse and they called it *parpisa* and it sprouted. On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, each person took his *parpisa* and revolved it around his head seven times saying: "This is instead of this, and this is my exchange and this is my substitute" and they would cast it into the river.

The casting in the river may again be symbolic of the transference of one's sins into the fish that live in the river, reminiscent of the *Tashlich* ritual described above.

### OTHER TREATMENTS FOR JAUNDICE

Numerous therapeutic regimens are recommended in the Talmud for jaundice. Urine from an ass, if imbibed, is good for jaundice.<sup>40</sup> According to Rabbi Matia ben Cheresh, the flesh of a donkey should be eaten by someone suffering from jaundice.<sup>41</sup> Water of palm trees and a potion of roots are said to be efficacious for jaundice.<sup>42</sup> Water of palm trees was thought to "pierce the gall."<sup>43</sup> A useful potion of roots is explained by Rabbi Yochanan as follows:

The weight of a *zuz* of Alexandrian gum is brought, a *zuz* weight of liquid alum, and a *zuz* weight of garden crocus, and they are powdered together . . . . For jaundice two-thirds thereof are mixed with beets and drunk, and the patient [although cured of his jaundice] becomes impotent.

Other remedies for jaundice are also mentioned in the Talmud:<sup>43</sup>

... let him take the head of a salted *Shibuta* [name of a fish, probably mullet], boil it in beer, and drink it. If not, let him take brine of locusts. If brine of locusts is not available, let him take brine of small birds [alternate translation: clear fish brine], carry it into the baths, and rub himself therewith. If there are no baths, he should be placed between the stove and the wall [to make him perspire].

Rabbi Yochanan said: "If one wishes to make the patient with jaundice warm he should wrap him well [or rub him] in his sheet. Rabbi Acha ben Jacob suffered therewith, so Rabbi Kahana treated him thus and he recovered. But if not, let him take three *kapiza* of Persian dates, three *kapiza* of dripping wax [dripping from an overflowing honeycomb], and three *kapiza* of purple aloes, boil them in beer, and drink it. If not, let him take a young ass; then the patient shaves half his head, draws blood from its forehead, and applies it to his own head, but he must take care of his eyes, lest the blood blind him. If not, let him take a buck's head which has lain in preserves [vinegar], boil it in beer, and drink it. If not let him take a speckled swine, tear it open, and apply it to his heart. If not, let him take porret [leeks] from the wastes of the valley [Rashi: from the middle of the furrow, where the leeks are sharp]."

In the rabbinic *Responsa* literature, remedies for jaundice include the drinking of urine<sup>44</sup> or the swallowing of eight lice taken from one's own head.<sup>45</sup> These folk remedies, like the nostrum of the pigeons on the navel, have no scientific validity but were used, perhaps for their placebo effect. Their efficacy was never in doubt to those who recommended them.

### CONCLUSION

Biblical license is given to a human physician to heal, and biblical mandate is given the patient to seek healing from a human healer. Does this mandate also include alternative therapies such as a nostrum or remedy known as a *segulah*

as exemplified by the pigeon treatment of jaundice? Leeches have been used for centuries to treat a variety of illnesses. Recently, scientific respectability has been given to leech treatment as an acceptable medical therapy.<sup>46,47</sup>

In Jewish religious law, there is no objection to the use of amulets for healing purposes. Amulets are deeply rooted in popular belief. There is currently a popular belief, among some Jews, in the therapeutic efficacy of pigeons in the treatment of jaundice. The explanation offered for its alleged efficacy is the transference of illness from the patient to the pigeon. Other examples of disease transference therapies are recorded in Jewish sources. This concept of organic disease transference from the patient to a non-human living species has its parallel in the transference of sins from human to animal, as exemplified by the *Tashlich* and *Kaparot* rituals.

There is no medical or scientific evidence to support the therapeutic efficacy of the aforementioned pigeon remedy for jaundice. Anecdotal reports do not constitute such evidence. The death of pigeons during such attempted treatment can readily be explained by the pigeon suffocating from being held in a vise-like grip. An alternative explanation for the pigeon's death is exsanguination secondary to rupture of the spleen. To my knowledge, no reports have stated that the pigeons become jaundiced and no pre- and post-treatment bilirubin measurements have been carried out on patients or pigeons. Hence, such treatment must be viewed with a great degree of skepticism.

Traditional medical therapy is required because of the biblical mandate for Jewish people to seek healing from a physician when they are ill and not to rely solely on divine intervention or faith healing.

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