The Healthy Jew: The Symbiosis of Judaism and Modern Medicine

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observations: the rich Jews who attracted such criticism receive no more attention from her than the poor Jews who got charity.

Perhaps the strongest section of the book is Rose’s discussion of stereotypes of Jewish sexuality, including the blatantly contradictory view of Jewish men as both “effeminate” and “sexually aggressive” (p. 143). She notes how Sigmund Freud downplayed the Jewishness of two of his most famous women patients, “Anna O.” and “Dora”, and goes on to investigate how early psychoanalysts confronted some of the sexual stereotypes about Jews. She concludes this section with an examination of the “Jewish self-hatred” of those such as the infamous Otto Weininger who accepted all the negative stereotypes. In a stunning contrast to the various notions of degeneracy, however, Rose emphasizes how Jewish women in Austrian drama of this era “invariably appeared exotic, alluring, and beautiful” (p. 213).

One comes away from the book with a sense of the multiplicity of “Jewish women” in Vienna—natives and immigrants, rich and poor, assimilated and Zionist, secularized and traditional, long-term residents and transient students. Rose could have done a better job not only of delineating the social history of these subgroups, but also of clarifying how their differences were submerged in many of the writings about “the” Jewish woman. She could also have provided a sharper definition of “fin de siècle”: her discussion of politics includes two leftists born in 1904 and 1906, and among the early women psychoanalysts were two born in 1910. Such individuals whose adulthood began after the mid-1920s do not belong in a book about the late nineteenth century.

Touching as Rose does on such a wide variety of topics, she has drawn on an extensive bibliography of both primary and secondary sources. Strikingly absent, however, are the works of Peter Gay, in particular *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (1988) and *Schnitzler’s Century* (2002).

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We’re all familiar nowadays with health foods and wellness practices of exotic (usually Indian and Far Eastern) cultures which gain some fad status in the Western World. Well, it seems that a century or so ago kosher food was on the verge of becoming the macrobiotic cuisine among Christians in Europe and America. It didn’t quite catch on. But the Jewish practice of circumcision did, at least in much of the U.S.
Also a century or so ago many gentile physicians and academics attributed the wildly disproportionate number of intellectuals and geniuses among the modern Jews to millennia-old Jewish eugenic practices (subtle and humane) which encouraged the procreation of the best and the brightest as well as “racial” exclusivity. Quite a few gentile medical men of the time deemed this worthy of emulation among their own populations. But eventually a totally perverted version of eugenics would arise to wreak horrific consequences on the Jews themselves, who came to be viewed as mortal parasitic genetic rivals of the “Aryans.”

These are some of the topics dealt with in this book by Mitchell B. Hart, associate professor of history at the University of Florida.

The period under discussion, roughly the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was a time of breathtakingly rapid advances in medicine and biology, especially with the triumph of the germ theory of communicable disease, the rise of Darwinian evolutionary theory and genetics, the development of microbiological models of immunity, and the application of scientifically based public health measures. However, religion (Christianity and Judaism), although on the wane in much of the Western World, remained a potent force.

It was also an era of industrialization and rapid urbanization—bringing in its wake epidemics of tuberculosis, cholera, syphilis, typhus and more to the city dwellers. Yet the Jewish population seemed to suffer proportionately far less from these scourges than did their neighbors.

The era was furthermore a time of Jewish emancipation in much of Europe. The explosive achievements of Jews in the sciences (especially medicine), the arts, literature, philosophy, technology, and the industrialization process were utterly out of proportion to their tiny population.

Contemporary medical scientists and clergymen in Continental Europe (notably Germany and France), Britain, and the United States were asking: Where were the reasons for such particularities of modern Jews to be found? In their age-old religious (Mosaic and Talmudic) practices? Their cultural traditions? Their long history as town-dwellers and persecuted minority?

In his study of contemporary opinions on these issues, Prof. Hart mines a particular kind of primary source material, namely academic journals and books, professional magazines, and even popular magazines and newspapers of the era. The physicians, scientists, and clergy who authored these texts were sometimes Jews, but often (and most interestingly) gentiles.

Thus we read how quite a few Christian clergymen, seeing as truly divine the Mosaic health-related practices (anti-contagion measures, dietary prohibitions, circumcision, and marriage and sexual rules), came to bemoan their having been discarded by Christianity. Less religious gentile medical men, al-
though more inclined to see Moses and his colleagues as incredibly advanced scientific thinkers, were no less regretful of the loss of Torah health practices to Christians, and all the more so in view of how the Diaspora rabbis had further developed such practices into the intricate halakha and kashrut system.

The Healthy Jew is a valuable contribution to the field of Jewish medical and cultural studies. But stylistically the book suffers from a certain repetitiveness and redundancy. This obstacle to general readers may be somewhat trying even for academics.

Of course, any paring and tightening of the text would have reduced the book’s already modest length. On the other hand, however, there are several topics which Prof. Hart treats either not at all or at most in a passing sentence, which, I believe, would have deserved consideration in the historical context.

With virtually no exception, all the authors cited—Jewish or Christian, physician, clergyman, or layperson—assume that the modern European Jews are racially pure descendants from the Biblical Hebrews. But in the decades spanning the turn of the twentieth century various Jewish and Christian medical anthropologists were debating the question of the genetic origins of the European Jews, particularly the Ashkenazim, who typically showed quite a range of “Aryan” physical characteristics. This led to much speculation that the Semitic Hebrews of the Bible had mixed genetically with Aryan Hittites, and that the northwestward migrating Diaspora Jews assimilated into their gene pool red-haired Khazars and various other European strains. In all the discussion of the presumed genetic medical superiority of the Ashkenazim, was “hybrid vigor” not posited as an alternative hypothesis to “racial purity”? (And if not, why not?)

Rabbi Isaac Arama in fifteenth-century Spain declared: “The dietary laws are not, as some [most notably Maimonides] have thought, motivated by therapeutic considerations. God forbid! If that were so, the Torah would be lowered to the status of a second-hand medical tract or even worse!” Arama’s viewpoint has been shared by many rabbis throughout history (also regarding circumcision). Weren’t such voices heard in the debate about Jewish health a century ago?

The works of the famed British anthropologist James Frazer in the late nineteenth century showed that primitive contagion fears and circumcision rites were widespread among various contemporary stone-age societies throughout the world (and by extension, presumably, the prehistoric ancestors of the Middle Easterners and Europeans). Did the authors who marveled at the “prescience” of the supposedly divine Mosaic laws not take into consideration their apparent prehistoric roots?
All that having been said, Mitchell Hart’s work is a welcome academic study. Sander Gilman’s various popular books (e.g., *The Jew’s Body*, 1991) have told us much about the widespread image of the unhealthy “dirty Jew” (internalized by many Jews themselves) a century ago. Prof. Hart presents us with a quite different contemporary image: the healthy “noble Jew.”

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Jacob’s Legacy: A Genetic View of Jewish History, by David B. Goldstein.  

The use of genetic data in order to try to understand history is not new. The first attempts used mainly blood groups; however, nowadays new technical abilities allow much more accurate analyses. In the last decades genetic research has been used more and more to try to verify some of the known history and ask specific questions. This is a short book written by geneticist David B. Goldstein about his research on some elements of the Jewish history aimed at the general public. I think that he did excellent job and wrote a very interesting, easy-to-read book that may be appreciated by everyone.

The book includes four chapters presenting on one side the history and oral tradition and faith of the Jews and on the other side the scientific observations, along with proposed explanations on the link between them. In recent years some of the subjects discussed in the book have been presented in various newspapers, journals, or television programs. However, the book allows for a better understanding of the facts and helps the reader to form a personal opinion about the possible implications of the results on each of the subjects presented. By using markers that allow one to follow the paternal history (male to male inheritance—Y chromosome), scientific observations were made that are compatible with the oral tradition of the Cohanim being direct descendants of Old Testament priests. Similarly, it was shown that the probable origin of an African tribe, the Lemba, was Jewish as it is claimed in their oral tradition. On the other hand, the same methods did not allow the exact origin of the Levites to be determined. This raises several possibilities—in particular, that they are descendants of communities that converted to Judaism, such as the Khazars. Mitochondrial markers were used in order to follow the maternal history (female to female inheritance), since mitochondria are inherited only from women even though they are present in cells of both sexes. Distinct genetic histories of the mitochondrial DNA and of Y chromosomes lead Goldstein to suggest that Jewish males traveled, intermarried with local women, and founded new communities linked to one another.

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