**Women, Medicine, and Life: A Jewish Hermeneutic**[1]

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How do Jewish law and interpretation think about medicine when women's lives are at stake? How can Judaism warrant care in women's medicine? There are multiple factors to consider before one can form a conclusion.

One way to begin a Jewish account of women's medical well-being is with Leviticus 18:5: "You shall keep My statutes and My laws, which a person shall do and live by them."[2] The verse itself does not explain what it means to "live by them," but later Jewish tradition does. In the Babylonian Talmud, the great rabbinic work of legal debate and interpretation, the tractate called *Yoma* reads the phrase as "live by them, and not die by them."[3] Commandments are given to sustain life. They are not meant to become instruments of injury or death.

This principle became one of the foundations of Jewish medical ethics. When life is endangered, ritual duties yield. One may violate Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, to save a life. One may eat on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, if fasting poses serious danger. Later Jewish law summarizes this priority with the principle *pikuach nefesh*, the saving of life, which overrides the Sabbath.[4] Jewish law stays close to bodily reality. It speaks in the presence of danger, illness, vulnerability, and care.

That preservation of life has a special force in thinking about women. Jewish law speaks directly to women's bodily life in illness, pregnancy, childbirth, and danger. In the *Mishnah*, the early rabbinic law code, and in the later Talmudic discussions that interpret it, a pregnant woman who experiences dangerous craving on Yom Kippur is fed.[5] Her condition matters to the law. Her hunger is treated as a reality that changes what must be done.

The same commitment appears with even greater urgency in the laws surrounding childbirth. *Mishnah Ohalot* 7:6, a rabbinic legal text about purity and bodily life,

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[1] Developed from the notes of Dr. Aryeh Ben Yehuda
[2] Leviticus 18:5.
[3] Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 85b. *Yoma* is the tractate of the Talmud devoted mainly to Yom Kippur and the Temple service associated with it.
[4] Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 85b. *Pikuach nefesh* means the preservation or saving of human life.
[5] Mishnah *Yoma* 8:5; Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 82a.

addresses the case of obstructed labor and permits dismembering the fetus in utero in order to save the mother's life, because her life takes precedence. Once the greater part of the child has emerged, one life is not set aside for another. The text is difficult, but its ethical core is clear. Jewish law takes maternal danger with utmost seriousness. It does not turn childbirth into an abstraction. It asks what must be done to preserve life.

If life must be preserved, medicine must be authorized. On Exodus 21:19, which includes the phrase *verappo yerappe*, usually translated "he shall surely heal" or "he shall cause him to be thoroughly healed, "the rabbis in *Bava Kamma*, a Talmudic tractate concerned with injury and damages, conclude: "From here we learn that permission has been given to the physician to heal."[6] Healing stands within the world G-d has made. Illness summons the physician into responsibility.

For Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish legal thinker and philosopher also known as Rambam, that permission becomes a duty. In the *Mishneh Torah*, his systematic law code, he writes that anyone who is able to save a life and does not do so violates the biblical command "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor."[7] Medicine therefore belongs to moral obligation as well as technical knowledge. One who can intervene, must intervene. Applied to women's medicine, the point is simple. A woman's suffering creates obligations for those who can help. Her danger makes claims on the physician, the community, and the law.

Maimonides takes it one step further. His philosophy includes the idea that the qualities that truly matter are good judgment, compassion, and kindness. While emphasizing the difference between legal reasoning and medical reasoning, he argues that the core goals of the two are the same: serving. That service to others is guided by morality and knowledge, rather than blind subservience to G-d. Women seeking healthcare are seeking moral usage of knowledge in caring for their bodies; according to Jewish law, they deserve nothing less.

Another classical principle deepens the picture: *kavod ha-beriyot*, a rabbinic phrase usually translated "human dignity" or "the dignity of creatures." In *Berakhot* 19b, another tractate of the Babylonian Talmud, concern for dignity can redirect the application of

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[6] Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Kamma* 85a. *Bava Kamma* is a tractate of the Talmud concerned with injury, damages, and civil responsibility.

[7] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Rotzeach u-Shemirat Nefesh 1:14. Maimonides, also called Rambam, was a twelfth-century Jewish philosopher, physician, and legal codifier.

certain obligations.[8] This principle matters in medicine because care concerns more than survival in the abstract. Human dignity remains part of treatment. Women's well-being includes dignity in illness, dignity in childbirth, dignity in bodily exposure, dignity in speech, and dignity in the application of law. A patient's vulnerability does not suspend her dignity. It heightens the community's obligation to honor it.

When reflecting upon this obligation, one must ask: what is dignity, and how do we effectively afford it to those we meet? The idea of *kavod ha-beriyot* emphasizes promoting dignity through action, *shev v'al taaseh*, to make people feel worthy. Jewish law considers both the psychological and physical factors when defining dignity, and maintains both principles in deciding if abortion is permitted.[9] If the woman would live a more dignified life, abortion is allowed. If her physical and/or psychological state would be considerably worsened by not receiving an abortion, withholding that procedure is heavily looked down upon.

Leviticus 19:16 adds the communal dimension: "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor."[10] In medicine, this becomes a prohibition against passivity before another person's danger. For women, that principle matters because pain, exhaustion, reproductive risk, and postpartum suffering are often borne quietly. Jewish ethics presses toward attention. Another person's vulnerability creates a claim.

Nachmanides, the medieval biblical commentator and legal thinker also known as Ramban, gives the question a different theological frame. In his commentary on Leviticus 26:11, he imagines an ideal condition in which Israel would not need physicians because divine providence would be direct and transparent.[11] Medicine belongs to the world as we know it, where human beings live through natural processes, bodily fragility, and learned expertise. Yet even here the practical result remains the same; physicians heal, and lives must be preserved. Women's medicine stands within one of the central questions Jewish law asks: what does fidelity to G-d require when a life is at stake?

Fidelity to G-d, however, is not just recognized in observing Shabbat or praying before meals. It is also very heavily grounded in the concept of *tikkun olam*, "world repair." Tikkun olam is one of the guiding principles of Judaism: acting in partnership with G-d to fix the world with justice and kindness. Originally in the Talmud, the phrase referred to

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[8] Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 19b. *Berakhot* is the tractate of the Talmud that opens with prayers and blessings and develops broader legal discussions.
[9] Sheilot U'Teshuvot Tzitz Eliezer 9:51:3
[10] Leviticus 19:16.

improving society, typically through legal interventions. Essential to today's society is ensuring legislation that protects women's healthcare. Later, in the sixteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Luria, a Jewish mystic also called "The Ari," wrote that the process of practicing *tikkun olam* was finding sparks of divine light in the world and delivering them to G-d. Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov took this one step further. He taught Jewish people around the world that fostering those sparks of life was in turn fostering goodness in society. Women's medicine, too, is led with a goal of providing reproductive and autonomous justice to patients. In practicing *tikkun olam*, doing good for others acts as a deeper method in which Jewish people can serve G-d and live by Judaism's ideals.

A Jewish account of women and medicine can begin with the idea that law is meant to sustain life. The principle of *v'chai bahem*, "and live by them," suggests that the commandments are given for human flourishing rather than suffering or neglect. That commitment appears again in the physician's permission to heal, the command not to stand idly by another person's blood, the concern for *kavod ha-beriyot*, or human dignity, and the idea of *tikkun olam* as responsibility for repair in the world. These sources suggest that women's medical well-being belongs within the tradition's own understanding of the purpose of law. Jewish medical ethics therefore asks what it means to uphold life, dignity, and care when the person before the law is a woman whose body, pain, vulnerability, and agency all matter.