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Jewish Medicine and Science

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Jewish Medicine and Science

Abstract

It is difficult to speak about Jewish involvement in the medicine and science during the Renaissance and beyond without reference to Jewish traditions of medical and scientific activity in the ancient and medieval periods. Perceiving themselves as proud heirs of such medieval luminaries as the physician Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), the astrologer Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1164), and the astronomer Levi ben Gershom (Gersonides; 1288-1344), as well as the biblical Abraham, Solomon, and the ancient rabbis, Jewish thinkers living in early modern Europe continued to believe that the study of nature was a supreme religious ideal and that the roots of magic and medicine, astrology and astronomy, were ultimately located in ancient Jewish sources.

Disciplines

European History | History | History of Religion | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Intellectual History | Jewish Studies | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Jewish Medicine and Science

Encyclopedia of the Renaissance, 2000
From World History in Context

It is difficult to speak about Jewish involvement in [medicine](#) and science during the [Renaissance](#) and beyond without reference to Jewish traditions of medical and scientific activity in the ancient and medieval periods. Perceiving themselves as proud heirs of such medieval luminaries as the physician Moses [Maimonides](#) (1135-1204), the astrologer Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1164), and the astronomer Levi ben Gershom (Gersonides; 1288-1344), as well as the biblical Abraham, Solomon, and the ancient [rabbis](#), Jewish thinkers living in early modern Europe continued to believe that the study of nature was a supreme religious ideal and that the roots of magic and medicine, [astrology](#) and astronomy, were ultimately located in ancient Jewish sources.

The Study of Nature

Important differences in their approaches to the study of nature are also apparent due to a number of specific factors unique to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. [Jews](#), like other Europeans, were profoundly affected by the more prominent role of science and technology in European culture and by the impact of printing on the dissemination of scientific information. Even more decisive were the new opportunities to study medicine in the universities as well as the integration of a new community of converso doctors into the Jewish community.

By the second half of the sixteenth century, certain scholars in central and eastern Europe pursued the study of astronomy and cosmology as a desirable supplement to their primary rabbinic pursuits. Moses Isserles (1525-1572) and Judah Loew ben Bezalel (the Maharal; c. 1525-1609) openly encouraged the study of the natural world. Their student David Gans (1541-1613) composed an original Hebrew compendium of geographical and astronomical information, even offering his readers a tantalizing report of his exchanges with Johann Kepler and Tycho Brahe in Prague.

In Padua, hundreds of Jews gained entrance to a great medical school for the first time, matriculated, and went on to practice medicine throughout Europe. Eventually, universities opened their doors to Jews elsewhere in Italy and in the rest of Europe. Through their medical studies, Jews received a prolonged exposure to the study of the liberal arts, to Latin studies, and to classical medical texts, as well as to the more recent scientific advances in [botany](#), [anatomy](#), chemistry, clinical medicine, physics, and astronomy. They were also afforded the opportunity for intense socialization with other like-minded Jews and non-Jews throughout Europe, maintaining intellectual and professional links with each other long after their graduation.

The writings of several illustrious graduates of Padua illustrate quite dramatically the impact the new [medical education](#) was having on Jewish religious and cultural sensibilities. Joseph Delmedigo (1591-1655) produced a highly sophisticated Hebrew compendium of physics, mathematics, and astronomy, and later attempted to integrate this knowledge with the latest cosmological theories of the Kabbalah. Tobias Cohen (1652-1729) published a comprehensive textbook of medicine, also in

Hebrew, incorporating the most recent therapies of the chemical philosophers.

The ranks of this newly emerging Jewish medical community were swelled even more by hundreds of university-trained converso [physicians](#) who fled Spain and Portugal in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, settling in Italy, Holland, Germany, England, and even eastern Europe and the New World. They served as clinicians and sometimes purveyors of scientific learning within the Jewish community while often wielding considerable economic and political power. While many of these physicians were indifferent to traditional Jewish practices and beliefs, their professional identity, as members of a highly successful but often racially maligned medical community, was frequently linked with their own personal quest to define their newly evolving relationships to [Judaism](#) and the Jewish community. The biographies of such illustrious converso physicians as Amatus Lusitanus (1511-1568), Zacutus Lusitanus (1575-1642), and Rodrigo de Castro (1550-1627) and his son Benedict (1597-1684) reveal quite distinctly such linkages and, to a great extent, exemplify convictions shared by others with similar professional and ethnic backgrounds.

Jewish Theologies of Nature

Especially within these three subcommunities--rabbinic students in Prague and Cracow, graduates of Padua and other [medical schools](#), and converso physicians--the study of natural philosophy was tolerated and even enthusiastically endorsed to a greater extent than in previous eras. Some Jewish religious thinkers in this period were increasingly willing to disentangle physics from metaphysics, the secular from the sacred, science from theology, and thus, in a manner similar to many of their Christian counterparts, to view scientific advances as positive resources to be enlisted in the cause of perpetuating the Jewish faith. By erecting carefully drawn boundaries between the domains of scientific activity and religious faith, they discovered a strategy whereby the two could live peacefully and harmoniously with each other, avoiding the often bitter acrimony between faith and reason of the medieval period.

Others found ways of integrating the new scientific information with [Jewish theology](#), especially mystical theosophy, thus spiritualizing the former while reinvigorating the latter. And through the vehicles of greater mass communication available to the Jewish community--the pulpit sermon, Hebrew and Yiddish [textbooks](#), and scientific literature in other languages--larger numbers of Jews were becoming aware and appreciative of the new scientific culture, whether or not they were literate in it. With the increasing secularization of European culture in the eighteenth century, these strategies of alliance between science and Jewish faith would become more tenuous and difficult to sustain.

Consumers, Not Creators, of Scientific Culture

Reflections on scientific activity among early modern Jewish thinkers, to be sure, are not the same as actual scientific performance itself. With few exceptions, the achievements of Jewish practitioners of science were unimpressive in comparison with those of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Probably the greatest achievements were related to the practice of clinical medicine. This lack of achievement, however, should not be attributed to any religious or theological inhibitions inherent in Judaism itself. More critical is the fact that Jews conspicuously lacked the institutional support of

churches, courts, and especially scientific academies, and thus had little opportunity to "do" science other than medicine. The only avenue available to them in order to keep abreast of the latest scientific discoveries was through medical education or through their own reading of scientific literature. They consequently remained outside the scientific laboratory primarily because of social rather than religious constraints.

Further Readings

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