

A Sample of Jewish Texts on Health Care

Rabbi Sherman spoke of texts on health care during Rosh Hashana services and has provided this reference.

May the One who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless and heal those who are ill. May the Blessed Holy One be filled with compassion for their health to be restored and their strength to be revived. May God swiftly send them a complete renewal of body and spirit, and let us say, Amen.

English text of Prayer for Healing, Mishkan Tefila, A Reform Siddur, CCAR Press, 2007

The earth is Adonai's and all that it holds, the world and its inhabitants.

Psalms 24:1

Because our bodies belong to God, we have a moral imperative to heal—not because of an oath taken by a physician, and not in order to earn money, but because we are obligated to preserve and protect that which belongs to God.

Elliot Dorff, Matters of Life and Death, 1998, p. 26

Whoever is in pain, lead him to the physician.

Talmud Bava Kama 46b

We must strive to maintain a healthy body so that we can serve God.

Maimonides, Hilchot De'ot, chaps 3-5

Pikuach Nefesh – this Jewish value holds that the saving of a human life is paramount, overriding virtually any other religious consideration. When the life of a specific human being is in danger, it is permissible to violate almost any negative commandment of the Torah. This value is derived from the biblical verse, “Neither shall you stand by the blood of your neighbor” (Leviticus 19:16).

Our tradition teaches that everyone has the right to obtain health care. In fact, we learn that if a physician withholds care, it is as if he is shedding blood.

Yoreh Deah, 336:1

The non-Jewish poor are to be sustained along with the Jewish poor, the non-Jewish sick are to be visited along with the Jewish sick, and the non-Jewish dead are to be buried with the Jewish dead.

Babylonian Talmud Gittin 61a

Doctors are required to reduce their fees for people who cannot afford to pay full price. When that is still not sufficient, the community must subsidize the patient.

Yoreh Deah, 249

Abba, a physician, had a space outside of his workspace where people could drop coins. Those who could afford to, would put some in. Those who could not could come in and receive treatment without being ashamed.

Talmud Ta'anit 21b

There are those who say that the commandment to [build and support] a synagogue takes precedence over the commandment to give charity to the poor, but the commandment to give money to the youth to learn Torah or to the sick among the poor takes precedence over the commandment to build and support a synagogue.

Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 239:16

Still, the duty to save life does not necessarily fall upon the physician as an individual. The commandment of *pikuach nefesh* is addressed to all of us, not just to a particular class of persons; the physician has no greater obligation than does anyone else to save life. This is a key element in the Jewish legal theory which permits physicians to be paid for their work. When a positive commandment is incumbent upon all members of the community, no one person can be required to perform it for free. Physicians are entitled to reasonable compensation because, though they render a service that only trained professionals are allowed to administer, they are the agents of the community. The *mitzvah* they perform is *our mitzvah*, not just theirs. Like others who provide vital public services, they are the means by which each of us fulfills the individual responsibility to save life. Thus, if it costs money to perform the *mitzvah*, that expense ought to be borne by the community, by all of us together, and not by doctors alone. It is arguably unfair to require that physicians treat indigent patients without adequate compensation.

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