

Jewish Herbalism

Source Sheet compiled by Adira Rosen

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“Chicken Soup Theory” excerpt from “Ashkenazi Herbalism”

by Deatra Cohen and Adam Siegel

Today the popular notion of healing among Ashkenazim is often reduced to “chicken soup,” but Eastern European Jews have a highly complex medicinal tradition that dates back to the Hebrew Bible. The historical records of Jewish communities across many centuries and lands (the ancient Near East, the Islamic world, medieval Europe, etc.) reveal a rich variety of practices that include plant-based remedies. Oddly enough, if the researcher seeks out evidence of herbalism in modern Eastern European Jewish communities, the written record falls largely silent. While many aspects of Ashkenazi life and culture have been thoroughly documented...the history of Ashkenazi communities has almost entirely ignored the existence of traditional healers among the Ashkenazim...Despite the longstanding and tireless efforts to “eradicate” their practices, however, Ashkenazi folk medicinal practitioners had an enduring presence in Eastern Europe for centuries, and they were an integral part of community well-being until deep into the twentieth century.

- In what ways could recovering and studying these folk practices change our understanding of Jewish history, culture, and resilience?

“Medicinal Herbs published” by Jewish Virtual Library

In Talmudic literature close upon 70 plants are mentioned as having medicinal properties, including plants mainly used as food, such as olives, dates, pomegranates, quinces among fruit – and garlic, *beet , *hyssop , *cumin , and *fennel-flower among vegetables and spices. In addition wild plants are mentioned which were used principally for remedial purposes...There is in addition a long list of medicinal plants, potions, and remedies from the plant world which are prescribed in the Talmud. A number of remedies were known for restoring virility, for increasing seed, for aphrodisiac purposes, for inducing temporary sterility, or for preventing conception. Several herbs are prescribed as cosmetics. Opium is mentioned once – as a plant dangerous to buy from gentiles.

- What does the wide range of plants and remedies mentioned in the Talmud suggest about the rabbis’ engagement with medicine and the natural world?

“Herbs & Judaism” published by Jewitches

The use of plants in ritual has not waned or lessened in the Diaspora, though they are hardly identified by these names. Once pointed out, people can often point to numerous ritualistic uses of herbs. One such easily identifiable experience is Havdalah, the closing ceremony of Shabbat (the Sabbath). It is believed, in very few words, that during Shabbat, one receives extra spiritual heights. At Havdalah, this Shabbat soul departs and your soul is left devastated. To comfort and soothe oneself, one inhales the scent of fragrant spices, herbs, or fruits. (4) The most popular of the herbs used for this is cloves.

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- In your own life, what rituals or sensory experiences help you cope with feelings of loss or transition, the way smelling herbs/spice during Havdalah does for the soul?

“Raspberry Medicine from the Shtetl: Two Recipes and a Brief History”

by Naomi Spector, published by Gashmius Magazine

In historic Jewish communities of eastern and central Europe, the gathering, harvesting and preserving of plants for use as food and medicine each year was a matter of communal survival. Traditional foods are medicine, and the preparation of foods and home remedies was often combined with the spiritual medicine of prayer. Psalms, or *Tehilim*, regularly “served as a cure for many Jewish troubles, communal and personal.” In hassidic (Jewish mystical) communities, a *segula* (amulet) might be prescribed to help someone recover from illness or to enhance their fertility, and would often combine herbs with prayers for healing. *Segulot* would even sometimes include elements considered to be imbued with spiritual power, like oil used for hanukkah celebrations or an *etrog* left over from sukkot. From a Jewish perspective, the healing power of any remedy, whether it be a chicken soup or an herbal tea or a balm, is strengthened by the prayers of the people who lovingly prepared it. Fresh fruits, especially fruits grown in clean soil and water, hold tremendous power to heal and strengthen the body. Jews relied on fruit preserves during the long, cold winters, when most fresh fruits were no longer in season. Fruit teas, jams, wines, cordials, brandies, and syrups were all important sources of vitamin C and many other essential nutrients. These medicines were shared between community members all winter long...Cherry brandy, for instance, was a popular remedy for a stomach ache, as was bilberry cordial...There was even a folk saying referring to raspberry preserves: “May there be no need for them!”...In Jewish folk belief, herbs that caused sweating were considered to be powerful healers, because sweating was considered to drive disease out of the body. Raspberry cordial was often taken to help the body to sweat out a sickness. In some towns, raspberry syrup was known as “the shtetl wonder drug,” and was given to anyone who was sick as a popular all-purpose medicine. In fact, ‘syrup maker’ was a popular folk profession, usually associated with women.

- How does the blending of physical remedies (herbs, fruits, teas) with spiritual practices (prayers, psalms, *segulot*) reflect a holistic Jewish approach to healing?
- What does the communal preparation and sharing of foods and remedies teach us about the role of care in traditional Jewish health practices?

“Ancestral Herbalism: Jewish Traditions and the Divinity of Rosemary”

by Laura Rubin, published by At the Well

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) has been beloved for thousands of years by many ancient traditions. In Jewish folk traditions, it was equated with protection from physical, spiritual, emotional and mental harm. Likely chosen because of its strong pungent odor, it was widely used for cleansing, detoxing, memory and cognitive function, gastrointestinal issues, immunity, and more. In both Sephardic and Ashkenazi traditions, rosemary was known in particular as one of the most holy herbs to protect against the ayin ha-rah (evil eye). The

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evil eye was seen as the key source of illness, with a heating and drying energy like a ball of fire. It would cause grave sickness (or death) to anyone who came in contact with it, and so women and children would place a sprig of rosemary inside pockets, on an altar, or in an amulet for protection. These were not just empty rituals. Rosemary is in fact incredibly antiseptic and anti-inflammatory, and contains important volatile oils and diterpenes including rosmarinic acid, carnosic acid, camphor, and linalool (Hoffman, 2003, 577). Its extracts are incorporated in many Alzheimer's medications to help offset the impacts of memory loss. Just 500 mg of rosemary extract a day has been shown to help memory recall and relieve depression, anxiety and poor sleep.

- How does modern scientific knowledge about rosemary's medicinal properties change or deepen our understanding of why it was valued in Jewish tradition?