



JUDAISM AND MASSAGE

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Massage, known to have been used since pre-historic times by many civilisations, has a long Jewish tradition, having been practised by Jewish physicians and endorsed by the highest rabbinical authorities over thousands of years.

In Biblical times humans and objects intended for sacred purposes were anointed with oil and anointing was also a ceremony of initiation into royal or priestly office. It consisted of pouring oil from a vessel over the head or making a shape on the forehead with a finger using oil. Anointing ceased to play a part in Jewish ritual on the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.

Singer in his Jewish Encyclopaedia makes the point that alongside this ritual was the practice of anointing as part of the private toilet for a feast, and that the primary meaning of *mashach* used for both in the Bible was to daub or smear – an activity which is likely to have been an early form of massage. Most massage texts refer to the word massage as being derived from Arabic *mas'h* which means to press softly, or a similar Greek word meaning to knead or handle, or even the French *masser*. None refer to the Hebrew word *mashach*.

When the Jews of ancient Israel came into contact with Greek civilisation (around 300 BCE) public baths were introduced where massage was a routine treatment, these Hellenic influences being discernible in the Talmud from around the end of the 2nd century CE until midway through the 5th century. The Talmud, which encapsulates Jewish law and is central to the Jewish religious tradition, refers to 'bathing-master' and 'bathing attendant', the people who actually carried out the massage in the Greek style baths.

Among treatments mentioned in the Talmud are diets, warm and cold compresses, sweating cures, rest cures, sun baths, change of climate, hydrotherapy, psychotherapy, exercises and, of course, massage – a menu which would not be unusual in a health spa of today and in which massage figures as a normal Jewish activity.

The Talmud gives precise rules for Jews about the use of massage, stating, for example, that as a rule anointing with oils and perfumes followed the bath and that on the Sabbath, anointing, whether for pleasure or health, is allowed. On Yom

Kippur, anointing is forbidden, whereas on other fast days it is permitted for health only. The Talmud recommends rubbing the head with wine, vinegar or oil to treat a headache.

The Talmud is not the only authoritative Jewish source on massage. One of the greatest historical authorities on Jewish law was Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), a doctor, rabbi and philosopher. In his *Treatise on Asthma* Maimonides advocates seven hygienic principles: Clean air, Correct eating and drinking, Regulating one's emotions, Exercise and rest, Excretion or retention of wastes, Bathing, Massage.

Maimonides recommended massaging the body on awakening and before going to bed at night. Several types of massage are described in his writings, as are exercises for the young and elderly. In his *Medical Aphorisms*, for example, Maimonides quotes Galen (131-200 CE), the Graeco-Roman physician whose medicine dominated the medical stage for 1,500 years. He said that palpation and light massage of the abdomen can help diagnose the cause of abdominal spasm. Maimonides notes that moderate massaging, as a general therapeutic measure for a variety of illnesses, is most helpful if applied during periods of quiescence of illness, and that massaging with oil is beneficial after bathing and is recommended to bring on sleep. In his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides rules that the abdomen may be anointed and massaged on the Sabbath, provided that both actions are performed simultaneously so as to constitute a departure from normal weekday procedure.

Jewish medicine in the period up to and after Maimonides was characteristically the medicine of the host country to which Jews had dispersed, but the international nature of Jewish life and scholarship meant that it was often at a sophisticated level. Parts of Europe and the Mediterranean countries continued up to the 16th century to be dominated by the writings of Galen and of Avicenna (the Persian 'prince of physicians'), both of whose medical writings are replete with the use of massage. Avicenna's definitive medical text, the *Canon*, with its many references to massage was still being translated and published in Hebrew up to the 15th century.

The evidence continues as we move to the next and final definitive codification of all Jewish law, which still operates today, the *Shulchan Aruch*, published in Venice in 1565 CE. It rules that one may not have a strenuous massage on the Sabbath to become tired and sweat, though it explains that a patient who has lost the use of a limb may have 'physiotherapy' administered by a Jew on the Sabbath to prevent this loss becoming permanent. As the patient progresses to walking, simple exercises are still permitted on the Sabbath, so massage is allowed. If the patient has pain, massage is permitted on the Sabbath.

Moving closer to modern times, Jewish clients are no strangers to massage at their local beauty salon or health club. There are clear recent antecedents for this. For example in England in the early 20th century the dominant area of settlement in London for the new immigrant eastern European

Jews was Whitechapel, an intensely Jewish area, at the centre of which was, and is, the London Hospital. From the 1880s in England and the USA, doctors and nurses increasingly used massage as an orthodox medical treatment. The most important centre for this development in England, the London Hospital, had at the time of the immigration a massage department and massage school which, simply because of its location, must have ministered to the local Jewish community.

Massage was frequently prescribed for many conditions, both surgical and medical. Around 1900, Brick Lane in the East End boasted Russian Vapour Baths, brought over by immigrants, offering the 'best massage in London'. Friday evenings were particularly busy at the baths as Jewish men would go there from their workshops before going on to the synagogue. Rev Schewzick, the manager of the baths, also conducted Holy Day services in the Great Assembly Hall in Mile End.

As late as the 1930s the Vienna Jewish Hospital in Austria, at the centre of a major and sophisticated Jewish community, also had a massage department and school and trained Jewish masseuses for normal medical work. And in provincial English cities, Jewish masseurs in the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s lived and worked in the heart of the Jewish community where they received an almost entirely Jewish clientele of referrals from an almost wholly Jewish constituency of doctors.

With the Second World War and the development in England of the profession of physiotherapy, many new treatments became available involving less physical labour than massage. And with the introduction of new 'wonder' drugs to replace old massage treatments, massage in England declined and virtually fell into oblivion until its revival, mainly as a vehicle for the application of



Enamelled metal sign for Russian Vapour Baths, Brick Lane, known as Schewzik's. Courtesy of Jewish Museum, London

aromatherapy essential oils, in the final years of the 20th century.

Society's amnesia in relation to the earlier popularity of massage has meant that it is seen today as somewhat 'new age'. Massage is probably as old as mankind, and is acknowledged in modern massage literature to have appeared in the medical writings and social practice of many societies. The modern books on massage now should add that Jews also have used it for thousands of years, integrated it into their medical and social practice, legislated about it and possibly even, via the Bible, given the very word itself to modern language.

Prof Len Goldstone teaches Health and Social Statistical Research Methods and the theory and practice of Massage and Complementary Therapies together with Massage History and Research. He has written several books on the history of massage in the UK.

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