



My Daughter, The Doctor

LIBI ASTAIRE

IT'S COMMON KNOWLEDGE THAT WOMEN HAVE WORKED AS HEALERS AND MIDWIVES THROUGHOUT THE AGES. WHAT'S LESS WELL KNOWN IS THAT WHEN A SICK PERSON LIVING IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE WENT TO SEE A PHYSICIAN, THE "DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE" JUST MIGHT HAVE BEEN A JEWISH WOMAN

For brightening the light of the eyes: Take calamine that is similar to a white stone of a weight of half a zekuk and take from it five or six pieces and burn them. Remove it with tongs and put it into a jar of strong vinegar. Do it nine times to soften the calamine. Afterwards pound the calamine in a mortar well until it is a fine powder and sift the powder through a thin cloth. Every night take a palm's worth and dilute it with a bit of wine or saliva and put it around the eye when you go to sleep. And it will brighten the eyes. This is a tested and proven remedy.

— *Doctors: Medieval*, Cheryl Tallen, Jewish Women's Archive

To be honest, when I first read this “tested and proven remedy” for red eye and other eye ailments offered by Marat Yuskah, a Jewish woman who worked as an oculist (eye doctor) in the early 1200s in Germany, I was wary. Isn't it a big no-no to put calamine lotion anywhere near the

eyes? Was this just an old wives' tale, and one that did more harm than good?

Apparently not. Six hundred years later, in the early 1800s, the London Medical Dictionary gave a recipe for an ointment that was very similar to Marat Yuskah's to treat discharges from the eye and cloudiness of the cornea. Chinese medicine has also recommended a similar mixture for many long years.

Marat Yuskah was therefore in good company — one that knew, unlike me, that calamine lotion and this remedy are two very different things. But at a time when Jews were barred from so many professions, how did she obtain her medical knowledge? Who were her patients? And could a medieval physician who happened to be both Jewish and a woman make a decent living?

THE DOCTOR IS IN

Jewish doctors have always been in demand. Even during the Middle Ages, a period when Jews were barred from most

professions in most European countries, medicine was often the exception. One reason is that Jews served as a bridge between the Arab lands — where medical knowledge was at a higher level — and medieval Europe. Just as Jewish doctors had translated Greek medical treatises for their Arab colleagues during the Golden Age of Spain, a time when relations between Jews and Muslims were good, Jewish doctors who later fled from the Iberian Peninsula and settled on the European continent translated these medical works into Latin, the argot of Europe's scholarly classes. They also brought with them their own expertise and skill, culled from Jewish sources such as the Talmud, medical works written in Hebrew, and knowledge that had been handed down throughout the generations from father to son.

And, sometimes, to daughters.

This partially explains how Jewish women received their medical education. Despite the fact that much of medieval medicine would be considered primitive by today's

Would You Like a Haircut with That Operation?

If a young doctor today were to say that she received her medical license from the Guild of Doctors, Apothecaries, and Grocers, most people would insist on going elsewhere for a second opinion. Yet in the medieval world, lumping doctors with grocers wouldn't have been considered odd at all.

The reason had to do with the guild system, which regulated all the professions in an attempt to ensure a high standard of performance. But rather than group together professions by their purpose, the medieval guild was organized according to the tools and materials that the various professions used. Thus surgeons and barbers were in the same guild, since they both made use of cutting instruments. Physicians, on the other hand, were grouped with apothecaries, grocers, and even artists, presumably since they all made use of powders and scales.



Frau Doktor

It shouldn't happen, but if you should find yourself time-traveling back to medieval Europe and you need a doctor, here's a list of a few other Jewish women physicians, by country:

France and Provence

- Sarre of Paris might sound like a fashion house, but it's actually the name of one of the first Jewish women physicians on record. She lived toward the end of the 1200s. Her daughter Florian was also a doctor.

- Sara of Saint Gilles (early 1300s) both practiced medicine and taught it. A contract found in the Marseilles archives, dated August 28, 1326, states that she agreed to teach one Salvetus de Burgonoro, an inhabitant of Salon in Provence, "*artem medicine et phisice*" for the period of seven months.

Germany

- Serlin, a Jewish doctor who lived during the 15th century in Frankfurt am Main, seems to have been an astute businesswoman as well as a good doctor. She petitioned the local authorities for a tax break in 1428, due to her competence and popularity, but her request was denied. She may be the "Serlin" mentioned in 1431 who was forbidden to lend money on interest (to non-Jews) since she earned enough income through her work as an eye doctor.

- Sara of Wurtzburg was practicing medicine around the same time. For the price of two florins for the permission and ten florins for taxes and a contribution, she received permission from Bishop Johann II of Braun on May 2, 1419, to practice medicine.

- Rav Yehudah ben Asher, the brother of the Baal HaTurim, had this to say about an unknown 13th-century woman oculist living in Cologne:

When I was an infant about three months old, my eyes were affected and were never completely restored. A certain woman tried to cure me when I was about three years of age but she added to my blindness to such an extent that I remained confined to the house for a year, being unable to see the road on which to walk. Then a Jewess, a skilled oculist, appeared on the scene. She treated me for about two months and then died. Had she lived another month, I might have

recovered my sight fully. As it was, but for the two months' attention from her, I might never have been able to see at all.

Italy

- Monna Antonia di maestro Daniele, a resident of Florence, earned the title "my daughter, the doctor" sometime between 1386 and 1408, after studying at the Guild of Doctors, Apothecaries, and Grocers.

- Manuela and her son Angelo were noteworthy physicians for several reasons. Residents of Rome, they were personal physicians to Pope Bonifacius IX, who liked them enough to get them an exemption from paying taxes in 1399. But they were also well known for their work with the poor, whom they treated without requesting payment.

Spain

Floreta ca Noga (late 1300s) underwent a three-year course of study to receive her medical license. The investment paid off handsomely since she was often called to the royal palace to treat Sibila, Queen of Aragon.

Eastern Europe

To date, only one Jewish woman physician in this region has been discovered: Slawa of Warsaw. A 1435 agreement stated that her patient didn't have to pay if the woman wasn't cured, suggesting either that Slawa was very sure of herself or that the medical profession wasn't as lucrative in medieval Poland as elsewhere.

Eretz Yisrael, Egypt, and Turkey

A document found in the Cairo Genizah makes mention of a Jewish woman oculist, and it's known that there were several women eye doctors in 16th-century Jerusalem. A century later, Bula Ikschati, the widow of Salomon Ashkenazi, a renowned statesman and physician, cured the young Sultan Achmed I of smallpox.

Source: "Doctors: Medieval," Cheryl Tallen, Jewish Women's Archive

standards, and many of the treatments were horrifically painful, not just anyone could hang a shingle that said “The Doctor Is In.” All professions were heavily regulated during the Middle Ages, and the medical profession was no exception.

Medical practitioners were divided into four main categories. At the top were the university-trained physicians, who made diagnoses and suggested remedies. Next came the surgeons/barbers; as their names suggest, they offered hands-on treatments. After them came the apothecaries, who would whip up a plant or herb-based powder or potion for common complaints. Finally, there were the midwives.

There was another class, which Jewish physicians sometimes fell into, that was known as “empirics.” These doctors hadn’t received a university education; instead, their medical knowledge came from practical experience. But why would a doctor choose to be an empiric, which lacked the status of being a full-fledged physician?

The answer is discrimination. There were times and places when Jews were welcomed into the medical field with open arms. For instance, the medical school at Italy’s University of Salerno, which had its glory days between the 10th and 13th centuries, not only trained Jewish physicians, but also had Jewish doctors on the faculty. The medical school was also one of the few places that allowed women to enroll and receive a degree. But this was the exception, and it was much more common for European universities, which were governed by the Catholic Church, to exclude all Jews and most women.

Jewish women therefore would learn their profession by becoming an apprentice to an experienced physician. For modesty reasons, this would usually be a father or husband, or even a mother.

Practicing medicine without a university-recognized license did have its drawbacks. For instance, when Parisian authorities

decided to crack down on unlicensed physicians in 1322, a doctor named Belota the Jewess was one of the doctors hauled before the court. Interestingly, the charge that was made against the accused, which were mainly women but did include some non-Jewish male physicians as well, wasn’t that their treatments were inferior. Instead, it was an open attempt by doctors trained at the University of Paris to put the competition out of business.

THE DOCTOR IS OUT

Belota the Jewess, like the others who were put on trial, was barred from ever again practicing medicine. But that wasn’t the end of Jewish women physicians. During the Middle Ages, European cities grew at a fast pace, and the need for qualified doctors far exceeded the number who had been university-trained. Therefore, a doctor’s reputation often counted for more than a diploma, and women doctors were usually held in high regard by their grateful patients.

In addition to her duties as a wife and mother, a typical medieval Jewish woman might have several professions, which she worked at from her home on a part-time basis. For instance, Mayrona of Manosque, who lived in Provence during the 1300s, was renowned as a skillful physician but she also had a successful career as a moneylender.

Other Jewish women physicians looked upon their profession as a way to do *chesed*, as opposed to make money. Viridimura, for instance, told the physicians of the Sicilian Royal Court who examined her that she wished to become a doctor in order to provide treatment to poor people who couldn’t afford to pay the high doctors’ fees. Apparently, the royal doctors didn’t mind this sort of “competition,” since Viridimura received permission to practice medicine in the Kingdom of Sicily in 1376.

Apparently, career women are not the modern phenomenon we thought they were. ■



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