



## The Best of Doctors Parshas Mishpatim

The second largest doctor's strike in Israel's history occurred exactly thirty years ago, during the winter of 1983. The doctors were on strike for a total of 117 days, and even submitted their resignation. At some point the protest escalated, and they went on a hunger strike. The strike began at the Beersheba hospital and quickly spread to the rest of the hospitals in Israel. Numerous doctors were hospitalized as a result of their weakness.

The doctors at the Afula hospital, near Migdal Ha'Emek, were on strike as well. I decided as an act of solidarity to stay with them over Shabbos, joining them two hours before the Shabbos commenced. When I entered the hospital in my Hasidic garb the atmosphere changed completely. Instead of the usual arguing and quarreling, everyone accepted the Shabbos with happiness. I organized evening prayers which were absolutely packed and then we had a group meal together. Hundreds joined in the special Shabbat songs. The strikers' families, who came to demonstrate, joined the joyous banquet instead.

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After *Kiddush*, and after the doctors came to a decision regarding the drinking of the grape juice – if would constitute a breach of the hunger strike, I addressed the gathering.

Our weekly parsha states: "And if men quarrel, and one strikes the other with a stone or with a fist, and he does not die but is confined to his bed, if he gets up and walks about outside on his support, the assailant shall be cleared; he shall give only payment for his enforced idleness, **and he shall provide for his cure.**"<sup>1</sup> Our Sages learn from here that it is permissible for a doctor to heal patients. A question however emerges; if doctors are given a mandate from the Torah to heal the sick, then why does the Talmud state: "The best of doctors are destined to *Gehienom* (hell)?"<sup>2</sup> Why have our Sages spoken so harshly against doctors, when we have a tradition that anyone who saves a life it is as if he has saved an entire world?<sup>3</sup> Doctors save thousands, why would they be destined to hell?

We further know of rabbis throughout the ages who have served as doctors – were they destined too headed to hell? Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld<sup>4</sup> would say that a good and dedicated doctor should be prepared to forfeit his wage in

the world to come for the sake of his patients. The best of doctors is he who is willing to go to hell for the sake of saving a patient.

I told them of the famous Dr. Wallach of Jerusalem, who was the director of the Shaarei Tzedek hospital and was close with Rabbi Sonnenfeld. Rabbi Sonnenfeld once told him that in Heaven everyone is perfect and there is no need for a doctor, but the broken spirits go to Hell, and they need a doctor to take care of them...

I have been told that once my mother was hospitalized in Shaarei Tzedek hospital, and Dr. Wallach asked her, as a Charedei youth, to explain the statement -"The best of doctors are destined to *Gehienom* (hell)?" She replied that he who relies only on a doctor will be destined to hell. He who relies on G-d to send him a cure will indeed be cured.

I told the striking doctors: everyone appreciates your dedication. And if to save one soul it is worth going to hell, it is clear that it is worthy to suffer in this world as well, even with respect to salary issues. Not that you do not deserve the salary, I added. I told them of Dr. Buffels, who was known to charge substantial fees for his visits. He was once asked why he 'squeezes' his patients. The doctor answered that someone who falls sick must repay a debt. If the doctor collects a small fee the patient will continue to be sick for a longer time. If the doctor asks for a substantial fee he will remove the patient's debt and get him cured quickly. That's what Dr. Buffels did. A 'good' doctor who collects only a small fee and leaves his patient sick is destined to hell...

That lofty holy Shabbos left an indelible impression on all who participated in it, and the media discussed it for days to come.

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As the days passed the unity of the strikers began to dissipate, as some of the doctors accused others of practicing privately during the strike to increase their income. The strike ended only after a court order was submitted. The strike however, paid off, as the doctors' salary was significantly increased.

About ten years ago, on Shabbos eve, there was an immediate need for a life saving head surgery for a 16 year old. I called one of the leading doctors in northern Israel, a man who had spent that Shabbos with me during the strike, I asked him to help.

His spontaneous response was: "I will do it immediately, even if it means desecrating the Shabbos. I am willing to enter hell to save the lives of others.... "

<sup>1</sup> Shmot 21, 18 – 19.

<sup>2</sup> Tractate Kiddushin 82a.

<sup>3</sup> Tractate Sanhedrin 37a.

<sup>4</sup> (1 Dec 1848 –26 Feb 1932) was the Chief Rabbi and co-founder of the Edah HaChareidis, Haredi Jewish community in Jerusalem, during the years of the British Mandate of Palestine.