Maimonides, ‘aboda zara, 11:11: The healing powers of words.

Last week we explained the idea of the *hober*, a wizard or enchanter who uses spells to invoke supernatural effects (see**this**). By “spells” we mean words without any meaning or content, that presumably have a magic effect.

Although Maimonides empathically rejects the use of magic spells, there is one instance in which something similar to a spell is allowed. The Talmud calls it: “*lohesh ‘al hamaka*” which means “whispering words to a wound”. If somebody was bitten by a serpent or a scorpion Maimonides allows that someone else would whisper some words into the wound. Why would Maimonides allow this seemingly magical practice, so similar to spells?

Maimonides explicitly recognizes that those words don’t have any magical power (and, by the way, for this practice to be permitted, the one who whispers must also believe that there is no magic in these words). Maimonides understands that “whispering to the wound” has a psychological effect on the patient, helping him or her to calm down and regain composure. This is critically important in the cases brought by Maimonides, when someone is bitten by a snake or a scorpion. In these cases the victim/patient is in a state of panic, believing that the poison will soon cause her death. In a state of panic his blood circulation will accelerate, and the poison would act faster. However, if at that time someone whispers some soft words, those word will have the effect of calming down the patient, until help or perhaps an antidote arrives.

To better understand Maimonides idea let us see what the Psychotherapist Dr. Judith Acosta, an expert in neurobiology and the author of the book “Verbal first aid”, explains. Dr Acosta trains first responders in scenarios of car accidents, fires, acts of terror or natural disasters. She argues that the first words said to the severely wounded victims are crucial. Words can calm the patient and prolong or even save his life “With our words we can address autonomic function in ways that can help them [the patients] be calm, stop or slow bleeding, reduce an inflammatory response, lower their blood pressure or soothe a broken heart.”

A last point. Althought Maimonides authorizes “lilhosh ‘al hamaka” he strongly opposes and severely condemns whispering onto the wound words of Tora. Why? We will see B’H next week.

Dedicated to the memory of Dr Albert Moghrabi, Abraham ben Aida, z”l.