

THE HEALTHY JEW

The Healthy Jew traces the culturally revealing story of how Moses, the rabbis, and other Jewish thinkers came to be understood as medical authorities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such a radically different interpretation, by scholars and popular writers alike, resulted in new, widespread views on the salubrious effects of, for example, circumcision, Jewish sexual purity laws, and kosher foods. *The Healthy Jew* explores this interpretative tradition in the light of a number of broader debates over “civilization” and “culture,” Orientalism, religion and science (in the wake of Darwin), anti-Semitism and Jewish apologetics, and the scientific and medical discoveries and debates that revolutionized the fields of bacteriology, preventive medicine, and genetics/eugenics.

Mitchell B. Hart is Associate Professor of History at the University of Florida. His first book, *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity* (2000), won the Salo Baron Award for Best First Book in Jewish Studies, presented by the American Academy of Jewish Research.

The Healthy Jew

THE SYMBIOSIS OF JUDAISM AND
MODERN MEDICINE

Mitchell B. Hart

University of Florida



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To Nina

Do not suppose that the sufficiency of the Chaldaic magic derived from the Kabbalah of the Jews; for the Jews are without doubt the excrement of Egypt, and no one could ever pretend with any degree of probability that the Egyptians borrowed any principle, good or bad, from the Hebrews. Whence we Greeks [by which he seems to mean Gentiles] own Egypt, the grand monarchy of letters and nobility, to be the parent of our fables, metaphors and doctrines.

Giordano Bruno, *Dialeghi italiani*¹

Moses . . . was a product of Egyptian civilization, and he offers us a sense or reflection of the sanitary system established among Pharaoh's people by the priests of Isis and Osiris.

E. Bertin-Sans, in *Dictionnaire encyclopédie des sciences médicales*²

The Hebrew physician feels it in his bones, has an acute intuition that it [Hebrew medicine] is the foundation of medical knowledge.

Dr. Yosef Tennovim, in *Ha-Rophe ha-Ivri*³

¹ Giordano Bruno, *Dialeghi italiani*, cited and translated in Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, vol. 1 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 159.

² “Moïse . . . issu de la civilisation égyptienne, nous offre comme un reflet de l'organisation sanitaire établie chez les peuples des Pharaons par les prêtres d'Isis et d'Osiris.” E. Bertin-Sans, “Hygiène,” in *Dictionnaire encyclopédie des sciences médicales* (Paris, 1888).

³ Yosef Tennovim, review of A. Goldenstein, *Torat ha-Hygiene* in *Ha-Rophe ha-Ivri* 1 (1927): 58–60. All translations in this book are my own unless otherwise indicated.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book began when I was researching my dissertation in the early 1990s. I came across a work on the history of social medicine in the ancient world by Alfred Nossig, a Polish Jewish intellectual who played a key role in founding the Jewish statistical movement in Berlin in the first years of the twentieth century. Nossig's book was fascinating, in large part because it contained ideas and arguments about Judaism and the Jews that were very different from anything I'd encountered before. I set aside the dissertation research for a while, worked through Nossig, and wrote an article on it. I imagined that I could then integrate that research into my dissertation; that, however, did not happen. Yet, having encountered Nossig's work, and then having examined some of the literature that he relied on, I was aware that there existed an entire counter-tradition in Europe that represented Jews and Judaism as vital and healthy, and that linked Jewry in numerous ways to civilization and progress rather than to barbarism and decline (the focus of my first book). *The Healthy Jew* grew out of this extended fascination with Nossig's book and the larger interpretive tradition he'd built upon.

Any book that takes a decade and a half to research and write owes its existence to a large number of people who make the research and writing possible. It's a great pleasure for me to thank those individuals and institutions for their assistance and support. First of all, my gratitude to Alexander Grass, whose generosity and interest in Jewish studies have made it possible for me to focus on research and devote time to writing. Thanks as well to my colleagues in the Department of History and the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Florida for the vibrant intellectual and social environment. My thanks especially to Robert Singerman,

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Thanks as well to other friends and colleagues who have made the past few years in Gainesville and New York so pleasurable (or at least tolerable). A special thanks to Taal and Todd Hasak-Lowy for all the time I’ve spent in the chair, and especially for Monday nights; to Tony Michels for the many discussions about Jewish history and culture; and to Kyle Todd for the time in New York and Massachusetts, and the continuing conversation.

Finally, to Nina Caputo, who for two decades has done her very best with a rather unhealthy Jew. There is nothing I could possibly write here that could convey my appreciation.

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