

## Is It Possible We Were Mistaken? by Rabbi M. Thomas Heyn – December, 2014

There were times when we could have said we just didn't know any better; when cigarette ads claimed that doctors favored one brand over another; when we drove without seat belts; and when we enjoyed *schmaltz* and *gribenes* without knowing or caring about their effects on our arteries.

These are only three examples of ideas and behaviors which we now know were not conducive to good health and safety. With a little reflection, we could probably come up with more examples. In most cases, however, there are only three reasons why such misguided thinking can persist for long periods of time.

First, we might not have been presented with enough evidence to convince us to think or behave differently. Secondly, if there *was* enough evidence, we might not have *wanted* to think or behave differently. And thirdly, admitting that we were mistaken is often considered a sign of weakness. For these reasons, attitudes and opinions are usually slow to change.

The advertisement is a composite image. The top half shows a middle-aged man in a white lab coat and tie, smiling and holding a lit cigarette. A yellow text box in the upper left corner reads: "He's one of the busiest men in town. While his door may say *Office Hours 2 to 4*, he's actually on call 24 hours a day. The doctor is a scientist, a diplomat, and a friendly sympathetic human being all in one, no matter how long and hard his schedule." Below this, the headline reads: "According to a recent Nationwide survey: **MORE DOCTORS SMOKE CAMELS THAN ANY OTHER CIGARETTE**". The bottom half of the ad features a woman with a large smile, holding a pack of Camel cigarettes. Text next to her says: "Your 'T-Zone' Will Tell You... T for Taste... T for Throat... that's your proving ground for any cigarette. See if Camels don't suit your 'T-Zone' to a 'T.'" On the left, a pack of Camel cigarettes is shown with the text: "DOCTORS in every branch of medicine—113,597 in all—were queried in this nationwide study of cigarette preference. Three leading research organizations made the survey. The gist of the query was—What cigarette do you smoke, Doctor? The brand named most was Camel! The rich, full flavor and cool mildness of Camel's superb blend of coastlier tobaccos seem to have the same appeal to the smoking tastes of doctors as to millions of other smokers. If you are a Camel smoker, this preference among doctors will hardly surprise you. If you're not—well, try Camels now." The bottom of the ad features the Camel logo and the text "CAMELS Coastlier Tobaccos".

A growing body of evidence suggests that attitudes and opinions about health and healthcare are shifting in ways that will affect many institutions, including our own. There is an idea that was long disregarded in the scientific community but is now under more careful investigation. It's an idea that our rabbis spoke about in religious terms, while other Jewish thinkers -- such as Spinoza, Freud and Einstein -- spoke about it in non-religious terms. From a contemporary scientific perspective, the idea is this: ***the relationship between the 'interior and exterior dimensions' of the human experience are more complex and nuanced than we thought.***

For the past few centuries, science concerned itself mainly with the 'exterior dimensions' of human experience; those dimensions we can measure using any of our five senses – sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. In more recent years, the social sciences have enabled us to learn and understand more about the 'interior dimensions' of the human experience, which include thoughts, feelings and other subjective phenomena.

Early in my career as a pastoral care professional, I became interested in the work of researchers who were developing ways to measure the 'spiritual health' of their patients. A few questionnaires have since been devised, one of which I recently circulated to members of our congregation. If you haven't seen it yet and would like to measure your own spiritual health, contact our Temple office for a copy of (or link to) the questionnaire.

While it is the responsibility of most healthcare professionals to focus on physical health, more

attention is being given these days to the 'interior dimensions' of health; that is, emotional, psychological and spiritual well-being. This is bringing about widespread changes in the field of healthcare, but it could also have an important impact on synagogue life. Although we never thought about it in these terms, it has always been Judaism's goal to bring more attention to the interior dimensions of the human experience; that is, to our emotional, psychological and spiritual well-being.

Being scientifically-oriented, most Jews in this era developed a misguided notion that Jewish spirituality is a recondite interest or hobby for the few who enjoy such things. But as the scientific community focuses more attention on exploring the interior dimensions of our experience, we would do well to notice that this has always been Judaism's goal. It's like being a health-conscious doctor back in the days when other doctors were still touting cigarettes and eating *schmaltz*. Finally, people are becoming more open to what we've been teaching and practicing all this time.

On Sunday, December 7<sup>th</sup>, renowned author and journalist, Jay Michaelson, will lead us into a deeper discussion on the interior dimensions of the human experience from a Jewish perspective. Our rabbis and mystics had many insights that are now more relevant than in previous decades. We'll examine these insights in relation to the emerging field of 'spiritual health' to gain a better understanding of what it is, how to measure it, and how we can improve it using the means we have at our disposal.

As more and more people bring their focus to the interior dimensions of the human experience, we Jews might try focusing our own attention there a bit more. In doing so, we may discover that Judaism has some valuable ideas and techniques to offer in this domain. If we had failed to notice them before, we were certainly mistaken. Fortunately, it's not too late to notice them now.