



A POINTED LOOK AT ACUPUNCTURE

**IS THIS FORM OF ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE A
HOAX OR THE MAGIC IT'S MADE OUT TO BE?**

BY RUCHY REESE

“Can we just skip this test?”

I ask, anxiously squirming on the examination table.

The needle being prepped in front of me is terrifying. Despite my apprehension, the doctor insists. When the first attempt at drawing blood fails, tears begin to prick my eyes. The next attempt brings nurses running when my blood pressure plunges and I nearly faint.

Needles and I do *not* go together.

And yet, there are those who voluntarily seek to puncture their skin, becoming human pincushions in pursuit of health.

Enter the world of acupuncture: a world in which needles reign supreme.

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These days, nearly everyone knows what acupuncture is, at least superficially. It is a somewhat controversial form of treatment that involves inserting needles into specific parts of the body for improvement or maintenance of health. People have turned to acupuncture as an attempt to treat an array of conditions, including to relieve hay fever or chronic back pain, or even to turn a breech baby.

When it comes to the needles, the claim is often made that, “It doesn’t hurt,” but I for one, don’t buy it. To me, a needle is a needle. But the truth is, once I actually *saw* an acupuncture needle, I realized that it’s quite different from the hypodermic syringes that make me quiver in the doctor’s office. Thinner than a human hair, and flexible, the most commonly used acupuncture needles look almost painless. Almost.

For many people, the chance to be free from chronic pain or other medical issues trump any fears they may harbor about discomfort. In fact, studies show that an increasing number of people worldwide are embracing acupuncture as an effective modality for various ailments — and many of them are doctors. Hospitals across the world are integrating acupuncture into their pain management programs. From Seattle Children’s Hospital to Stanford University’s two hospitals and many more in between, the medical practice of the east has found a home in the American west. Even the world-renowned Johns Hopkins and Memorial Sloan Kettering hospitals are now providing acupuncture treatments to cancer patients in the

quest to ease their pain and nausea.

In China, from where the modality originates, acupuncture is offered as an affordable anesthetic option for patients undergoing surgery, even complicated procedures, such as an open-heart operation. Truth be told, the modality is so respected in China that it is used for just about everything, though that wasn’t always the case. From the mid-1600s to early in the 20th century, the ruling Manchurian Qing dynasty banned acupuncture, considering it inferior to newer “Western” medical techniques, though acupuncture was still practiced by many in private. Later, it was banned again under the Kuomintang government, though the common folk continued to remain loyal followers. By the 1940s, acupuncture joined conventional Western medicine as a complementary practice in the Chinese medical world.

In America, the practice of acupuncture was little known until it saw a sharp rise in popularity during the 1970s, after President Richard Nixon visited China, bringing with him journalist James Reston, who developed appendicitis while on the trip and required emergency surgery in a Chinese hospital. When he returned home, Reston wrote an article for the *The New York Times* detailing his experience with acupuncture for pain relief. He wrote:

I was in considerable discomfort, if not pain, during the second night after the operation, and Li Chang Yuan, doctor of acupuncture at the hospital, with my approval, inserted three long, thin needles into the outer part of my right elbow and below my knees and manipulated them in order to stimulate the intestine and relieve the pressure and distension of the stomach.

That sent ripples of pain racing through my limbs and, at least, had the effect of diverting my attention from the distress in my stomach. Meanwhile, Doctor Li lit two pieces of an herb called ai, which looked like the burning stumps of a broken cheap cigar, and held them close to my abdomen while occasionally twirling the needles into action.

All this took about 20 minutes, during which I remember thinking that it was rather a complicated way to get rid of gas on the stomach, but there was a noticeable relaxation of the pressure and distension within an hour and no recurrence of the problem thereafter.

While Reston confirmed what my needle-phobic self

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suspected — that pain can be part and parcel of the puncturing package — Shira Yael Klein, one woman I interviewed, tells me that the experience is worth it.

“Yes, it did hurt, but not as much as you think it would. It was mostly a brief pain when the needle went in, then I kind of ‘felt’ the needle there, doing its thing, but it didn’t hurt. The ones in my face hurt more than the ones in the rest of the body. The needles also produced a weird tingly feeling, and the first session felt like ‘pops’ where the needle was inserted, then electrical currents running down my limbs and ‘popping’ in my toes, etc. Acupuncture affects nerves, and boy did I feel it. While this whole process wasn’t pleasant, the problems that they were treating were making me much more miserable.”

Several other women I spoke to concurred with Shira Yael, that although discomfort is involved in acupuncture, for them, the results are worth it. But on the opposite end of the spectrum stand people like Ahuva Goldbaum who told me that acupuncture held no notable success at all.

“I guess you might say we were hoping for a miracle, so it really came as no huge surprise that we didn’t see results. When our son was two months old, he had sudden cardiac arrest which we later found out was due to meningoencephalitis. He was left in a vegetative state, ventilator-dependent, tube-fed, etc. Shortly after he was discharged home, a relative who is an acupuncturist in the US strongly urged us to try acupuncture to restore his brain function, and he gave us the name of a practitioner he trusted in Eretz Yisrael, about a half-hour drive from our city. He also recorded a video showing him exactly where he thought the needles should be placed, recommending that we have it done three times a week, but the person we were seeing only had office hours once a week. After about a year with no results, the driver who had been

taking us to the appointment every week offered to learn how to do it so that he could come to our house three times a week and give him the full, recommended treatment. We did that for another year or so with no results, and eventually we just stopped.”

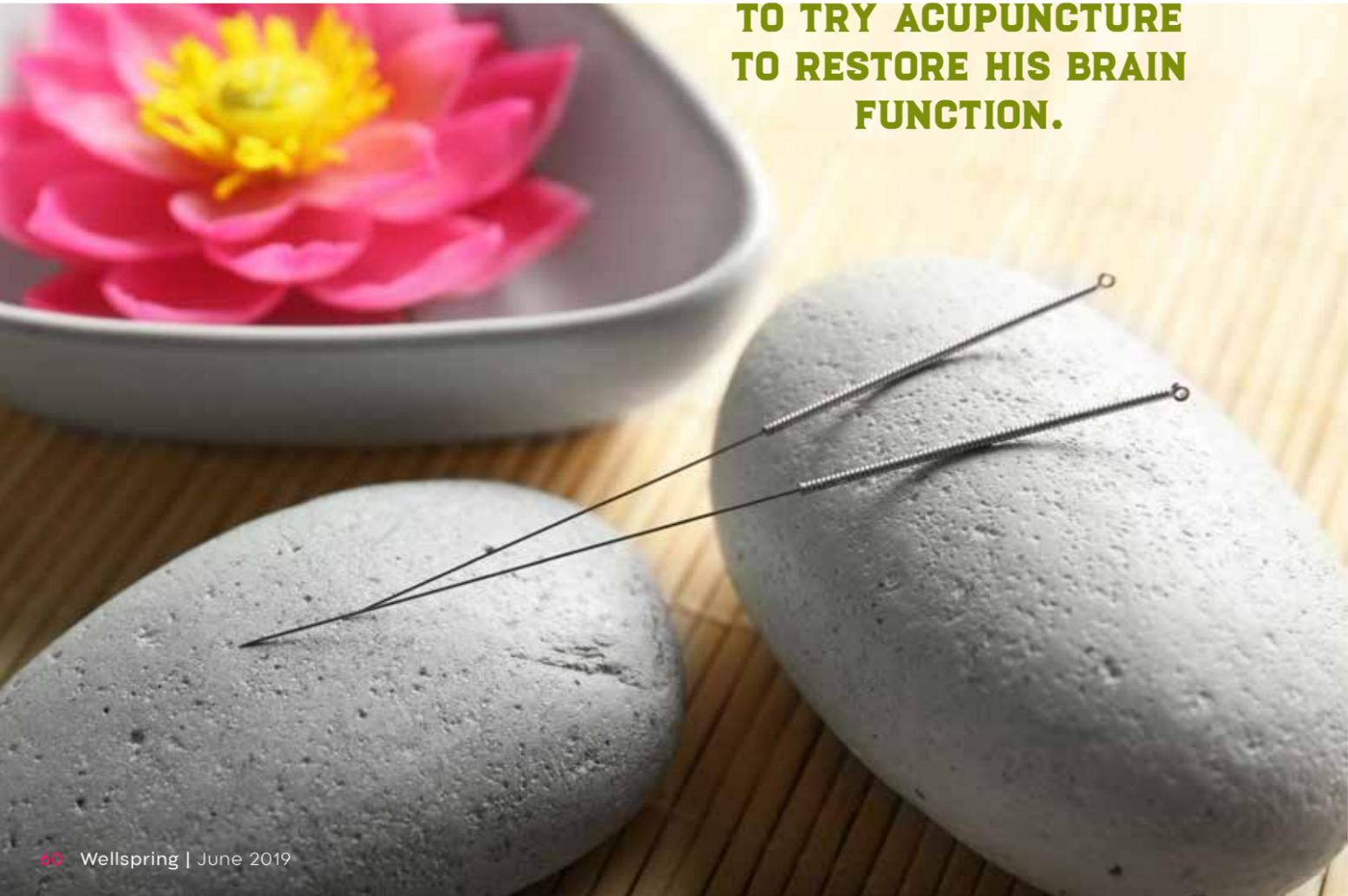
Likewise, a relative of mine claims acupuncture made no change in her condition, though to be fair, it caused no pain either. It seems that when it comes to anecdotal evidence both for and against the effectiveness of acupuncture, the pendulum swings two ways. Medical studies, however, are another story.

Though thousands of studies have been done on acupuncture in the last 20 years, not all studies are worthy of our trust. To get a better overview of the research, I turned to the Cochrane Collaboration, one of the most reliable sources of information in regard to medical studies. (See sidebar for more information on the Cochrane Collaboration.) I pulled up more than 20 Cochrane reviews, which compare multiple similar studies under any given topic, and found only four in which acupuncture was considered an effective,

proven treatment based on the data available. The reviews concluded that acupuncture may be moderately effective for postoperative vomiting, effective for tension-type headaches, and can be considered an effective treatment for migraines in some patients. Fibromyalgia, too, may benefit from acupuncture.

Of the rest I examined, many reviews were inconclusive due to poor methodology, small trial size, or publication biases. Conditions for which acupuncture is not reliably documented to help, as of yet, include neuropathic pain, insomnia, asthma, high blood pressure, ADHD, epilepsy, dysphagia after acute

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stroke, autism spectrum disorders, urinary incontinence, traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injuries, and more.

Though positive data is currently lacking in regard to many conditions, new, more reliable studies are surely being conducted, and reviews may conclude that acupuncture really is effective for many ails. Only time will tell. But that brings us to another question:

Is Acupuncture Halachically Permissible?

Whether or not we choose to look at medical studies or be swayed by personal stories of people who’ve “been there and done that,” are we even allowed to avail ourselves of this modality? To understand this question, we need to understand the concepts behind acupuncture.

According to Chinese religions, there is an energy that flows through the universe. They believe this energy is found in everything, and though it appears that they do not worship the energy per se, they consider their thousands of idols to be manifestations of this energy. They call this energy “chi,” and they say it flows through all of us and through everything, and by way of breath and food, living beings absorb and expel this energy.

Acupuncture is considered the way to balance this chi, causing the body to have proper energy flow. This is done by way of the channels believed to be in the body, which they call “meridians.” These meridians can develop blockages that need to be cleared out, and insertion of acupuncture needles are used to do this, as well as to balance the various aspects of energy in the body.

On the topic of chi (or “ki” or “prana,” in Japanese and Indian religions), Rav Chaim Yisroel Belsky, zt”l, taught, as written in the sefer Shulchan Halevi:

The types of healing methods... are based on one general principle called “Universal Energy.” According to its false comprehension, this force — this universal energy — extends from one end of the world to the other, surrounds every living creature with a special aura, and has a separate mind and independent will with the ability to benefit or cause harm (may Hashem save us from this false theory). Adherents of this worldview also believe that this energy is the source of life, and that an individual with the proper wisdom and specialized training has the capability to control this power. He can use it to help himself or affect others in beneficial ways, such as healing, curing imbalances, or confusion of the mind... Some associate this energy with known, scientific forms, such as electromagnetic energy, which operates on the atomic and subatomic levels. Others say it is a different form of energy, occupying the space between

WHAT IS COCHRANE?

Cochrane is a global, independent, transparent network of more than 13,000 members who join together to review data in regard to potential harms or effectiveness of healthcare. It’s the gold standard in the evaluation of medical studies, with a goal of ruling out publication biases, conflicts of interests, sham trials, and poorly conducted studies. Cochrane does not accept commercial or conflicted funding, and the members are located across the globe. In short, Cochrane attempts to review all available, relevant data for conditions and treatment options, and offer a conclusion in regard to a trial’s reliability.

A WIDE WORLD OF ACUPUNCTURE

Although we usually think of acupuncture in terms of thin needles inserted into the hands, legs, or back, there are actually many forms of this alternative treatment.

Acupuncturists can choose to apply needles to the entire body or to focus only on the face or scalp. Likewise, ear acupuncture is sometimes done with small needles that can stay in place for several weeks. Some practitioners choose to connect the needles to a source of electricity for electrostimulation. Cupping, too, is used by some. In this process, heated glass cups are applied to the skin before or during acupuncture to bring blood to the surface of the skin.

THE NINE NEEDLES

Traditionally, nine types of needles were used in acupuncture, though nowadays, the thin filiform needle is most common. There was a needle for 1) superficial pricking 2) massaging 3) knocking/pressing 4) puncturing a vein for bloodletting 5) draining abscesses 6) rapid pricking and 7) a long needle for thick muscles 8) a large needle for puncturing joints and 9) the standard filiform needle most commonly used today. The other needles have been largely replaced with surgical tools.

the nuclear particles. Still others associate the energy with resonance patterns. However, one thing is clear, this energy cannot be defined in physical terms, and is like nothing we are aware of today. There is no instrument available that could measure this energy.

During my research of this article, the question occurred to me that perhaps this chi and acupuncture, though historically entwined, are actually two separate issues. In a chicken-and-egg sort of way, I pondered: *Which came first: acupuncture or the concept of chi?* Did the creators of Chinese religions take normal function of the human body and build the concept of chi around it in the attempt to understand what they were experiencing? Is acupuncture able to be defined by science and legitimately separated from Chinese religious beliefs?

According to Professor George Lewith, a medical doctor and lecturer who also extensively studied acupuncture, there was a time when acupuncture was not applied to specific parts of the body — there was no concept of meridians. Over time, through careful observation of what caused certain sensations and effects in the body, these “channels” were mapped out. The professor writes:

Acupuncture points are undoubtedly the end-product of millions of detailed observations and as they were developed... so each of them was given a name and Chinese character, depending on its therapy properties.

Was it only after the developments of these “meridians” that chi was associated with acupuncture?

Up until that point, was acupuncture truly only a form of medicine? Would Rav Belsky say that such acupuncture is permissible?

Let’s fast-forward to current times and ask the same question.

Up until recently, science hit a brick wall in explaining how acupuncture works, or, as referenced above, if it works at all. It has been hypothesized that the release of endorphins causes pain relief when acupuncture is used — but endorphins can be released through many other means, no needles necessary. Likewise, it has been suggested that acupuncture works with the nervous systems to target bodily functions both near and far from needling points, but little specific data has yet been provided to prove this. Perhaps the most compelling evidence we have of acupuncture’s effect on the body is research done by Dr. Morry Silberstein, as published in the *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, in which he asserts that insertion of needles at known acupuncture points corresponds with areas in which Group C nerve fibers (one of the three types of nerve fibers) branch out. While the role of C-fiber nerves in the nervous system are little understood as of now, it is suspected that interaction between the needle and the nerve create a pain-numbing sensation that can be carried throughout the body.

As for scientifically proving or disproving the rest of the theories about what acupuncture can or cannot do, only time will. Until then, if you’re interested in acupuncture, present the data to your Rav and ask how he rules, find a well-trained acupuncturist — and pray for *siyatta d’Shmaya*.



A WORD OF WARNING

There have been many documented cases of compounds sold by acupuncturists and other alternative practitioners that have contained undeclared, added medicinal ingredients. This is especially true in regard to steroids. Running the Skin Healing Gemach has exposed to me to incredible pain and suffering caused by these “magical” and so-called “natural” products that often result in severe pseudo-eczema when the product is discontinued or stops working. This has been seen especially with products from Asia, and in products targeting the skin.

Likewise, there have been disreputable acupuncturists who have administered steroids without patient knowledge, resulting in life-threatening adrenal failure and skyrocketing blood pressure post treatment. These are serious risks to keep in mind when seeking treatment.

SHARP TIPS FOR ACUPUNCTURE

If you pick to puncture, use these tips to increase your chances of a safe experience.

- Consult your Rav. While many *rabbanim* rule that today’s acupuncture is permissible, there are those who maintain that it is a danger to the *neshamah*.
- Only use a licensed acupuncturist. Using an acupuncturist from some storefront exposes you to greater risks of running into a charlatan who may administer medications unbeknownst to you.
- Do your research. Only trust someone who is very well trained. Internal organs may be punctured if the needles are inserted too deeply.

Q&A WITH DR. YEHUDA FRISCHMAN, DAOM, L.AC.

Though some *rabbanim* forbid acupuncture, others rule that it is allowed. Dr. Frischman, an *erlicher Yid*, follows their ruling and has used acupuncture for 19 years as a means of helping others heal. He practices in Yerushalayim but maintains his license in the States, where he frequently lectures and practices.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BECOME AN ACUPUNCTURIST?

In the state of California, one is required to attend a certified four-year school of acupuncture and oriental medicine. To apply for admission one must have at least a Bachelor of Science degree or a Bachelor of Arts along with science prerequisites. After four years of rigorous academic and clinical training one is able to sit for the graduation exam and once one passes that, one can sit for the state board license. After passing this exam, one receives a masters in acupuncture and oriental medicine. These standards were established about 20 years ago. In addition, a select number of acupuncturists choose to study further — a minimum of another two years — for a doctorate degree, Doctor of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (DAOM). The course of study I took to complete my DAOM was over 4,000 hours.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO LEARN ACUPUNCTURE?

My late wife had been suffering from a seizure disorder that was not responsive to any Western medical treatment/medicine for many years and we had gone to several hundred practitioners and doctors around the world. No one could help. My business was suffering and I lost my home. I had to face up to the message Hashem was sending. It was time to close my business and go to medical school. I chose Chinese medical school and craniosacral coursework from the Upledger Institute as they seemed to provide the most hope for diagnosing and treating my wife's terrible suffering.

DO YOU RECOMMEND ACUPUNCTURE ONLY FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE A MEDICAL ISSUE, OR AS MAINTENANCE FOR HEALTHY PEOPLE, AS WELL?

Acupuncture is a valuable tool as part of a well-balanced regimen to promote health, wellbeing, and longevity. It is also effective in treating pain syndromes, both chronic and acute, by releasing the body's own pain relievers — endorphins — and treating emotional disorders by releasing serotonin.

HOW DO YOU FIND THE AREA TO PUNCTURE? IS THERE A FEELING, SUCH AS A PULSE, THAT YOU PICK UP ON?

In Chinese medical theory, there are 14 main pathways, called channels (aka meridians), that traverse the entire circulatory and lymphatic and fascial systems of the body, head to toe. There are specific points along these channels that address specific organic and global issues. On these channels are specific anatomical points that have empirically been shown to address specific physical and emotional issues. A trained physician or practitioner is able to feel differences in pulse and body temperature at these points.

IS THERE ANY MEDICAL CONDITION THAT IS UNABLE TO BE HELPED WITH ACUPUNCTURE THAT YOU ARE AWARE OF?

Conditions of severe depletion require nourishing from food and Chinese and other medicinal substances and formulas before acupuncture itself can be used. Then there are some iatrogenic conditions, caused by Western medicine, where the body has been irreparably damaged by pharmaceuticals and treatments.

ACCORDING TO YOUR RAV, DO WE HAVE TO WORRY THAT THERE IS ANY TYPE OF AVODAH ZARAH OR KISHUF INVOLVED IN ACUPUNCTURE?

Acupuncture is nothing more than a tool. There is no issue of *avodah zarah*, no more than the use of a hammer or screwdriver or computer. When used prudently, it can build and increase *kiddush Hashem* in the world, and when used wrongly, it can do harm. One should always be careful with any medical issue to recognize that illness is a message from Hashem and not a mechanical process. When we relate to our bodies and the world mechanically, then we miss out on a tremendous opportunity to hear the messages Hashem has given us. As such, we should always look for a G-d-fearing person to help us address our medical needs.

Q&A WITH JONATHAN LEIBOWITZ, MD, PC

Dr. Jonathan Leibowitz practices in the Borough Park section of Brooklyn, New York. In practice for over 25 years, Dr. Leibowitz did his medical training at The Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan and is board-certified in both internal medicine and nephrology. He is also certified by New York State for the practice of medical acupuncture.

WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO ADD ACUPUNCTURE TO YOUR MEDICAL PRACTICE?

Although I am classically trained, I was always intrigued by alternative approaches to medicine. My only condition to incorporating these approaches into my practice was that they worked in a tangible way. I do not want to waste time “believing” in a system or treatment. Rather, I want to be able to see and measure the results, whether it be traditional medicine or alternative medicine/acupuncture.

WHEN DO YOU RECOMMEND THAT A PATIENT CONSIDER ACUPUNCTURE?

In my practice I have found that acupuncture has a role in mainly treating pain. It is important to note that acupuncture is just one aspect of Chinese medicine and, if it is to be used beyond the treatment of pain, both the patient and the practitioner should adhere fully to *all* the principles of Chinese medicine. This includes the use of herbs and diet as well as certain exercises; it is generally not an à la carte menu. For example, although it can, at times, rapidly relieve wrist, shoulder, sciatica, and other pains, turning to acupuncture to solve all of life's problems without getting to the source is not wise. We can't subsist on kugel and cholent and expect acupuncture to cure our diabetes and high blood pressure. If an individual wishes to avoid traditional medicine, they must avoid the traditional lifestyle as well.

ARE THERE ANY TAKE-AWAY MESSAGES YOU CAN SHARE?

People should understand that while acupuncture is generally safe, like all else in life, there can be certain side effects. Some people might get what is called “needle shock;” they pass out in response to needles. While this is not necessarily harmful, it can be quite disconcerting for both the patient and doctor. Another thing to keep in keep in mind is that while acupuncture is often advertised as “painless,” it isn't necessarily so. Sometimes there is truth to “no pain, no gain.” Of course, the treatment should always be performed with disposable needles. The most important take-home should be that nothing can be done in isolation. While acupuncture is sometimes a great treatment, it is not for everyone nor for every condition. ♥

Dr. Frischman and Dr. Leibowitz can be contacted through The Wellspring.

