

Pills and Religion

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

As children in the UK, we used to make fun of Americans with their bottles of vitamins and supplements: a pill for every hour of the day, every limb of the body, and every possible deficiency known to man and animal. The GIs who came over to rescue Europe seemed bigger and stronger and more handsome than the local infantrymen. Some thought it was because of the Bazooka bubblegum and soda they consumed. But perhaps the real secret was that they took all those fortifying pills. We were trained to think of going to a doctor and taking pills as a sign of weakness, of namby pamby overindulgence. We were brought up on Arnold of Rugby's robust empire-building ideology. No, we decided that we were morally superior because we did not take pills.

We Brits had been forced to be basic. We had to eat our unappetizing food and not leave any on the plate because the poor Chinese were starving (how the tables have turned). We were urged to eat carrots for our eyesight and spinach for iron, bland local vegetables (swedes, turnips, and rhubarb) and (as soon as rationing ended) fruit. An apple a day keeps the doctor away. We hated all that healthy stuff. All we wanted were "chips with everything." After the war, returning sergeant majors took jobs teaching physical education in our schools. I remember being yelled at often enough "Rosen! Chin in, chest out, you lily-livered little weakling! You have got sparrows kneecaps for biceps!" We tried. But still the Americans won more competitions (perhaps because they had many more millions to choose from). They looked bigger and handsomer and took the girls. Perhaps there was a value in taking pills after all.

Later on, of course, it became clear America was indeed addicted to pills. Not just the vitamins but all kinds of horrid stuff, from steroids and artificial stimulants to Lance Armstrong's blood replacement and everything that now makes American sport as dirty and dishonest as the old East German sports teams. America is a society in which pills are the answer to everyone's problems. Pop a pill and it will all be better.

Antibiotics became so popular that people ended up becoming resistant to them. And once you started popping one kind of stuff, you popped others. Then the mentality spread into other areas of instant solutions. Gurus, mystical healers, and kabbalists. Like snake oil salesmen, they all had the answer. Sure, Charles Atlas urged us to exercise, and we had home exercises, then gyms, then spinning clubs. But it is so much easier to pop a diet pill. And even reading became like taking pills, easy, quick instant cliff notes and a self-help culture that inevitably fall back on pills when nothing else worked. Timothy Leary brought us LSD and American hippies made drug taking normal, and then came ecstasy and all the other ways of avoiding reality. Now even many of my Charedi friends are heavily into the game.

If you watch American television today you might think that the most serious threat to our lives is erectile dysfunction. Drug companies dominate the

commercials (or "messages" as they facetiously call them). Every American child seems to be on Ritalin and Israelis are imitating them. And adults need a pill to go to sleep, a pill to wake up, and another pill to keep going through the day. Only us older generation Brits still cling to the belief that this pill business is a bit of con, a trick pulled by commercial enterprises in the USA to get us to part with our cash. But we are capitulating too.

And the disease is not simply pills, themselves, but the areas they have completely conquered, like John Wyndham's triffids. The pill has changed our sex lives in sixties with contraception; it enabled everyone to go at it like rabbits with Viagra. It's going to ensure that no one should ever go without an orgasm. And the morning-after pill that is now available to everyone (and frankly I am not against it if it means fewer later-term abortions) will ensure that no one has to think before they act. Relationships? An optional extra.

No wonder we have become a species of addicts. From the cradle to the grave we have been trained to take pills for everything. Morphine and opium have morphed into Oxycontin, Vicodin, Percocet, Percodan, and Tramadol, to name the best known. In New York there is pharmacy on every corner.

One of the most influential books in America today is a handbook of the American Psychiatric Association. It is officially called "The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" Known as the DSM, the fifth edition has just been released. This is the bible of American psychiatry, a profession that for years advocated lobotomies, misdiagnosed and invented all kinds of mental states that might or might not have been the cause of every ill in American society. This has led to people being institutionalized or even being persuaded that they had traumatic experiences that led to charges that ruined other lives. It had advocated the talking cure for years. But now it has decided that that takes too long and it is cheaper just to give out a pill. Ah yes, here we go again. So doctors can once again prescribe a quick-fix pill.

So far the fun; I fear I have needlessly insulted Americans, Britons, and Israelis. But to be serious, of course many pills in many situations are essential and quite miraculous. It's the abuse, the idea of an instantaneous solution without effort, quick and easy, that worries me for our future as a species. And religion, which should be a bulwark against this instant gratification, has borrowed and adapted the very mentality it excoriates as corrupt Western materialist paganism. It is all there amongst the black hats and the long black coats. The wonder rabbi solves our problems. If not a magic cure, a drug will do. Of course, this is not new in our tradition, indeed in all religion. But it is getting surprisingly worse, not better. Superstition is a placebo too.

It is there amongst our less religious too, this desperate need for someone else to take responsibility, something else to blame. Someone I know who is not Orthodox agreed to my suggestion that he put on tefilin every morning to start the day in a more spiritual, meditative frame of mind. He did for a while, and he said it helped. But then he made some terrible decisions, and

his business plummeted. Off came the tefilin. He had expected the magic to work and it hadn't so he blamed the pill!!!

Me? I don't take pills. I eat healthily and carefully, and I exercise. If I want God to do His bit, I had better do mine!